CHINESE COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHERS' RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT

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1   Introduction

This is a summary of a study conducted by Professor Simon Borg and Professor Yi Liu which examined the beliefs about research and the research activities of Chinese College English teachers. The full report of the study has been published in *TESOL Quarterly*[1]. We thank everyone who supported this work, in particular all the teachers who participated.

2   Purpose of the study

In this study we explored teacher research engagement in the context of College English teaching in China. Specifically, we examined the extent to which College English teachers (CETs) report being engaged both *with* (by reading) and *in* (by doing) research, and the factors which influence such engagement. The study examined the following research questions:

1. What degree of engagement with (through reading) and in (by doing) research is reported by CETs?
2. What reasons do CETs give for being more or less research engaged?
3. What are CETs' perceptions of the extent to which their workplace is conducive to research engagement?

3   Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods approach. Our primary quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire, while the supporting qualitative data came from follow-

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[1] If you would like to read the full report of this study please contact the authors on s.borg@education.leeds.ac.uk or daphneliu3@gmail.com

up interviews. The questionnaire was made available both online and by e-mail. Data were collected for six months, at which point the survey was closed with replies received from 725 respondents, from around 20 different provinces in China. Twenty teachers took part in follow-up interviews through which their questionnaire responses were discussed in greater detail. Each interview lasted on average 30 minutes, was conducted in Chinese, and audio recorded (with permission). Questionnaire data were analyzed statistically while the interview data were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis.

4   Findings

4.1   Background Information

Almost 82% of the CETs who participated in this study were female, while in terms of experience of teaching CE, 52.6% had less than 10 years, 32.1% had 10-19 years, and 15.3% had more than 20 years. The profile of qualifications was high: over 92% of the teachers in this study had at least a Master's degree. Only 62% of the CETs in this study majored in foreign language education or applied linguistics.

4.2   Reading Research

Table 1 shows CETs' reported frequency of reading language teaching research. The most commonly reported frequency of reading (by over 37% of the teachers) was 'occasionally', and overall, we would interpret the levels of engagement with research reported here as modest.

4.2.1   Impact of Reading

The 621 CETs who said they read research at least 'occasionally' were asked about the

extent to which their reading impacted on their work as CETs. Almost 44% said the influence of the research they read on their work was moderate, 32.8% felt it was fairly strong or strong, while 23% felt the influence was slight or non-existent.

Table 1: How often CETs read research (N=725)

	N	%
Never	8	1.1
Rarely	96	13.2
Occasionally	271	37.4
Periodically	208	28.7
Often	111	15.3
Frequently	31	4.3
Total	725	100.0

4.2.2   Reasons for Not Reading Research

The 104 teachers who said that they read research never or rarely were asked why they did not read research more often, and 96 of them replied. In terms of individual items, that cited most commonly was a lack of interest in reading research, followed by the difficulty research publications were felt to pose.

4.3   Doing Research

Of 698 respondents, almost 20.9% said they did research themselves rarely or never, 52.7% occasionally, and 26.4% often or frequently. Thus, a total of 79.1% said they conducted research at least occasionally (of course, 'occasionally' means different things for different teachers).

4.3.1   Reasons for Doing Research

The three reasons for doing research that the teachers gave were 1) because it is good for my professional development; 2) to find better ways of teaching; 3) to solve problems in my professional work. Getting a promotion was ranked fourth. Nonetheless, promotion was a concern that affected teachers' attitudes toward and engagement in research and one which emerged strongly in the

interviews. Overall, while the questionnaire responses suggested that CETs were motivated to do research mainly for professional and pedagogical reasons, the interview data suggested that promotion was a very powerful external motivation, too.

4.3.2   Reasons for Not Doing Research

Teachers who reported doing research rarely or never (N=146) were asked to identify reasons for their low engagement with research, and 138 did. The top three reasons identified by these teachers are listed in the following table.

Table 2: Reasons for not doing research (N=138)

Reason	N	%
It is difficult to get my research published	68	49.3
I need someone to advise me but no one is available.	66	47.8
I do not know enough about research methods	65	47.1

4.4   Research Cultures

Section 3 of the questionnaire elicited teachers' views on the extent to which they worked in an environment which was conductive to research engagement. and the responses here suggest that the CETs assessed their institutional research cultures moderately positively in several respects. In particular, almost 88% of respondents agreed that they are expected by the management to do research; however, just over 66% felt that the management supports teachers who want to do research, while only slightly over 30% of the teachers agreed that time for research was built into their workloads. Teachers felt there was a gap between what management expected them to do inn terms of research and how much support and incentive the management provided for such activity.

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5   Discussion

5.1   Engagement with Research

The teachers in this study reported moderate levels of reading research. In explaining why they did not read research more often, teachers often stated that research did not solve practical problems in the classroom. Such an expectation, though, is unhelpful and research is not designed to provide direct solutions to local problems. These findings suggest that CETs would benefit from opportunities to explore the range of relationships that can exist between engagement with research and classroom practice. Overall, what emerges in this study is a largely instrumental view of the value of engagement with research characterized by the search by teachers for immediate and direct positive impacts on their classroom practices. This is an important finding, because it allows us to better understand one reason why teachers have negative attitudes to much published (and, in their eyes, overly theoretical) research and why, for several teachers here, reading research was an activity they engaged in only when they had to (e.g. for promotion).

5.2 Engagement in Research

Over 79% of the CETs in this study reported doing research at least occasionally. Taking both the quantitative and qualitative data into account, we would suggest that promotion was at least as important as pedagogical drivers in motivating CETs to engage in research. Various reasons for not doing research were also highlighted here – both predictable factors such as a lack of advisors, knowledge and time – as well as difficulty in getting published. Teachers' views here reflected the fact that the promotions system for CETs only recognizes research that is published, and, thus, where teachers did not feel that publication was a realistic goal, there was very often no incentive for them to engage in research. At the same time, though, there was evidence here that publication was not universally accepted by CETs as a

necessary goal of research and that some teachers.

 Overall, our analysis of CETs' reasons for doing and not doing research suggests a complex range of interacting and often conflicting factors, in which personal interests, self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., regarding teachers' knowledge of research), disciplinary background, conceptions of research (personal and institutional), relationships with colleagues, working conditions, and external requirements (especially for promotion) combined to shape the stance teachers adopted. The lack of transparency (i.e., explicit discussion within the institution) that surrounded many of these issues was a central factor here in the ambiguities and dilemmas that CETs experienced in relation to doing research.

5.3 Research Cultures

Overall, CETs assessed in moderately positive terms the extent to which their working contexts constituted an environment conductive to research engagement. A key tension to emerge was that there was a substantial gap between the management's expectations of teachers' research activity and the support that teachers felt the management provided for such activity. Additionally, an original theme to emerge from CETs' analysis of their research cultures was that the lack of a collaborative research ethos and the competitive promotions system seemed to contribute to teachers' preference to engage in research individually. Such an individualist research culture may hinder the development of productive research-engaged organizations. This is another point that has implications for language teaching organizations more generally who would like their staff to be research active.

6. Implications

The broader implications of this study for promoting language teacher research engagement within CE departments are listed as follows.

1) A critical questioning and explicit statement of the value attached to the rationale for promoting teacher research engagement needs to be articulated in CE departments. In other words, there should be clear and shared understanding among teachers and managers of why reading and doing research are valuable activities.

2) It is necessary to have a clear statement of how research is being defined in CE contexts and of the criteria that institutions use in determining what will or will not 'count' as research. Public dissemination is generally acknowledged as a criterion for research; however, such dissemination can take many forms and does not have to constitute a written academic journal article. A broader notion of what counts as dissemination might thus be one way of creating a more productive research culture in CET and language teaching contexts more generally.

3) This study suggests that the system for appraising teachers' research may discourage teachers from doing research collaboratively. This is unfortunate given that collaborative research can be more productive, professionally rewarding and of better quality.

4) It is important for institutions to be explicit about the levels of research engagement they expect of teachers and to ensure that these targets are feasible given the other duties teachers have to fulfil.

5) It was clear in this study that teachers perceived a gap between institutional expectations and the support they received to meet these. It is essential then that strategies to promote teacher research engagement assess the support teachers require and consider feasible strategies for putting this in place. Support should not be limited to resources such as equipment and time. Teachers also need opportunities to develop their own knowledge and skills in relation to research.

We would suggest that an analysis of the above implications can assist CE departments in making informed decisions about whether and how to promote research engagement among their teachers and make it more likely that the strategies adopted for doing so are supportive of teachers' professional growth.