



## A Survey of EFL Teachers' Research Engagement

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### Abstract

The field of language teaching has recently witnessed a resurgent wave of interest in the value of educational research and its impact on teachers' practice. Consequently, various strands of inquiry have commenced to investigate the relationship between research and practice. Within these discussions, however, the opinions of teachers are mostly ignored or reflected only circumstantially. The purpose of this study was to take teachers' views about research on board by exploring the extent to which they use and conduct research as well as the barriers that may hinder their research engagement. To collect data, a survey questionnaire was designed and validated through soliciting experts' opinions and conducting factor analysis. The questionnaire was then administered among a large sample of Iranian English teachers. Participants' responses showed moderate levels of research engagement among English teachers. Results also indicated that four categories of barriers can best account for teachers' lack of research engagement: problems related to the nature and quality of research, restrictive educational policies, lack of systematic partnership, and problems associated with the use of research in educational settings. The findings suggest that the research-practice division is the result of a complex interaction of an array of factors that cannot be simply reduced to technical matters. Thus, reconfiguration of the gap requires multidimensional strands of development in research and practice communities as well as in educational policies.

*Keywords:* barriers, research engagement, research-practice gap, teachers' views, utilization of research

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## **Introduction**

Cross-sectional examinations of scientific resources in various academic disciplines show the presence of a gap between research and practice (Biesta, 2007). For instance, in various professional domains ranging from nursing, social working, and mentoring to language education, there seems to be a gap between academic knowledge generation and application. The issue is gloomier in some fields than in others. Research in engineering, for instance, enjoys more or less established channels to practical application. Similarly, studies in medicine are often delivered through authorized agents and institutionalized pathways to practitioners (Bauer & Fischer, 2007). When it comes to other applied fields of study, however, established exchange structures between researchers and practitioners are lacking (Pica, 2005).

In the field of language teaching, like many other professional disciplines, the role of researchers has traditionally been assumed a merely intellectual activity, and their main responsibility has been to produce arguments, generalities, and theories. The assumption has been that academic research can potentially offer practical advice to improve the quality of language education. On this basis, some scholars have argued that teachers' pedagogical activities must be inspired and supported by scientific research evidence (Mehrani, 2014). The prevalence of this idea has positioned researchers as generators of knowledge and teachers as consumers. Within the last few decades, however, various efforts have been made to challenge the research-practice split in English language teaching (ELT). For instance, several theoretical ideas such as teacher-researcher collaboration (Stewart, 2006), exploratory practice (Allwright, 2005), and reflective teaching (Schön, 1987; Akbari, 2007) have been proposed to promote a research mindset among teachers and to encourage them to conduct classroom scale research studies.

Although a primary goal of these initiatives was to approximate the communities of research and practice, retrospective investigations show that the gap is still ubiquitous and educators experience the research-practice divide in various ways. Teachers disparage researchers for conducting research on issues that are not their pedagogical concerns (Everton et al., 2002). Researchers, on the other hand, criticize teachers for their lack of willingness to use the best and updated knowledge to improve their practice (Hargreaves, 1980). "The temporal and physical distance between researchers and practitioners in educational meetings" also points to the hierarchical relationship between researchers and practitioners (Mehrani, 2014, p. 23). Thus, if teachers are to be encouraged to employ research findings in their pedagogical practice, then it is important that we learn more about the conditions under which they have to do so. In other words, we need to take on board teachers' own concerns directly and reanalyze the research-practice configuration (Everton et al., 2002).

Bearing this in mind, the main purpose of the present study is to reflect teachers' opinions about academic research by exploring the extent to which they engage with research as well as the barriers that may keep them away from research. An inquiry into practitioners' opinions can inform us of what is necessary and beneficial for promoting the status of research in educational contexts. Because such investigations not only provide us with theoretical insights for setting overall

research policies, but also enable stakeholders to effectively redesign professional development programs for language teachers.

### **Literature Review**

Some scholars believe that a fundamental cause of the gap between researchers and practitioners stems from the conflicting nature of two types of knowledge bases that they deal with. While teachers need a body of practical, perceptual and situational knowledge that can inform their decisions in various particular situations, academic research conventionally provides a theoretical framework which aims, most of all, at helping us understand general phenomena. Based on this distinction, some argue that for academic knowledge to be systematically used by teachers, research findings ought to be presented in a responsive way, such that teachers can adapt them to address their pedagogical needs (Everton et al., 2002). In recent years, the idea of translating academic theories into applicable teaching strategies has been persistently followed by policymakers and stakeholders in many educational contexts. For example, a recent initiative in the UK has commenced an “evidence-based teaching” policy, where teachers are encouraged to employ research findings in their teaching. In the Iranian context, a similar policy has been proposed (though not implemented) by The Institute for Educational Research. The core component of this policy is to reinforce the “utilization of research findings” in education through summarizing educational research and presenting it in a plain non-technical language.

The debate on the research-practice gap, however, is not restricted to the dichotomy of types of knowledge. For instance, some researchers have challenged the long-established feudal model of relationship with “researchers at the top dispensing leisurely wisdom and the serfs laboring in the classroom, too exhausted to engage beyond daily survival” (Allison & Carey, 2007, p. 65). Allison and Carey also argue that the main cause of the non-reciprocal relationship between researchers and teachers must be sought in their power relations. Historically, positions of privilege and power have been occupied by researchers where they set evaluation standards and criteria for obtaining higher qualifications. Researchers also lay down lines of practice for teachers and require them to put in extra effort to engage in research studies (Allison & Carey, 2007). Gore and Giltin (2004), similarly contend that the discursive conditions, different reward structures and different material working conditions have shaped conflicting assumptions and opposing opportunities that seem destined to increase the distance rather than close the gap between academics and teachers. From this perspective, unless evaluation standards, professional development programs, and material conditions in both schools and universities are altered, it seems unlikely to witness any significant improvement in the division between language teachers and researchers (Gore & Giltin, 2004).

A further strand of contributions for approximating research to practice has explored teachers’ conceptions of research. For instance, Borg (2007; 2009) studied language teachers’ research engagement in thirteen countries and found out that teachers’ conception of research plays a significant role in their engagement with research. Borg argues that teachers’ conceptions are primarily anchored in a traditional view of academic research, where only very few models of research are considered legitimate (Borg, 2007). This “minimalist view of a research stance” (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 7) has been reported in other contexts as the

dominant conception of research held by English language teachers (Faribi et al., 2019). For example, Gao et al. (2010) examined teachers' conceptions of research and found that Chinese teachers mainly believed that the essential features of research include experimental designs and statistical analyses. In the contexts of Turkey, Canada and Saudi Arabia similar findings were reported. EFL teachers' understanding of research in these countries is well-matched with the scientific research paradigm. Teachers in these contexts indicated that educational research should follow a standardized and structured framework and offer implications for practice (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Nassaji, 2012; Shafiee & Sotoudehnama, 2019). A recent survey of ELT practitioners' views of research in Iran revealed that from teachers' perspectives, high quality research is characterized by a priori research questions, a sizable number of participants, and rigorous analysis of data. Iranian teachers also seemed to prefer studies that address their pedagogical concerns and bear practical implications (e.g., Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016). Such a simplistic view of what research means to language teachers is among the major reasons why efforts for bridging the research-practice gap are unproductive because teachers' restricted understating of the notion of research makes a great deal of educational research obscure and unappealing to them (Mehrani, 2016; Usita, 2022).

Examination of teachers' views has also highlighted a further concern about academic research: lack of relevance to education. In line with other commentators, Ortega (2005) contends that the assessment of the quality of research must be based on its potential in offering solutions for social and educational problems. But retrospective investigations suggest that a great deal of research studies in ELT are about issues that are too trivial or too irrelevant to teachers' pedagogical activities (Nassaji, 2012; Saeb et al., 2021). Teachers' overemphasis on the practicality of research studies is justified to the extent that theoretical research studies do not yield pedagogically-pertinent results (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003).

Aside from the above general insights about research-practice division, the literature is replete with local investigations that meant to provide contextualized understandings of research engagement for informed local decision making. For example, studies by Gao and colleagues (2010) and Borg and Liu (2013) report that in China, different contextual challenges such as heavy workload and limited competence in English prevented language teachers from engaging with research. Local investigations in Australia, similarly identified teachers' lack of trust in research findings, their hectic schedule, and the challenging discourse of academic articles as deterring factors to research engagement (Gore & Giltin, 2004). Borg's studies in the UK suggest that language teachers may tend to view their institutions as environments conducive to research engagement (Borg, 2007).

Several attempts have been made to classify the barriers to research engagement. For instance, Pieters and de Vries (2007) make a distinction between fundamental and applied reasons. Fundamental causes include incompatible language and payment systems, the context-bound nature of teaching practice, and disagreements about the overall aim and objectives of education. Factors such as the unavailability of time and money are categorized as practical limitations. Allison and Carey contend that there are two sets of internal factors (e.g., insufficient knowledge of research) and external factors (e.g., teachers' tight schedule) which can constitute the gap (Allison & Carey, 2007). Others, like Funk et al. (1989)

classify the barriers into four groups: factors related to practitioners, settings, research, and the way research is presented.

As the above review shows, studies conducted on the barriers that impede teachers' engagement with research are characterized by diversities of opinions. This issue is further complicated because although the findings of the previous studies are often based on examinations of different local contexts, the conclusions are assumed to apply universally, regardless of the particularities of each educational context. Thus, careful investigations into various factors that might be unique to any educational context are required in order to verify the results of the previous studies. Furthermore, accounts to be made in relation to the factors that hinder teachers' research engagement must be based on empirical insights into the current level of engagement.

To extend our understandings of the extent to which English language teachers engage in research and the factors which they feel may impede them from doing so, the present study addressed the following two questions:

1. To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers read or do educational research?
2. What reasons do they cite for not doing or reading academic research findings?

Answers to these questions would enable us to make informed decisions on what is feasible and desirable about research-practice integration in the Iranian context.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

To answer the above questions, a survey research design was employed in this study. This design is a popular type of research for a large-scale examination of individuals' opinions and is particularly suitable for the present research as it leads to the development of a new research instrument while also allowing the researchers to collect a sizable body of quantitative data efficiently and economically (Babbie, 1990). Since there are a large number of variables influencing teachers' engagement with research, survey research allows us to "carefully examine the relative importance of each" variable (Babbie, 1990, p. 42).

### **The Development of a Questionnaire**

To develop a data collection instrument, a general framework was first drawn by relying on the guidelines suggested by Dornyei (2003) and Brace (2004). The first part of the framework intended to capture the respondents' demographic information while the second part was devoted to teachers' level of reading and doing research. Teachers' justifications and reasons for keeping away from research were included in the last part. The survey was initially designed to be administered in English to both low proficient and high proficient EFL teachers. Upon reflections and consultations with experts in the field, however, it was decided to provide it in Persian in order to guarantee full understanding of its contents.

After formulating a list of relevant demographic items and devising four open-ended prompts for examining teachers' level of research engagement, the researcher jotted down all factors and categories that were considered to be potential barriers to teachers' research engagement. This was done based on an in depth

review of the literature and a consideration of the results of exploratory studies into Iranian teachers' research engagement (e.g., Mehrani & Behzadnia, 2013).

All potential barriers reported in the literature and those elicited from local investigations were first tallied. Next, the researchers eliminated recurring items and those that overlapped, reducing the list to 25 items. To write the questionnaire prompts, an item pool was provided. Questions were then formulated on the basis of a Likert rating scale by which participants were prompted to specify their opinions by choosing one of the five given options for each item. Following the procedure used by Akbari et al. (2010), in the next stage an attempt was made to find themes or commonalities among the developed factors. Seven experts, namely four university instructors, one PhD student of ELT, and two language teachers were then invited to critically review the items of the questionnaire. The experts' comments and recommendations resulted in alternations in the wordings of some items. The revised version of the instrument was then piloted by administering it to a total of 26 EFL teachers. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of the instrument was calculated and yielded 0.82. Once the accuracy of the questions and the reliability of the questionnaire were ascertained, it was disseminated among participants, as described below.

### **Participants**

In an attempt to broaden the scope of the study, the researchers collected data from English teachers in different geographical regions of Iran. The sampling procedure was a mixture of random and cluster sampling. That is, the researcher approached a number of colleagues in various ELT contexts across Iran who could encourage potential participants to participate in the study. The colleagues' cooperation facilitated the process of data collection by both recruiting potential participants and suggesting which mode of questionnaire administration (e.g., printed copy vs. email attachment) would work most suitably for the respondents. Administering the questionnaire among a sample of 514 English teachers, the researchers managed to collect data from different provinces including Tehran, Khorasan, Zanjan, and Sanandaj. A total of 403 questionnaires were returned, of which 84 were removed because they seemed not to have been thoughtfully filled up. This resulted in a total of 319 carefully completed questionnaires to be analyzed.

In the analysis of the questionnaire data, teachers' demographic information was first reviewed. Although the majority of the participants had less than 10 years of teaching experience, the sample of teachers had a broad array of teaching experience, ranging from one through to 32 years. In terms of academic degrees, only 48 teachers had postgraduate qualifications. However, responses to the questionnaire revealed a rather balanced distribution of working places, with 128 teachers teaching in the private sector and 184 teaching for the public schooling system. Seven teachers did not provide information about their job site.

### **Construct Validity of the Questionnaire**

As was mentioned, the questionnaire developed in this study for examining barriers to research engagement was authenticated by seven experts. However, in an attempt to validate this hypothetical model, the researchers conducted a factor analysis on the instrument. In doing so, teachers' responses given to each single item of the questionnaire were subjected to a factor analysis procedure. The analysis was

conducted in a two-step sequential fashion. Prior to conducting the main analysis, a preliminary analysis was conducted to determine how many factors to extract in the main analysis. Therefore, in the first step, the analysis was conducted to provide a scree plot. The results revealed a break after the first four components. In other words, the scree plot indicated that *four* is the ideal number of legitimate factors to account for teachers' research disengagement. This was in line with the theoretical framework developed by Funk et al. (1989).

In the next step, principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation was run to evaluate the significance of each factor and the underlying structure for the 25 items of the questionnaire. Based on the results of the first step, four factors were requested. After rotation, four factors that were internally consistent were produced. The first factor accounted for 10.0% of the variance, the second factor for 9.2%, the third factor for 7.9%, and the fourth factor for 6.0%. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the magnitude of loading for each item and the rotated factors. Magnitudes less than .27 have been omitted for simplicity and clarity.

**Table 1**  
*Factor Loading for the Rotated Factors of Barriers to Research Engagement*

Item	Factor loading				Commonality
	1	2	3	4	
• Item 1	.676				.49
• Item 2	.636				.42
• Item 3	.539				.39
• Item 4	.528			.312	.47
• Item 5	.492				.34
• Item 6	.481				.38
• Item 7	.419	.302			.43
• Item 8	.344				.29
• Item 9		.685			.56
• Item 10		.586			.40
• Item 11		.576			.47
• Item 12		.486			.42
• Item 13		.440			.40
• Item 14		.405			.29
• Item 15		.352			.38
• Item 16		.274			.28
• Item 17			.674		.46
• Item 18			.626		.46
• Item 19			.591		.45
• Item 20			.458		.39
• Item 21		.312	.402		.31
• Item 22				.702	.47
• Item 23				.653	.51
• Item 24		.309		.362	.33
• Item 25				.297	.39
• Eigen values	2.50	2.30	1.99	1.50	
• % of variance	10.01	9.21	7.97	6.00	

Note: Loadings < .27 have been omitted.

The first factor, which indexes the characteristics of research studies, loads most strongly on the first eight items. As the above table reflects, the fourth and seventh items have their highest loadings on the first factor, but have cross-loadings on the fourth and second columns, respectively. The second factor, which traps variables that relate to institutional and educational policy, is comprised of the five items in the second column. The third factor, which indexes items relevant to collaborations between researchers and practitioners, includes five items with loadings displayed in the third column. As Table 1 shows, the item concerning financial and intellectual supports has a moderate cross-loading on the second column too. Finally, the fourth factor, which indexes logistical factor, includes three items in the fourth column. As is displayed in the table, the third item has moderate loadings on both the logistical factor and the institutional and educational policy factor. Therefore, based on the results of factor analysis, teachers' barriers can be classified into four main strands:

- The nature and quality of research,
- Institutional and educational policies,
- Collaborations between researchers and practitioners,
- Use of research in educational contexts.

## **Results**

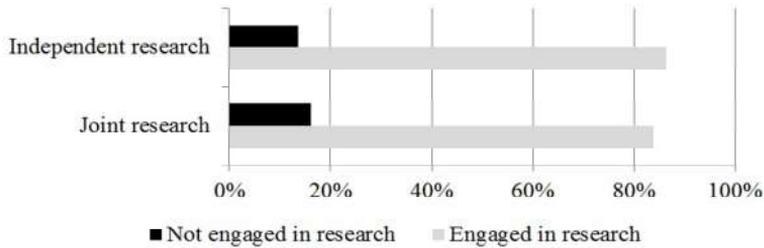
Aside from the first section of the questionnaire, which solicited the participants' demographic information, sections two and three respectively asked the participants to indicate their level of research engagement and the barriers to their research engagement. In what follows, the teachers' responses to these questions are presented.

### **Doing and Reading Research**

The participants were initially asked to specify whether they had done any independent educational research studies. Over 85% responded positively, but about 15% confirmed that they had never done an independent research. Teachers were also asked to indicate whether they had been involved in any joint research projects. As Figure 1 shows, 83% of the respondents reported that they had cooperated in research projects, but over 16% rejected prior involvement in research studies. Of the proportion of the participants who reported no professional research activities, there was little information to construe if they represented a particular group of teachers. However, teachers with higher academic qualifications appeared to have been more seriously engaged in doing research though the small sample involved made it difficult to reach a firm conclusion from this finding.

**Figure 1**

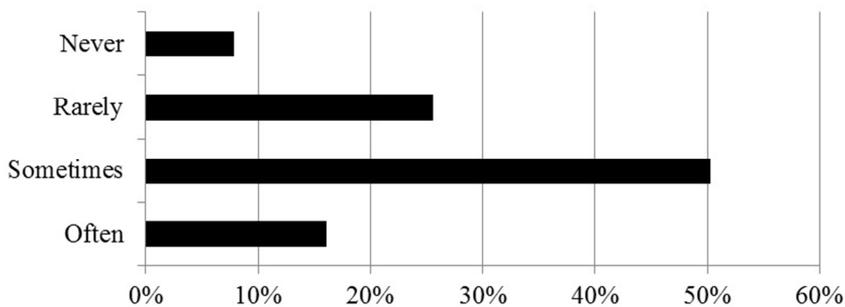
*Reported Percentage of Doing and Participating in Research Projects*



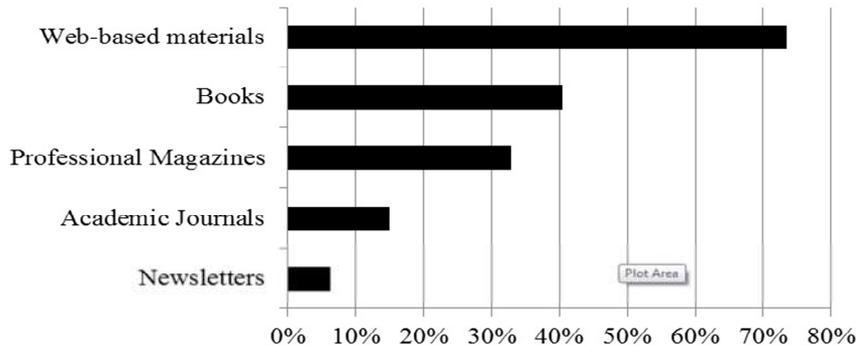
The next question asked respondents to indicate how often they read educational research. As Figure 2 shows, about 16% claimed that they read research often, 50% read research sometimes, 26% rarely and 8% Never. Using Spearman's correlation, teachers' reported levels of reading research were analyzed for potential associations with their teaching experience and academic qualifications. In terms of qualification, a significant association was found ( $N = 307$ ,  $\rho = 0.138$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). That is, teachers with higher academic degrees reported higher levels of reading research. In terms of teaching experience, a significant correlation was also found ( $N = 307$ ,  $\rho = 0.174$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Teachers with more than 10 years of experience surprisingly reported lower levels of reading research.

**Figure 2**

*Reported Percentage of Reading Research Studies*



The last question in the second part of the questionnaire prompted participants to specify the sources they use for reading research. Although teachers reported high levels of using research sources, as Figure 3 shows, they indicated that they do not frequently use academic journals which publish scientific studies in a long-established orthodox fashion. Rather, teachers' research engagement is more through web-based materials and books in which research findings are often presented in a digested form.

**Figure 3***Relative Popularity of Research Sources*

### Barriers to Research Engagement

The next section of the questionnaire included a list of 25 items capturing factors that could potentially hinder or lower teachers' research engagement. Teachers were asked to rate the significance of each factor on a five-point Likert basis. The purpose of this section of the questionnaire was to gain insights into the importance of each barrier in teachers' lack of research engagement. Therefore, in order to analyze the relative importance of each barrier, the researchers calculated a weight score for each item of the questionnaire. This was done by allocating a score of +2 to every "strongly agree" response and a score of +1 to every "agree" response. Likewise, a score of -2 was assigned to every "strongly disagree" response, and a score of -1 was given to each "disagree" response. Teachers' "undecided" responses received no score, and, thus, each item received a score between -2 and +2. Finally, a mean score was computed for each item by adding up all the scores and dividing them by the number of respondents. Within this structure, the mean score for each item suggested the significance of the barrier.

Ratings given to each item by the participants revealed the relative significance of each barrier to teachers' research engagement. The most important barriers, as rated by teachers, were insufficient intellectual and financial incentives, lack of a comprehensive database and research directory, and teachers' lack of familiarity with specialized discourse of research. As Table 1 reflects, negative views toward research and innovation, teachers' conception of teaching and research, and unreliability of research findings were the least rated barriers, suggesting that they were not important in teachers' lack of research engagement. Mention should be made that although teachers' ratings to each single item can give us an idea about the particular importance of that item, for obtaining a comprehensive insight into the overall importance of and the interactions among various factors, teachers' ratings should be interpreted holistically. Bearing this in mind, the results are summarized in Table .

**Table 2**  
*Weight Scores for Barriers to Research Engagement*

Questionnaire items	No. of respondents	Weight scores	SD
حمایت مالی و فکری برای انجام تحقیق و بکارگیری یافته‌های پژوهشی صورت نمی‌گیرد.	312	1.13	.77
سازوکار مناسبی جهت اطلاع رسانی در رابطه با پژوهشهای آموزشی وجود ندارد.	311	1.09	.79
معلمان به اندازه کافی با روشهای تحقیقاتی و مطالب پژوهشی آشنایی ندارند.	316	1.06	.80
امکانات و تجهیزات آموزشی کافی جهت بکارگیری نتایج پژوهشهای آموزشی وجود ندارد.	316	1.00	.91
ارتباط نظام‌مند و سازنده‌ای بین پژوهشگران و معلمان زبان وجود ندارد.	316	.96	.76
بکارگیری یافته‌های پژوهشی در تدریس مستلزم مهارتهای ویژه‌ای است.	307	.85	.97
کتابها، آزمونها و مواد آموزشی دیگر بر اساس یافته‌های پژوهشی تدوین نشده است.	314	.69	1.02
بانک اطلاعاتی جامعی از نتایج پژوهشهای آموزشی در دسترس نیست.	316	.69	1.01
دیدگاه معلمان نسبت به آموزش و پژوهش با دیدگاه محققان تفاوت دارد.	316	.68	.90
در ارزشیابی معلمان توجهی به انجام پژوهش و بکارگیری یافته‌های پژوهشی نمی‌شود.	314	.64	1.00
یافته‌های پژوهشی با ارزشهای حاکم بر نظام آموزشی تناسب ندارد.	307	.60	1.10
اختیارات معلمان زبان در بکارگیری یافته‌های پژوهشی محدود است.	314	.52	1.16
فکر می‌کنم در پژوهشهای صورت گرفته به نیازهای پژوهشی معلمان پرداخته نمی‌شود.	310	.46	.92
فکر می‌کنم تعداد پژوهشهای مروری و فراتحلیلی محدود است.	307	.34	.82
تغییر روشها و تکنیکهای تدریس دشواریهایی برای معلمان زبان ایجاد می‌کند.	310	.33	1.09
مطالعه و فهم مطالب پژوهشی به دلیل نگارش آنها به زبان فنی و غیرقابل فهم دشوار است.	310	.22	1.06
معلمان به اندازه کافی برای مطالعه و انجام کارهای پژوهشی وقت ندارند.	315	.19	1.20
انجام پژوهش و بکارگیری یافته‌های پژوهشی جزء مسائل حاشیهای تدریس زبان است.	310	.15	1.27
دسترسی به منابع پژوهشی دشوار است.	312	.13	1.14
نتایج پژوهشهای آموزشی در رشته آموزش زبان اغلب متفاوت و متناقض است.	310	.13	.93
به نظر من یافته‌های پژوهشی به محیط کاری من قابل تعمیم نیست.	313	.09	1.12
به نظر من پژوهشهای صورت گرفته در رشته آموزش زبان کاربردی نیست.	314	.07	1.10
احساس میکنم نتایج پژوهشهای آموزشی قابل اتکا نیست.	312	-.00	.95
مطالعه پژوهشها و بکارگیری نتایج آن جزء وظایف معلمان زبان به شمار نمی‌رود.	312	-.15	1.24
در محیط کاری من دیدگاه غالب نسبت به نوآوری و بکارگیری روشهای نوین منفی است.	316	-.20	1.23

Note: In this table where the number of participants does not add up to 319, this is due to missing data.

## Discussion

Examining the views and educational commitments of Iranian language teachers as a starting point, the purpose of the present study was twofold: to examine teachers' level of research engagement and to explore the barriers that may impede their engagement. This inquiry provides an account of the status quo and informs the future production and dissemination of research. Studies of this type can contribute to the development and implementation of policies which aim at bridging the gap between educational research and practice. In what follows, the results obtained from the examination of teachers' views are discussed in two consecutive sections: their level of research engagement and the reasons they cited for lack of engagement. Attempts are made to augment the discussion by theoretical research findings reported in the literature.

## Level of Engagement

The results concerning involvement in research revealed moderate to high levels of research engagement. In particular, more than 80% of the participants reported that they had been involved in the process of conducting research studies. In addition, 65% of the sample reported that they consulted research papers either often or sometimes. However, as Borg (2009) discusses, these statistics should be interpreted with caution because the terms “often” and “sometimes” are perceived variously by different individuals. For example, the term “sometimes” might be interpreted as “a euphemism for *rarely*” (Borg & Liu, 2013, p. 291). In addition, a more elaborate analysis is needed into what teachers exactly meant by doing and reading research. It is likely that some teachers might have considered “using standardized language tests in their classrooms” or “contributing to a research study by filling out a questionnaire” as doing research. Thus, an awareness of teachers’ understanding of what actual research entails would be conducive in the analysis of teachers’ level of research engagement.

Teachers’ high level of engagement can, in all probability, reflect their positive attitudes toward research as an effective instrument for their professional development. Although there are multiple strands of development available to prospective teachers (e.g., workshops, practicums, classroom observations, etc.), this does not continue to hold true after graduation from their teacher education programs. As a matter of fact, for the majority of practicing teachers, research engagement is the only available path toward regularly promoting their pedagogical knowledge and expertise. This is in line with previous empirical findings which indicate that teachers resort to research as an instrument for solving their pedagogical problems and improving their practical teaching (e.g., Gao et al., 2010).

Moreover, teachers’ reported level of engagement might not necessarily indicate their “*current*” research engagement, but as Mehrani (2015) contends, it can merely point to various academic regulations and course requirements. One can envision that many teachers might have been required to do or read academic research as a component of their university programs; but this does not essentially evince that they have continued to do so since licensed to work as a teacher. This speculation is already made in the literature (e.g., Borg, 2007; 2009) and is particularly supported by the findings which show teachers with higher qualifications and less teaching experience have had more research engagement.

The results also revealed that academic research journals are not among popular resources that teachers may use to update their professional knowledge. As an alternative, they prefer web-based sources such as weblogs, forums, and research repository platforms that are more easily accessible. This finding suggests that perhaps the accessibility of academic research does not guarantee teachers’ engagement with research (Mehrani, 2015). Teachers’ tendency toward web-based research sources might also point to the fact that research findings in such resources are often reported in a simple and teacher-friendly language. This lends support to what Bauer and Fischer (2006) refer to as *intellectual accessibility* of research which

points to the importance of presenting research findings in an encapsulated and simplified way to teachers.

It seems, therefore, that a crucial step in increasing teachers' research engagement is a broad dissemination of research findings that are relevant and ready to use, in a form that is understandable to teachers. Given that the current major publication platforms are academic journals and scientific conferences, it seems practice-oriented workshops and non-academic conferences can open new avenues for research dissemination and enhance communication between researchers and practitioners, provided that such meetings are planned in and by educational – not academic – centers.

### **Barriers to Engagement**

The findings of this investigation uncovered some of the complexities involved in teachers' research engagement in the Iranian context. Despite some differences between the results found here and those reported in the literature, it seems that the findings are consistent and can be considered reliable. As a matter of fact, the study conducted by Funk et al. (1989) identified four sets of obstacles that further the distance between practitioners and academicians. The statistical factor analysis in this study similarly reiterated that the potential barriers can best be discussed in four broad categories. In the following, attempts are made to discuss these categories of barriers under the titles that correspond to the results of the factor analysis.

### ***The Nature and Quality of Research***

The findings showed that one of the problems with ELT research is that it often fails to address the unique properties of various teaching contexts. That is, many teachers cast doubt on the potential of current research in addressing and solving their pedagogical problems. In fact, teachers' emphasis on the idiosyncratic features of their teaching contexts poses a great challenge to the practicality of ELT research. This concern has been frequently raised in the literature and reflects what Clarke (1994) calls dysfunctionality of research in ELT.

Simply, if educational research is concerned with theoretical arguments, it cannot provide unambiguous evidence for "what works" in practice. Moreover, sometimes studies focus on marginal questions that are too insignificant and, consequently, the results of such studies do not have any practical values. Even when a study yields unambiguous results, explorative use of findings is discouraged by researchers for various reasons. For instance, teachers are warned for the liberal use of the findings because: "the study was limited in scope," "the subjects included only elementary learners," "the procedure was highly controlled," "non-random sampling was employed," etc. Such warnings (often stated by researchers as "study limitations") make it extremely difficult for teachers to obtain practical advice from academic articles.

Another relevant problem identified by teachers is the complex and technical language of research papers. In particular, the mathematical jargons employed in the methodology and the statistical complexities used in the analysis of research results

make research hard for teachers to fully understand. This concern is justified to the extent that so much research in ELT is replete with fairly complicated analytical procedures. This, in turn, leaves numerous research studies superfluously complicated and too difficult for teachers to understand. As Mehrani and Khodi (2014) vehemently argue, even the most determined researchers (let alone teachers) sometimes have hard times understanding complicated statistical analyses such as factor analysis, path analysis, regression, analysis of variance, etc. One may challenge ELT research community on suspicion that researchers, through using a practice-exclusive language, widen the gap between researchers and practitioners. Could they really not present research in a more simplified, understandable language?

### ***The Use of Research in Educational Contexts***

The next set of factors that were perceived by teachers as leaving a negative impact on their research engagement centered on the unavailability of logistics for research and insufficient facilities for using research. Previous studies (e.g., Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Macaro, 2003) have recurrently referred to unavailability of research as a main cause of teachers' disengagement with research. One way to address this problem is to simply "get things across" which in the words of Bauer and Fischer mean to present your research findings where practitioners can easily find them (2007). Within this formulation, then, comprehensive summaries of research studies should be compiled and made available to practitioners.

The next barrier is a lack of technological facilities such as TV, media players, and computers in the classroom context. The participants of this study ranked this issue as one of the major barriers in the utilization of research findings. It follows then, that the decisions to be made about the implementation of innovative strategies of teaching and the application of research findings must be informed by a consideration of the required logistical facilities.

Previous studies emphasized that teachers' hectic schedule can prevent them from engaging in research. The ratings given by teachers in this study, however, suggested that this assertion might not hold true in the Iranian context. Unlike other studies (e.g., Borg, 2007; 2009), the present survey did not prove a lack of time as a significant factor in teachers' research disengagement.

### ***Institutional and Educational Policies***

Teachers' ratings to items related to educational policies raise concerns about their job conditions and the financial and intellectual supports they receive to read or conduct research. Specifically, the data showed that many teachers believe that educational textbooks and materials are not designed and developed based on research findings, and, thus, cannot be taught based on the pedagogical recommendations of recent research. These findings suggest that since textbooks and educational materials and teaching approaches are not revised and updated, teachers may not feel required to promote their professional knowledge and tune up their teaching styles accordingly.

Furthermore, the results disclosed some teachers' perception of research to the effect that, in the Iranian educational system, doing or reading research is often considered as an off-the-point issue, one that does not receive any striking attention. In line with this perception, the data pointed to teachers' consensus that their efforts in applying research findings into classroom context are not appreciated nor even taken into consideration. This echoes the need for a reformulation of our current teacher evaluation system. For instance, a new system can be envisioned, where teachers not only are institutionally encouraged to keep up with current thinking in educational issues, but also are intellectually and financially supported to conduct research projects.

The majority of the participants also resented the educational system for a lack of liberation for innovative and creative educational activities. Teachers' ratings particularly addressed the restrictive rules and regulations that are imposed by policymakers. Although using research findings typically entails doing pioneering and innovative undertakings, restrictive educational policies such as fixed schedules or predetermined lesson plans often appear preventive of such endeavors. Therefore, if the research-practice gap is to be challenged, teachers need to be trusted and given pedagogical autonomy for practicing their own theories.

#### ***Collaboration Between Researchers and Teachers***

The last category of barriers that perpetuate the research-practice gap has to do with the scarcity of communication between the communities of teachers and researchers. In line with the demand for a harmonious orchestration between the two sides of the gap, the results of this study suggest that establishing a mutual relationship between the two domains is both necessary and constructive. Although the analysis of the results does not exactly delineate how such a relationship can be constructed with respect to the actual measures that need to be taken at each end, it does highlight that the absence of interactions between researchers and practitioners is a significant barrier to the utilization of research findings in practice.

Specifically, the results indicated that there is not any systematic "research notification system" such that Iranian teachers may have no idea of what is going on in university centers. A lack of communication and contact makes research appear as a remote and far-reaching domain which cannot be approached without having a highly specialized body of knowledge. In fact, many teachers in this study clearly declared that they assume they do not have the pre-requisite knowledge for reading and conducting academic research papers. Moreover, the data shows participants believe that utilization of research findings requires a set of specific skills that many practicing teachers lack.

These barriers could arguably be attributed to the inadequacies of our teacher education programs, where prospective teachers are rarely trained to read, analyze, and use academic research (Mehrani, 2014). In fact, our current pre-service and in-service teacher education programs are most often organized within time limitations of educational semesters, and, therefore, instructors of research courses are not able to provide prospective teachers with realistic and meaningful research experience.

However, to bridge the research-practice gap, we argue that prospective teachers must not just be simply trained within course limitations but be educated for a prolonged profession. This requires establishing multiple paths through which academicians develop more cooperative models of interactions with practitioners. For instance, they ought to be more considerate of what their research outcome can really offer to teachers. Researchers should also work out alternative frameworks of disseminating their research so as to communicate clearly and succinctly with teachers (Gore & Giltin, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

A main concern behind embarking on the present study was to reflect a substantial number of teachers' views on research engagement. This is a remarkable contribution of this study as the ideas culminated in the findings inclusively echo teachers' voice. In terms of methodology, the study designed, developed, and rigorously validated a new instrument which can be used in future studies. In addition, the study also offered empirical findings about teachers' level of research engagement as well as the barriers that impede their engagement.

As a broad implication, this study gives credence to the criticisms against such simplistic conceptualizations as "exploratory practice," "teacher researcher movement," and "evidence-based teaching." This study showed that the research-practice division is indeed the result of a complex interaction of an array of factors that cannot be simply reduced to technical matters. In fact, the study suggests that such simplistic views are doomed unproductive in reducing the gulf between research and practice, and reconfiguration of the gap requires multidimensional strands of development both in research and practice communities as well as in educational policies.

As a further implication, the present study points to the requirement for establishing mutual interactions between researchers and practitioners for identifying research needs, conducting research and utilizing findings. Through reciprocal channels of communication, practitioners can offer a more eloquent description of their research needs, contribute to the process of doing research, and provide feedback on the impact of research. Such initiatives, of course, require hard work within schools and academic centers to bring these two communities into alignment and to build up mutual interactions between them.

To finalize with a positive tone, the findings suggest that despite existing restrictions, Iranian EFL teachers seem willing to keep their engagement with research to improve their pedagogical practice. Therefore, future studies can investigate potential pathways through which teachers' drive can be reinforced. In addition, future researchers can investigate teachers' reasons for research engagement and alternative paths to professional development such as action research and reflective teaching. Such inquiries can provide benchmarks for comparative analyses.

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