



“I am coming out of my research shell ...”:
Exploring Iranian University English Teachers’ Research Engagement
through Activity Theory

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Although university English teachers’ professional growth hinges upon active research engagement, they could not individually follow a one-size-fits-all approach to turn into teacher researchers. In this study, through the lens of activity system, we explored how university English teachers could be empowered to mediate their research engagement by reliance on socially enhanced research tools, research community norms, and research scaffolding trends. Thirty Iranian university English teachers (twenty-seven PhD candidates and three PhD graduates) participated in this study. To collect the data, we used semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and online discussion forums. The findings demonstrated that Iranian university English teachers’ research engagement is mediated by research mindset, research interest, and research toolkit. Furthermore, research apprenticeship and academic promotion are the two research norms that university English teachers support. In the research engagement system, research networks and research teams promote the teachers’ collective research literacy. The results further showed that to socially mediate the university English teachers’ research engagement, research educators are expected to systematically guide the teachers’ research practices, research materials developers need to curate and produce teacher-friendly research materials, and academic researchers should authorize the teachers to get socialized into teachers’ research communities.

Keywords: research engagement, university English teachers, activity theory, professional development

Introduction

Language teachers’ research engagement, as a vibrant area of interest in teacher education (Bai, 2018), motivates them to conduct research to facilitate their professional development (PD) (Barkhuizen, 2020), embed research into their teaching practices, and resolve classroom concerns (Borg & Liu, 2013; Li & Borg, 2014; Taylor, 2017; Tran et al., 2017). The emphasis on research in teacher education is internationally growing (Van Katwijk et al., 2021). There is an increasing emphasis on transforming teachers into researchers (Nicholson & Lander, 2020) because research guides teachers’ daily pedagogical practices (Brew & Saunders, 2020) and by changing their research consumer to research



producer role (Gray, 2013), language teachers can make more effective research-pedagogy links (Sato & Loewen, 2019). University language teachers' research engagement involves stepping beyond their comfort zones as practitioners and turning into active teacher researchers (Bai & Hudson, 2011; Borg & Liu, 2013). Therefore, university language teachers are more often judged by their roles as researchers than teachers (Huang & Guo, 2019).

Through in-service teacher education programs, college English teachers could be empowered to reconstruct their research-informed professional identities. The three research-oriented trajectories of their professional identity reconstruction are determined by moving from "unreconciled dreamer" to "fulfilled research practitioner", "passive adapter" to "agentic researcher-teacher", and "invisible layperson" to "confident teacher-researcher" (Bao & Feng, 2022). Cao et al. (2021) further addressed the promising role of teaching-research integration in the context of university to educate the future generations of teachers. Iranian university English teachers' PD depends on their research engagement that is mainly characterized by doing research to not only promote their pedagogical practices, but also integrate themselves into the academic community. These teachers' understanding of research is mainly informed by theory-loaded research books and research trial-and-error cycles. Although these teachers are interested in meaningfully enriching their research engagement, their research practices are predominantly overshadowed by individual and collaborative research projects occasionally accompanied by inconsistent mentorship, traditional researcher education courses following outdated instructional methods, and detachment from teachers' research communities. To gradually step beyond individual research comfort zones and collectively promote research engagement, university English teachers need to rely on socially mediated research tools, research community norms, and research scaffolding resources. Against this backdrop, we addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What tools do Iranian university English teachers use to mediate their research engagement?
- 2) What research community norms do Iranian university English teachers follow to mediate their research engagement?
- 3) How do research stakeholders scaffold Iranian University English teachers' research engagement?

Literature Review

Teachers' Research Engagement

Research-literate teachers tend to seek research evidence to inform their critical judgment and decision-making (Woore et al., 2020). As Bai (2018) further asserts, if teachers understand the pedagogical and professional benefits of research, they would be more intensely engaged in it. Kostoulas et al. (2019) also believe that through engaging with research, teachers would no longer be the passive recipients of research outcomes, bridge the gap between research findings and pedagogical practices, and enhance autonomy by selecting the research findings tailored to their immediate classroom needs. Teachers as self-reflective individuals need to be open to research-pedagogy dialogues (Sato & Loewen, 2019).

University English teachers' PD that hinges on their concurrent teacher-researcher roles foregrounds the need for striking a balance between them. As research engagement is turning into a seamless side of university English teachers' daily academic concerns, by establishing a mutual symbiotic relationship between research and teaching, the teachers could immerse themselves in research practices and reduce the increasing pressure for playing the researcher role (Huang & Guo, 2019). By doing research, teachers improve their teaching and learning practices, get empowered, and professionally grow (Wyatt, 2011). According to Woore et al. (2020), the main characteristics of teacher researchers include dissatisfaction with the current teaching practices, willingness to act as change catalysts, aspiration to improve teaching, adoption of an inquiry stance, and interest in promoting agency and resilience.

Researchers and practitioners need shared spaces for reciprocally exchanging knowledge and experience. University English teachers' research engagement positively contributes to their professional growth. Liu and Borg (2014) found that university English teachers' active engagement in research is conducive to their PD. To conduct research, language teachers need to be intrinsically motivated and academic institutions should support them to develop their research literacy (Bai, 2018). Rather than "mystifying research", we could "introduce research to the teachers in a more accessible approach according to those teachers' current level of research competency and knowledge about research" (Liu & Borg, 2014, p. 289). In another study, Dikilitaş and Comoglu (2022) showed that reflective involvement in research stories that include real instances of teachers' pedagogical experiences empower them to develop their teacher self-images. By reflectively reading research stories, teachers build and enrich their pedagogical knowledge base. The findings further demonstrated that teachers doing research are committed and resilient critical thinkers. Therefore, through the researcher lens, teachers could more efficiently build the future selves. In a recent study, Van Katwijk et al. (2021) revealed that establishing the link between theory and practice in research and applying previous research findings to teaching practices have a positive cognitive and affective impact on teachers.

Research engagement as a key aspect of teacher training programs is characterized by motivation, prestige, support, training, professionalization, resources, community, and research areas (Gironzetti & Muñoz-Basols, 2022). Teachers need to play active roles in research, develop positive attitudes towards research, and participate in more experienced researchers' workshops (Tran et al. 2017). Yuan et al. (2016) similarly believe that in PD, teachers' participation in workshops, group discussions, and reflections could help them promote their research potentials, reflect on their research difficulties, and develop positive attitudes towards doing research. Bai and Hudson (2011) also found that researchers need training workshop, seminar, conference, departmental support, personal research mentorship, and reduced workload. Thus, mentoring helps the early-career teachers to get socialized into research and mid-career teachers to disseminate their research findings. Sato and Loewen (2019) found that to bridge research-pedagogy gaps, teachers could establish communities of practice, transfer research findings to pedagogical contexts, and integrate classroom research into their current curriculum.

Recent studies in the Iranian ELT (English language teaching) context attempt to focus on the teachers' research engagement. For instance, Mehrani (2015) addressed the Iranian teachers' motivation for doing research. These motivational sources include the teachers' professional development needs, pedagogical concerns, instrumental incentives, and organizational expectations. Farsani and Babaii (2019) also explored the EFL faculty members' research engagement and showed that despite high levels of faculty members' engagement in reading and doing research, their high-quality research outputs depend on meeting their expectations of the institutional support for doing research. In another study, Sadeghi and Abutorabi (2016) found that lack of access to research papers and books, financial resources, and relevance to classroom practices prevent English language teachers from being active researchers. Rahimi et al. (2021) further referred to research engagement setbacks in the higher education context in Iran that include the researchers' extrinsic engagement in and with research for academic promotion instead of professional development, the insignificant contributions of the departments and university instructors to research completion in higher education in Iran, and the pressures on the ELT researchers to conduct and publish research.

The recent literature predominantly highlighted different dimensions of teachers' research engagement. However, the Iranian university English teachers' research engagement characterized by conducting research to both enhance teaching practices at university and becoming academic research community members needs to be further investigated. Furthermore, although university English teachers' research engagement plays a pivotal role in their professional growth, there is a lacuna of research on how their research engagement could be socially mediated through research tools, research scaffolding mechanisms, and research community norms.

Activity Theory

As Livingston (2020) assert, research on teacher education is growingly concentrating on sociocultural theories by highlighting the socially mediated collective construction of teacher's knowledge. Activity theory as a fertile domain of research in education (Anh, 2013) "provides a lens through which we analyze and interpret the teachers' activity within their activity system" (Mak & Lee, 2014, p. 75), where the unit of analysis is contextualized in the collective, artifact-based, object-mediated system (Engeström, 2001). An activity system which demonstrates the complexity of human activity and its interaction with the context consists of seven components: subject, object, outcome, mediating artifacts, community, division of labor, and rules (Engeström, 2015). Although teacher education researchers have used activity theory to address teachers' professional identity construction (Anh, 2013, Karimi & Mofidi, 2019), agency (Feryok, 2012), and dynamic assessment (Herazo et al., 2019), examining teachers' research engagement from activity theory perspective is missing.

Method

Participants

Thirty Iranian university English teachers (thirteen males and seventeen females with an average age of 32.3) participated in the study. In Iranian state universities, university English teachers need to be at least PhD candidates to be granted the opportunity to teach university courses. The participants comprised twenty-seven PhD candidates and three PhD graduates. Eight of these university English teachers with prior research experiences wrote a reflective narrative journal about the research competence they gained on their research journey. Finally, in an online weblog discussion forum, five teachers shared the research norms that could mediate institutional research engagement. To ensure the participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews lasted for sixty to ninety minutes on average. The participants were given the freedom to choose the interview language. Out of thirty teachers, twenty-seven were interviewed in person and three took part in a telephone interview session. The interviews were tape-recorded for subsequent analysis. In the interview sessions, the teachers were asked about their research engagement activities, attitudes towards research-teaching interplay, social factors facilitating and debilitating their research engagement at university, and the ways in which research engagement contributes to their PD. Sometimes the data were member-checked to ensure the participants' statements were accurately recorded.

Narratives

Teachers with prior research experiences were asked to write narratives about their research activities. Barkhuizen (2016) highlighted the significance of using narratives for data collection because by relying on stories, the researchers could make sense of the participants' perspectives and real-life experiences. By delving into university English teachers' research journals, we deeply investigated the mediating tools the researchers employed in their projects, their experiences of research instruction and communication norms, and their reliance on different research stakeholders' support.

Online discussions

Five PhD candidates that worked as part-time university English teachers at Iranian state universities were invited to participate in the five-week weblog-based discussion forum as a small online community which provides a context for them to address institutional research norms. In these focus group discussions, the teachers openly shared their attitudes towards their roles as researchers and raised the current concerns about the research community norms. Since these teachers were teaching at different universities at the time of the study, they could comparatively discuss the research norms in their departments as the immediate contexts. More specifically, in five weeks, the teachers shared their real-life experiences of research engagement practices, institutional research norms, teachers' research communities, teachers' researcher role, and teachers' research mentorship and assistantship in their universities. These discussions set the context for exchanging research experiences as well as finding out about the teachers' research engagement promises and challenges in different universities. In online discussion forums, the five researchers acted as active participants that shared their real-life research stories and the first author played the moderator role by initiating the discussions, helping the participants follow the flow of discussions, and elaborating on vague points.

Data Analysis

In the present study, we concentrated on the components of activity theory (See Figure 1) as the theoretical framework. For data analysis purposes, constant comparative method was used to analyze the data based on inductive data-driven themes and deductive a priori categories defined by the activity theory.

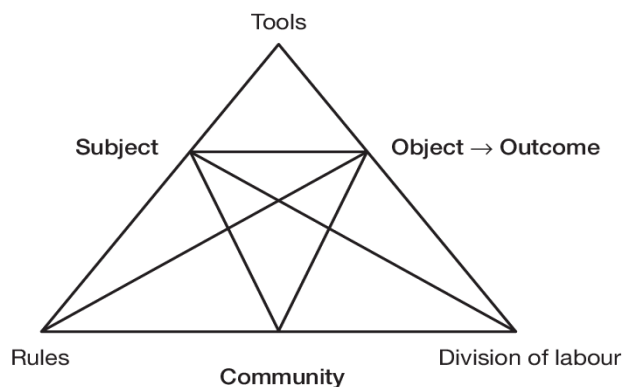


Figure 1. Components of activity theory (Engeström, 2015).

In the inductive phase characterized by open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the interviews, narratives, and discussions were constantly read to identify the overall codes communicating specific contents. Then, the codes were categorized and repeatedly compared to outline the sub-categories. In the deductive phase, the specific codes compatible with the activity system and its sub-components were inserted into the theoretical framework. To ensure the reliability, an experienced researcher independently coded the data. The disagreements and coding inconsistencies were discussed. The inter-coder reliability was estimated (95%, 94%, 93%) for interviews, narratives, and discussions, respectively.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the research engagement tools, norms, and division of labor mediating Iranian university English teachers' research engagement are presented and discussed.

Mediating Research Tools

In response to the first question, university English teachers pinpointed three main resources mediating their research engagement: research mindset, research interest, and research toolkit (see Figure 2).

Research mindset

Iranian university English teachers perceived research-oriented mindset as a key artefact mediating their research engagement. The findings demonstrated that while academic pursuit and academic competition are the two main sources guiding half of the teachers' underlying research-driven cognition, the other half of the teachers perceived their researcher role as a mediator of their life-long learning and pedagogical problem-solving.

First, the willingness to pursue a decent career in academia urges young teachers to persistently conduct research. Sahar currently working as a visiting lecturer in a state university is highly motivated to live an academic life because in her interview, she stated that *"working outside academia is a nightmare. We are motivated to do research to become qualified for employment and ensure our visibility in the competitive atmosphere of academia"*. She asserted that research engagement is a linchpin of academia-related careers and this research-oriented cognition directly impacts her research practices.

Second, sense of academic competition induced by the ELT research community could further trigger the teachers' research engagement. In the interview session, Mobina, a PhD holder and a part-time university teacher, mentioned:

In our coffee-break chats, we talk more about our research projects and how we can conduct research in our classes. When my colleagues discuss their projects, ask for cooperation, or get published, I become more motivated to do research to catch up and survive in the academia.

This indicates that university English teachers' research mindset is gradually and collectively shaped by the community of colleagues to which they belong. Academic competition socially shapes the teachers' research concerns. To avoid marginalization in the academic ELT community and in an attempt to remain an academic insider, teachers attempt to actively engage themselves in research.

However, some other teachers viewed research as a long-term learning process guiding their research-informed pedagogical decisions and classroom-based research activities. In her reflective journal, Melika mentioned, *"Researchers as life-long learners are like backpack travelers who take the rough road of research, no matter what it takes to complete the journey"*. Furthermore, in the interview session, Tara, a part-time teacher doing action research, stated, *"As a teacher doing research, this is my mission: Do research to make a difference. Do research to be the change you seek"*. These statements demonstrated that by doing research, the teachers are empowered to voice their concerns, solve real problems in their immediate contexts, feel they can make changes to the educational system, and moderate their professional growth.

University English teachers recommended writing reflective research journals to gradually shape their research mindset. By so doing, they keep abreast of the latest research findings, critically explore research trends, reflect on linking research to pedagogical concerns, record research experiences, and list recommendations for future research. While showing her colorful research notebook with highlighted research questions/topics in the interview session, Nastaran said, *"I have my own research notebook."*

Whenever I read an article, I record my critical comments, list the findings applicable to my classes, raise my questions, and write down recommendations for future research”.

This indicates that by journal keeping, university English teachers attempt to bridge the current research gaps and preserve their agency as active members of the research community. Teachers’ reflection could cognitively prepare them for linking research findings to their immediate pedagogical concerns/priorities. Drafting reflective journals positively involves the teachers in bridging theory-practice gaps (Barber, 2021). However, to socially mediate their research engagement, jointly build their research mindset, and relate their PD to the research norms conventionalized by the ELT community, the teachers could draft joint reflective journals in cooperation with their colleagues.

University English teachers differ from institute practitioners because in their professional growth, they need to actively adopt the transformative researcher role. The results showed that university English teachers’ research engagement is mediated by either product-based (doing research for academic visibility and promotion) or process-based (doing research for life-long learning or problem solving) orientations. The findings were in line with the literature corroborating the need for integrating research engagement into English teachers’ PD (Borg & Liu, 2013; Liu & Borg, 2014).

As such, the teachers enjoying research mindsets purported that there is always a room for them to address pedagogical concerns in research, highlight emerging critical classroom incidents, and turn into life-long learners. As Baan et al. (2019) acknowledged, teachers doing research perceive themselves to be more competent. Research perception is an empowering tool for teachers that mediate their research engagement by consistently reminding them of “butterfly effect” or making a huge difference by doing small-scale classroom research. The findings further demonstrated that the teachers’ cognitive awareness of doing research impact their research engagement (Kostoulas et al., 2019) because their beliefs about being researchers facilitate their research engagement (Bai, 2018).

Research interest

University English teachers’ research interest potentially mediate their research engagement because the more emotionally invested they become, the more meaningfully they are engaged in linking research to pedagogical priorities. Samira, a PhD graduate and part-time university lecturer, used to do research projects in different areas. While completing her dissertation, she figured out that she had already wasted her time and energy by literally doing research in multiple areas without gaining an in-depth insight. In her reflective journal, she affirmed that *“Instead of getting lost in different areas, we must define our interests around which all our research and teaching activities revolve”*. She partly linked this *“rolling stone syndrome”* characterized by indiscriminately tracking a wide range of research options to her professors that attempt different research areas. Samira whose current research interest is defined within the area of teacher education further admitted that joining special interest groups (SIGs), webinars, conferences, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) helped her gradually build it. This reveals that teachers’ research interest could be socially constructed in close interaction with other ELT community members. Therefore, instead of haphazardly following any research domain, teachers should pursue seasoned international researchers as role models who fully concentrate on well-defined areas. University English teachers need to strike a balance between their individual research orientations and academic community expectations, where teacher self-concept enhances their critical reflections and contributes to the process of their academic identity development (Badiozaman, 2017).

University English teachers also stated that research interest gradually shapes their pedagogical thinking patterns. The teacher focusing on assessment in research may conceptualize pedagogical practices differently from the teacher doing research on technology-assisted language learning. As Helia mentioned in the online discussion, *“Having a research agenda is important. You shape and reshape it until one day you become a very experienced researcher and you can have your own”*. This indicates that research interest not only mediates the teachers’ research engagement, but also their pedagogical orientations.

It could be concluded that Iranian university English teachers should be guided to specifically define research interests for establishing their positions, developing their professional identity, and doing joint research in shared areas. Since research is an empowering tool positively contributing to teachers' research engagement and professional growth (Wyatt, 2011), teacher-researcher collaboration (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021) could efficiently moderate research interests.

Research toolkit

The participants stated that digital research databases and e-portfolios, and video-based research tutorials are the main toolkits mediating their research engagement. First, the teachers believed that by creating databases through research management systems, they more efficiently moderate their research engagement because they could gain access to classified research contents, organize research library, and jointly share research highlights. This is reflected in Sarah's narratives as she stated, *"Two months ago, I attended a workshop on using EndNote. This helped me learn how to manage my research library. Now, I have my own space for sorting research papers"*. This implies that educating teachers how to manage and personalize research databases could purposefully engage them in research.

By relying on digital database management systems, the teachers are also given a space to form a community of researchers doing research on related domains. For instance, in his narrative, Iman who attempts to dynamically use digital tools for mediating his research efforts said,

My colleague and I are doing a project. We first use Mendeley to share recent papers. We also exchange our summaries through Google Docs to jointly draft the paper. This process has shifted my role from an independent researcher to an active co-researcher.

This indicates that teachers' purposeful use of research databases could not only digitally optimize research practices, but also direct collaborative research engagement. Additionally, e-portfolio accounts for teachers' interaction with digital research databases that give them the space for tracking their progress. This is represented in Tina's narratives: *"Whenever I do different projects, I keep track of my progress. I have recently started using Adobe portfolio to store and share my summaries"*. Therefore, digital collaborative research spaces could socially define teachers' joint research endeavors, contribute to building informal research communities, and help them systematically track their research progress.

Video tutorial is the second mediating toolkit for doing data collection/data analysis. In the interview session, Mobina stated, *"YouTube is my research home. Whenever I run into any statistical problem in my projects, I immediately go to YouTube/Faradars (Iranian e-learning platform), watch tutorials, and do the troubleshooting"*. This reflects the teachers' dissatisfaction with text-heavy research sources and their willingness to digest short, informal video-based tutorials. Therefore, as English teachers are welcoming micro audiovisual resources that mediate their understanding of research methods/statistics, the need for producing quality multimodal research materials is growing, where research concepts are made available to the teachers who readily apply them to research projects.

Therefore, although teachers need training workshops, seminars, conferences, and mentorship (Bai & Hudson 2011; Tran et al. 2017; Vu, 2020), they eagerly favor interactive multimodal sources that personalize research beyond traditional one-size-fits-all methods. The findings further showed that although the teachers are more interested in watching short video clips that elaborate on how to purposefully use research designs, methods, or statistics software, listening to researcher training and researchers' experience-sharing podcast series, and following research infographics, there is a dearth of micro multimedia materials on teachers' research training.

Research Engagement Norms

In response to the second question, teachers pinpointed research apprenticeship and academic promotion as the two norms shaping their research engagement.

Research apprenticeship

University English teachers as novice researchers embraced the idea of research apprenticeship and co-researcher role to gain the field experiences of doing research in different teaching contexts. In the online discussion, Mobina pinpointed that although she occasionally received supervisors' comments, she hardly experienced systematic one-on-one research mentorship and purposeful scaffolding because as she asserted, *"My supervisor's feedback is limited to occasional comments and I am on my own"*. This illuminates that Iranian teachers' research engagement is mediated by playing co-researcher/research assistant roles. However, to genuinely promote research engagement through assistantship, university English teachers need to be officially granted the role of a research assistant at university and must be financially supported to purposefully carry out projects and gain hands-on experiences. In this light, Mobina further said, *"Our research assistantship becomes more meaningful if we are supported by experienced researchers' step-by-step mentorship, go beyond our independent research comfort zone, and concentrate on the research problems directly related to our teaching context"*.

The teachers must be academically and financially supported to do systematic research projects in which senior researchers gradually scaffold them to reach their zone of actual development. In her interview, Anahid pointed out:

I do not like direct tips. I like questions to be raised in my mind. This is me being a researcher looking for the right questions. It is like a mental gymnasium. My mentors help me ask the right question and follow the right procedures.

This shows that question-and-answer forums could gradually make researchers' rough ideas ripe and educate them as competent researchers. Anahid also stated that she has to teach as a part-time visiting teacher at different universities since she could not earn money by doing research: *"Imagine we could earn money from research, which is common in other countries. If you earn money from research grants, you wholeheartedly invest your effort"*. Lack of financial support may endanger the teachers' interest in doing research for enhancing the teaching condition.

Reyhaneh, a part-time university teacher working as her professor's assistant in large-scale projects, associated her apprenticeship experiences with professional growth and researcher identity construction in the interview: *"In the long run, a new "me" comes out of the interactions during the apprenticeship period"*. This reveals that a research apprentice learns how to do research by confronting real research problems that need immediate actions.

Mentorship assists early-career researchers in getting socialized into research (Bai & Hudson, 2011). There is a need for defining research assistant roles for teachers because otherwise, they may unknowingly conceptualize research as an independent practice. This attitude prevents them from doing team research studies and positively contributing to a collective research culture. Senior researchers are also expected to assist novice teacher researchers find research interests and join research teams (Xu, 2014).

Academic promotion

The participants admitted that the teachers actively doing research are more highly esteemed by the faculty members and the heads of the departments. Institutional norms favor active research engagement and academic research publication. Hamed who works as a visiting part-time teacher at two state

universities mentioned that being an active researcher could largely determine his academic identity as a teacher. For example, in the interview session, he stated,

I currently teach at two state universities. What determines if I am a decent teacher is my research background, not my teaching experiences. That is why I am more motivated to do research to promote myself in the eyes of the head of the department and my colleagues.

The findings suggest that “it is necessary to develop a nurturing research environment to facilitate the development and production of research” (Bai & Hudson, 2011, p. 405). Therefore, although teachers’ research involvement yielding meaningful results must be acknowledged by stakeholders (Edwards & Burns, 2016), institutional norms valuing research more prominently push the teachers to prioritize research while there is a need for establishing research and teaching interplay. Institutional norms define research performance standards for the teachers to gradually guide their research engagement and promote a sense of belonging to a research community. Institutions must provide training and consistent support to develop the university teachers’ research competencies and turn research activities into rewarding endeavors than overwhelming struggles for gaining personal advantages (Bai et al., 2012).

Research Community of Inquiry

The teachers addressed research networks and research teams as the resources pursuing multivoicedness principle of activity system in which the university English teachers exchange knowledge and experience from multiple perspectives.

Research networks

University English teachers require a shared space that permits them to exchange research ideas, resolve research complexities, share research experiences, communicate research findings, and find research partners. In the interview, Bahar who has recently joined the university-based research center stated that “*I am coming out of my research shell to taste a new researcher lifestyle*” because she believed that university English teachers need to step beyond individual research zones, socially construct their experiential research knowledge, and feel attached to a research community. In her reflective journal, Melika also stated:

I have joined Telegram groups acting as forums for researchers to raise questions, share resources, and notify upcoming conferences, webinars, and events. But I still think that a research network for teachers in which they are systematically supported in their favorite areas is missing.

This indicates that based on their interests, teachers may like to join different research clubs and forums, where academic researchers and teachers benefit from a fruitful synergy. These research networks could potentially mediate Iranian teachers’ collective research practices and take them beyond individual research culture.

Teachers doing research go beyond their classroom walls and may be interested in globally sharing findings with other teachers. For teachers, research forums, newsletters, webinars, and conferences function as platforms for internationally exchanging pedagogical and research experiences. In her interview, Mahtab stated that she eagerly talks about her studies with colleagues during coffee breaks and frequently invites them to establish a research network. This represents that teachers’ informal research communities facilitate active research engagement because in such friendly contexts, teachers could openly share research experiences by recording short videos for showing different research phases, presenting findings in mini-conference presentations/posters/newsletters, and receiving prompt feedback from supportive colleagues. Although by communicating research, teachers’ voices are heard, Iranian

university English teachers are not adequately given the platform for unpacking their research outputs and sharing their research stories.

The findings corroborated the literature as the university English teachers need to share their findings in different venues to link research and pedagogy (Sato & Loewen, 2019) and gradually become research producers (Gray, 2013). To integrate research into their PD, teachers require international research forums for eloquently sharing their research experiences and research findings. In these learning communities, teachers not only share research outputs, but also receive comments on research practices. Along the same line, Yuan et al. (2016) recommended using group discussions to socially mediate teachers' research engagement.

These exchanges of research knowledge and experience enhance teachers' reflection on research practice and give them the opportunity to mutually interact, raise questions, and provide feedback. This supportive research culture cultivates teachers' PD (Kostoulas et al., 2019). Teachers' beliefs and reflective practices should be activated in professional communities (Mehrpour & Moghadam, 2018). Teachers' engagement in informal research communities could support them to boost their confidence as researchers. As Carrillo and Flores (2020) contend, teachers' interactions in online communities facilitate peer collaboration and collective reflection. By becoming a member of the research community, teachers internalize research conventions and activate research altruism.

Research teams

University English teachers thought that they can develop their research competence by doing research in teams and forming research SIGs, where all stakeholders are interested in a specific area. They believed that co-researchers' peer scaffolding in a supportive research team could collaboratively mediate their research engagement. Helia currently conducting a research project in a small research team thinks that her research engagement is more efficiently being shaped. She highlighted this issue in the online discussion: *"The pressure is shared. We gradually learn how to do research. A lot of discussion is going on if we are doing the same thing"*.

Kamran working as a part-time teacher in two state universities has recently formed three research teams. In his reflective journal, he pinpointed that team research is characterized by collaborative problem-solving and co-researchers' assistance because by synergistically cooperating, teachers *"look at a particular issue from different views. This adds to the depth and richness of the study provided that all researchers are actively involved in different stages"*. This shows that collaborative research engagement assists novice researchers in gaining research competence.

International research collaboration is another dimension that the teachers addressed. In the interview, as Hesam mentioned, *"Novice researchers are becoming more willing to join international research teams based on their interest and expertise"* because by so doing, teachers not only develop research literacy, but also update (inter)disciplinary knowledge.

The results further represented that although many English teachers are currently involved in independent studies, they addressed the critical role of research teams in collectively building research knowledge and finding co-researchers in their areas of interest. Sato and Loewen (2016) believed that to bridge research-pedagogy gaps, teachers are recommended to establish research teams and transfer research findings to pedagogical contexts. This thriving research teamwork could further pave the way for conducting interdisciplinary research. Teachers' research team boosts the members' confidence and PD (Willekens et al., 2018).

Division of Labor

In response to the third question, we found that educators, materials developers, and academic researchers scaffold university English teachers in their research engagement.

Educators

In post-graduate programs, university English teachers' research engagement strongly depends on how their educators conceptualize research, conduct research projects, address research-pedagogy interaction, and motivate teachers to integrate findings into their teaching. In the online discussions, Parvin who was not satisfied with her post-graduate research training experiences and independently learned doing research stated,

Post-graduate educators are our role models. If they do research for academic promotion, we learn to do the same. If they do research to make the teacher community thrive by focusing on research training and research scaffolding, we follow the same track. What motivates our educators to do research is mainly academic promotion than making research and teaching co-exist.

This shows that educators could mediate teachers' research engagement by investing in researcher education and researcher partnership. Therefore, for supporting university English teachers' research engagement, educators should rely on one-on-one mentorship and track teachers' progress through experience-based process than limiting their feedback to the final product. University English teachers mentioned that they individually do research and receive sporadic feedback. Therefore, scaffolding requires educators to guide teachers' research practices by systematic supervision and step-by-step research assistantship.

To gradually integrate research into teachers' pedagogical concerns and take them beyond drudgery research training, educators should follow three key principles: making research training multimodal and interactive, following micro-teaching norms, and enhancing experiential learning. Training is effective if it exceeds boring theory-dominated research articles and books, and relies on multimedia resources to make research concepts available and easily digestible. In her narrative, Mona stated, *"When I run into a problem about research method or statistics, I watch tutorials. Educators could either use or produce short classified research videos, animated research clips, and research training podcasts for teachers"*.

Furthermore, it is through micro-teaching of research methods that teachers could readily internalize and apply research theories. In this light, in the interview, Amir stated that *"Quick research tips and minor research notes are more digestible than covering an entire heavy book of research"*. Since teachers are overloaded by scattered information and overwhelmed by long working hours, micro research training could serve their research purposes.

Finally, teachers need to experientially do research and find out how to resolve research problems. In the interview session, Emad mentioned that *"To me, the best workshop is the very practical one in which a real study is done and I complete each phase with the help of a more knowledgeable researcher"* because he believed that we need to go beyond mere formal instruction and involve the teachers in doing research projects. As Mohammad pinpointed in the interview,

Last night, a person doing chemistry came to me and said 'The first time I sat for IELTS, I got 6.5 and the second time, I got 8'. I said 'Wow. This is a big jump. How did you get it?' He said, 'The first time I thought the sheer knowledge suffices. The second time somebody told me it is the technique that you need most. Doing research requires more experience than theory.

Therefore, teachers learn how to put research methods into practice by gaining the real experience of doing research in their immediate teaching contexts.

The findings demonstrated that "teachers who do make it into academia, with its associated expectations of engaging in academic institutional research, should be supported through induction programs and one-on-one mentor relationships for some time" (Barkhuizen, 2020, p. 16). In this study, teachers addressed three trends of research training that could mediate their research engagement: multimodal research education, micro research teaching, and experience-based research mentorship. By multimodal research training, teachers could gain access to audiovisual resources making research

theories and methods easily understandable. Micro research training breaks down research concepts into smaller units in form of research snippets, leaflets, infographics, and brochures to gradually scaffold teachers' research literacy. Finally, research troubleshooting clinics and statistics centers could further mediate teachers' research engagement. To avoid teachers' frustration, we should bridge "the gap teachers perceived between official requirements vis-a-vis research and the support available for teachers" (Borg & Liu, 2013, p. 295). The results further highlighted the role of digitally mediated pedagogy for integrating research into teacher education and assisting teachers in making research more relevant to their immediate pedagogical needs.

Research education materials developers

To make research education practical for activating teachers' research engagement, teachers believed that materials developers' role in producing interactive and multimodal research training sources is inevitable. As Neda put it in the interview, *"To make research easily available, the onus is on materials developers to support teachers and researchers"*. Research materials developers need to mediate research education by producing teacher-friendly research tools, short researcher training videos, and digitally interactive research sources. However, Iranian university English teachers rely on heavy research textbooks that prevent them from internalizing research concepts and integrating them into their teaching practices because their research knowledge is passively constructed by simply memorizing the contents. This requires defining a role for research materials developers because as Iman pinpointed in the interview, they can *"synergistically interact with educators to tailor the content of research instruction to their immediate research needs"*. Therefore, educators need a team of expert materials developers who make research engaging, accessible, and needs-based through emerging technologies and digital tools.

Academic researchers

Senior academic researchers and reviewers as research gatekeepers could define a space for the teachers to report their findings so that they are given voice and become integrated into research community. In the interview, As Emad stated, there is a call for increasing research visibility and promotion of university English teachers:

There are different sections in journals including empirical articles, featured articles, and book reviews. As a teacher, I wish we had a section for teachers' research to share our findings. Some journals are moving towards this direction by publishing teachers' research newsletters and mini research papers, where teachers describe the teaching context, highlight their innovation, reflect on its practicality, and make recommendations.

In the online discussion, Mandana also shared her experience of attending a conference in which teachers were given time slots to communicate their innovative findings. Research community members should provide the teachers with platforms for sharing their small-scale projects so as to raise their daily pedagogical concerns. If teachers are more meaningfully supported to share their real classroom research experiences, they become motivated to consider research as an integral side of their PD.

I once attended the TESOL conference. In this leading conference, not only senior researchers, but also ordinary teachers as novice researchers presented their work. The practitioners' presentations were about presenting a novel teaching method and its outcomes. That was awesome because the conference provided the opportunity for the teachers to present their action research.

To motivate the teachers, academic researchers should value their research endeavors, support them to fulfill their research goals, and raise their awareness of research-pedagogy interaction. Academic and

teaching communities socially construct and collectively promote a research culture (Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021). Thus, senior researchers could support university teachers to find their research interests and provide them with research presentation and publication advice. Additionally, by inviting young researchers to research teams, they collaborate with colleagues, discuss research, and receive recommendations for personalizing their research orientations (Xu, 2014). Therefore, peer support and collaborative reflection could raise the teachers’ awareness of the role of research in their PD (Yin, 2018).

Conclusion

We investigated university English teachers’ research engagement from an activity theoretic perspective. We found that the mediating tools and resources include research mindset, research interest, and research toolkit. The norms incorporate research apprenticeship and academic promotion. The community is defined in terms of teachers’ research networks and research teams. In division of labor, educators, researcher education materials developers, and academic researchers play leading roles. The object pertains to teachers’ research engagement. The desired outcome of this activity system is the teachers’ socially mediated research engagement. Figure 2 represents the summary of the findings.

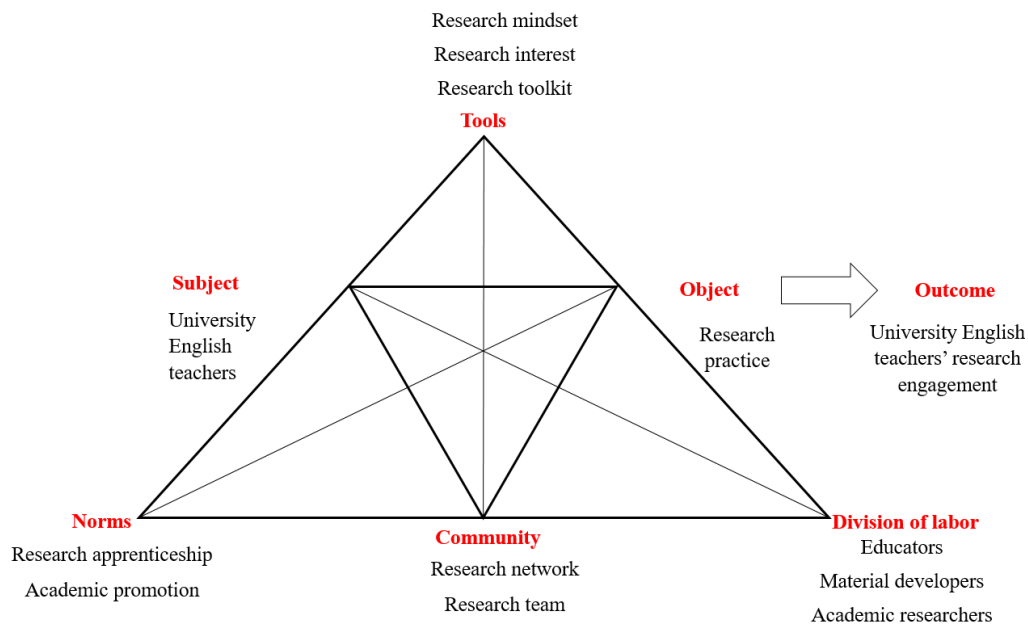


Figure 2. University English teachers’ research engagement from activity theory perspective.

The study provides implications for university English teachers for socially shaping their research-oriented cognition, engaging themselves in collective research projects in their areas of interest, and feeling integrated into the research community. University English teachers’ research engagement could be further enhanced through continuing research training courses, journal clubs, critical reflection forums, personalized research tutorials and portfolios, and research teams. Moreover, the study may arouse teacher educators’ interest in incorporating digitally enhanced instructional methods into teachers’ research education and using micro research contents. Teacher educators are also expected to leave a space for trial-and-error, promote research networking as a platform for novice-novice/ novice-experienced researchers’ collaborations, and inspire teachers to determine research agendas. Consequently, research materials developers could contribute to producing and curating relevant sources and academic researchers could promote teachers’ active participation in international research contexts. Future studies may investigate how emerging technology-assisted trends in education and e-learning

resources facilitate teachers' research education programs. Further studies could also address how virtual learning spaces and research communities shape university English teachers' research engagement.

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