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English lecturers' perceptions and practices of research engagement: The case of Can Tho University

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in research has been claimed to bring lecturers various benefits regarding their teaching and professional development. In Vietnam, lecturers have been mobilized to engage in research via various regulations and degrees by the Government. However, not many English lecturers engage in research. The current study was conducted with 56 English lecturers from Can Tho University to explore their perceptions and practices of research engagement. The results of the study revealed their positive but technical perceptions and moderate levels of research engagement. From the survey results, suggestions for promoting research engagement among English lecturers would be discussed.

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1 INTRODUCTION

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

Numerous specific benefits to teachers engaging in such activities have been proposed. From a general perspective, it is argued that when lecturers engage with research (through reading research paper) and in research (by doing research by themselves) and come to possible pedagogical changes basing on their research evidence, it will bring great benefits to both lecturers' teaching and students' learning (Hargreaves, 2001). Among which, lecturers' professional development is one of the undeniable benefits as they are research-involved (Kincheloe, 2003; Lyle, 2003; Lankshear and Knobel, 2004;

Kirkwood and Christie, 2006). In addition, reading and doing research encourage lecturers to change their roles from submissive positions in educational systems to innovative roles in curriculum development (Gurney, 1989). Moreover, such engagement gives lecturers motivation to make more informed and evidence-based decisions (Borg, 2007, 2009, 2010) as well as enhance their capacities to become more critical, reflective and analytical about their practice in classrooms (Atay, 2008). Furthermore, being research-engaged can also help lecturers reduce their frustrated and isolated feelings in their teaching process as well as their teaching challenge encounters (Roberts, 1993), or become less dependent on external challenges (Donato, 2003) since their research evidence gives them new insights into dealing with challenges, as well as making possible changes basing on their research findings. As a result, the more chances teachers involve in research, the more their capacity for autonomous professional judgments they can develop (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004).

In the context of Vietnam, there are still small bodies of literature on research engagement. As the matter of the fact, some previous researchers have mentioned research as a less feasible practice among Vietnamese lecturers of English (Doan and Nguyen, 2005; Le, 2005) due to certain constraints arisen from internal and external factors. Recently, lecturers' research engagement, however, has been more noticeably concerned, particularly in the tertiary context in which their research achievement has been considered as an item in the evaluation rubric for lecturers' titles promotion promulgated by the government in the Decree 40 (Government of Vietnam, 2014a) or as one of the benefits for lecturers' individual tax deductions thanks to their contribution to the development of science and technology (The Government of Vietnam, 2014b). Despite these, there seems to be a paucity of empirical studies conducted to explore English teachers' research engagement in the context of Vietnamese universities with respect to their perceptions and practices. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore English lecturer's perception and practice of research engagement in the context of a Vietnamese university. Specifically, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are English lecturers' perceptions toward research engagement?

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

2 LECTURERS AND RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT IN THE VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

Research among lecturers is always an issue concerned and developed in Vietnam. In education and higher education, doing research is one of the important duties that need to be fulfilled so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Tran Minh Uoc (2013) states the importance of research activities in improving the education quality at universities. More specifically, those activities will help lecturers at universities deepen their professional knowledge as well as adapt the content of their lessons so as to perfect them. In addition, through those activities, lecturers can also widen their knowledge of various fields and improve their critical thinking, creativity and their research competence. Those are the reasons why they have received special concern from the Government. In fact, many documents and circulars issued by the Government and other related ministries can be considered as legal basis for the orientation of developing research in the context of higher education. These documents are listed as follows:

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

2. Decision 711/QĐ-TTg (13 June 2012) approved by the Prime Minister about the educational development strategies in period 2011-2020. The aim of this decision is to lead all of training and education institutes in Vietnam to innovate the education management system and improve teaching staff in the context of globalization. In this decision, the connection between teaching and doing research is mentioned in Term 5.

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

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

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

6. Official Note 230/BGDĐT-KHCNMT dated 16 January 2015 about the implementation of Decree

99/2014/ND-CP indicates four main tasks, three of which focus on promoting research activities including making policies to support lecturers and students to do research, creating budget for science and technology promotion at universities, particularly giving priority to research activities at university level.

In general, it can be seen that research activities at universities are concerned and encouraged among lecturers in the country. Following the regulations, each university or institute creates and adapts these regulations to fit their conditions. With the guidance of those regulations, Can Tho University released Decision 4412/QD-DHCT dated 25 November 2015 about the working regime for its lecturers. In this decision, lecturers' duties are not only teaching but also doing research and other duties based on Joint Circular 36/2014/TTLT-BGDDT-BNV. Along with the duties, research activities are encouraged by being awarded the equivalent amount of teaching hours for lecturers who involve in research activities. Those activities include doing a project, compiling textbooks, publishing articles inside and outside Vietnam, and presenting at seminars or workshops at faculty or university level. It can be seen that the policies as well as the administration have seen the importance of research in development. Therefore, a number of regulations have been released in order to guide universities and institutes in promoting and implementing research activities. Along with that, there are terms giving rights and benefits for those involving in this activity.

With these forms of encouragement and enhancement, the perceptions and practices of English lecturers toward research engagement in Can Tho University are worth studying.

3 THE STUDY

3.1 The study context

In the region of Mekong Delta, Can Tho University (CTU) has been known as the largest higher institution with a significant amount of research in different fields. However, the emphasis of these studies has been primarily on scientific fields rather than on social and educational field. Although it is clear that lecturers' research capacity has long been considered as an important component that contributes to the lecturers' professional development as well as classroom teaching practice since teaching effectiveness will be improved significantly when teaching is integrated with research activities (Healey, 2005), studies conducted by English lecturers in CTU account for a very small portion as compared to those by

lecturers of other disciplines. Working in a large institution with multi-majors as CTU, English lecturers have been taken charges in not only teaching students at school, but in-service training as well as carrying out the missions of upgrading primary, secondary and high school teachers' foreign language capacity in the region of Mekong Delta in the National Foreign Language Project 2020 of the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam.

3.2 Participants

Fifty-six English lecturers in CTU were invited to participate in this study. Most of participants are female (60.7%) and from 31 to 45 (67.9%) years old. Most of them have higher education degrees (69.6% with Master degrees and 23.2% with PhD degrees or being in a doctoral program). About teaching experience, 73.2% of participants have worked for more than 10 years and the rest from five to 10 years.

3.3 Methodology

Quantitative data have been collected from a questionnaire adapted from Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012). The questionnaire consists of two main parts. Part I draws out the English lecturers' perceptions of research engagement while Part II explores English lecturers' practice of research engagement regarding the frequency of reading research, sources of educational readings, their publications as well as reasons for not reading and doing research. The data were analyzed using the tools of descriptive statistics on the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 20.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 English lecturers' perception of research engagement

English lecturers' perceptions of research investigated in the current study include their perceptions of (1) what can be considered a research engagement activity, (2) the benefits that research engagement can bring them, and (3) their evaluation of the importance of 19 listed research criteria.

For the first type of perception, nearly all of English lecturer participants consider writing an article for scientific journal (98.2%), conducting an experimental study in the classroom (96.4%) and having a presentation at a seminar or conference (96.4%) as research engagement activities (Table 1). Besides, a large number of them agreed that reading studies published in scientific journals or books and having scientific studies at different levels also mean research-engaging.

Table 1: English lecturers’ perception of what can be considered a research engagement activity

	N	%
1. Writing an article for scientific journals	55	98.2
2. Conducting an experimental study in the classroom	54	96.4
3. Having a presentation at a seminar or conference	54	96.4
4. Reading studies published in scientific journals or books	46	82.1
5. Having scientific studies at different levels (university, province, ministry)	42	75.0
6. Others	4	7.1

Regarding the benefits that research engagement can bring, 100% of participants agreed that it helps them improve their professional knowledge. In addition, nearly 90% of respondents asserted that engaging in research helps facilitate their critical thoughts and enhance their teaching efficiency, with

89.3% and 87.5% of agreement respectively. Moreover, English lecturers in the current study highly agreed with the ideas that research engagement boost their self-esteem, increase their awareness of students’ needs and build academic basis for their pursuit of higher education later (Table 2).

Table 2: Benefits research engagement brings English lecturers

Benefit	N	%
1. Improving lecturers’ professional knowledge	56	100
2. Facilitating lecturers’ critical thoughts	50	89.3
3. Boosting lecturers’ self-esteem	39	69.6
4. Increasing lecturers’ awareness of students’ needs	47	83.9
5. Enhancing lecturers’ teaching efficiency	49	87.5
6. Building academic basic for lecturers’ pursuit of higher education	45	80.4
7. Others	3	5.4

The next part of the questionnaire presents a list of 19 criteria and asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they felt was important in defining the quality of educational research. The results in

Table 3 are organized in descending order according to the percentage of respondents who said a criterion was “more important” (i.e. important or very important). “Less important” here refers to not important or no important at all.

Table 3: Criteria for defining research quality

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

Fourteen criteria in the list are considered to be important in defining the quality of educational

research by more than half of respondents. Among them, the four criteria of (1) Conclusion are

supported by evidence, (2) The research has a clear purpose, (3) Previous research is reviewed, and (4) Data are analyzed systematically were agreed to be important by almost all respondents. Meanwhile, five criteria of using interviews, studying an original topic, collecting a large volume of information, results applying to many educational contexts and studying a large number of people received more “unsure” answers from the respondents.

The findings of the current studies are in line with those of the previous ones (e.g. Borg and Alshumaimeri, 2012; Borg, 2013; Willemse and Boei, 2013; Almazrawi, 2014). In particular, English lecturers are aware of the benefits that research engagement can bring them and perceive research engagement in a technical way. The lecturers, by expressing their opinion toward the importance of listed research criteria, showed that they have a preference for a “scientific” view of research. In other words, they perceived that research should involve experimental designs, testing hypotheses, using questionnaires and analyzing statistics. This, in fact, is not a surprise

since traditional mode of research inquiry is more widely valued and recognized in the Vietnamese context. These findings also resemble the conclusion in Kiley and Mullin’s (2005) study that the predominant conception among university supervisors was a technical one that emphasizes the importance of systematic and rigorous procedures rather than originality or relevance for practice.

4.2 English lecturers’ practice of research engagement

4.2.1 Reading research

When being asked about how frequent they read research (Table 4), the most common answer among the English lecturer respondents is once a month with 16 answers, which accounts for 28.6%. The second common answer is once every six months with 13 answers, accounting for 23.2%. One-fourth of the participants responded that they rarely read any kinds of research with six respondents read less than once a year and nine read once a year. Only 17.9% of respondents read research to a more frequent level of once every two weeks.

Table 4: Frequency of reading research

Frequency	N	%
1. Less than once a year	6	10.7
2. Once a year	9	16.1
3. Once every six months	13	23.2
4. Once a month	16	28.6
5. Once every two weeks	2	3.6
6. More than once every two weeks	10	17.9

With regards to sources of educational readings, more than half to more than 80% of respondents ticked every source listed in the questionnaire (Table 5). More specifically, 83.9% of respondents claim that they read international academic journals

and on-line sources. The least popular source of research reading among respondents is publications by Ministry of Education and Training. Meanwhile, from 62.5% to 75% of respondents chose the rest of sources, namely, student theses, local academic journals, conference proceedings and books.

Table 5: Sources of educational research reading

Source	N	%
1. Books	42	75
2. International academic journals	47	83.9
3. Local academic journals	36	64.3
4. Publications by Ministry of Education and Training	29	51.8
5. On-line sources	47	83.9
6. Conference proceedings	42	75
7. MA/BA theses	35	62.5

With nearly half of respondents’ claim of reading research once every six months or less, it is worth investigating their reasons for infrequent research reading. Table 6 lists seven reasons which the respondents chose. The two most common reasons why they do not read research more frequently are time constraint and interest. More specifically,

73.2% of respondents stated that they do not have time to read while 71.4% said that they prefer to read research about their specialist subject area, which means that they are not very interested reading research in the fields they do not specialize. The third most popular reason for English lecturers’ infrequent research reading is the unavailability of

research books and journals (42.9%). Meanwhile, the four other reasons were only chosen by very few respondents (from 1 to 4) and thus, do not reflect the

Table 6: Reasons for not reading research

Reason	N	%
1. I'm not interested in educational research.	1	1.8
2. I do not have time.	41	73.2
3. Research books and journals are not available to me.	24	42.9
4. I find published research hard to understand.	4	7.1
5. Research publications are not interesting to read.	1	1.8
6. I prefer to read research about my specialist subject area.	40	71.4
7. Published research is not relevant to my work.	2	3.6

The findings on lecturers' research reading in the current study reveal some similar results with those by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012). First, English lecturers in CTU also claim that on-line sources are the most popular one for their reading. This could result from the fact that CTU provides a very good on-line resource for its lecturers and students through the account in the Learning Resource Center. Every year, the university informs the staff and faculty about the journal and e-book sources they have bought. In the year of 2016, for example, they bought Science Direct Source with 3,876 journal titles and many of which belong to the field of educational and applied linguistic research that English lecturers are interested in. Second, like lecturers in Saudi Arabi in Borg and Alshumaimeri's (2012) study, English lecturers of CTU stated that they do not have time for reading. Their time constraint mainly rooted from the heavy workload of teaching that they had to do during the three semesters of the school year. More specifically, English lecturers of School of Foreign Languages, CTU covered 75,300 hours of teaching in the school year 2015 - 2016. Among which, 52,300 teaching hours exceeded the lecturers' workload as regulated by the university. The third similarity between this study and Borg and Alshumaimeri's (2012) is that lecturers in CTU are only interested in reading research in their specialized subject areas. Since English lecturers in CTU specialize in various areas such as teaching methodology, learner autonomy, linguistic, multicultural communication, translations and interpretation, there are not always accessible resources relevant to their research areas. Thus, it is understandable why this is the second popular reason that English lecturers stated for not reading research.

4.2.2 *Doing research*

Various issues relating to English lecturers' doing research were collected in the current study. These issues include (1) their time allocation for different professional activities, (2) types of research involvement, (3) number of studies conducted, (4) number

important reasons for English lecturers' infrequent reading.

of conferences that they have attended as presenters, (5) number of publications up to now, and (6) reasons for not doing research.

For the first issue, the findings reveal that English lecturers spend most of their time for teaching. Most of them (76.8%) spend more than 50% of their time on teaching. Remarkably, about one-fifth of respondents (21.6%) spend from 80 to 100% of their time on teaching.

Regarding the types of research involvement, most of them (64.3%) stated that they conducted the research themselves and half of them (48.2%) collaborated with their colleagues. Only six respondents (10.7%) said that they had never been involved in any types of research. Meanwhile, 37.5% and 28.6% of respondents said that they asked colleagues and students to join their research projects respectively.

For the number of research projects funded by different levels (i.e. university, locality, ministry) that English lecturers have done, most of the respondents, about 60% of them, chose null number, which means they never got any funded research projects. For the rest of respondents, 10 of them had one research project in their career, seven had two, and five had from three to five funded projects.

Similar findings were found regarding the number of conference paper lecturers presented and articles published. That is, more than half of respondents never presented a paper at a conference (57.1%) and published an article (58.9%). The lecturers who stated that they had at least one chance to present at a conference and published a paper were mostly the ones who had followed their Master and Doctorate study programs abroad. There were the same number of English lecturers (33 respondents) who were first and the second author in a published paper. More than half of them had one or two publications, with 16 and 18 respondents for first author and second author publication respectively. There was a special case for which the respondent claimed that he had seven publications as the first authors and ten

publications as the second author. This lecturer has received his doctoral degree for six years from abroad and had a management position at the School of Foreign Languages, CTU.

Different reasons for lecturers' not doing research have been investigated in the study (Table 7). Among which, not having time for doing any type of research was chosen by most of respondents (31 of them, accounting for 55.4%). The two second popular reasons include difficulties in getting funding (42.9%) and irritating paper work for research

funding (41.4%). Almost similar number of respondents (from 10 to 12 of them) chose the following reasons as the constraints by which they did not do research. They are *I cannot think of any topics that are worth researching, I do not have access to the books and journals I need, and I do not know enough about educational research methods*. The answers that were ticked by the fewest respondents are *my employer does not support me and doing educational research is not relevant to my teaching*.

Table 7: Reasons for not doing research

Reason	N	%
1. I do not have time to do research of any kind.	31	55.4
2. I do not know enough about educational research methods.	12	21.4
3. I cannot think of any topics that are worth researching.	10	17.9
4. Most of my colleagues do not do educational research.	6	10.7
5. I need someone to advise me but no one is available.	8	14.3
6. My employer does not support me.	2	3.6
7. I am not interested in doing educational research.	6	10.7
8. I do not have access to the books and journals I need.	11	19.6
9. Doing educational research is not relevant to my teaching.	2	3.6
10. It is difficult to get educational research published.	12	21.4
11. It is difficult to get funding for research.	24	42.9
12. The paper work for research funding is irritating.	23	41.4

The results of this survey section reveal that English lecturers at CTU engage in doing research to a moderate degree. This is in line with those by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012). However, the reasons for their little engagement in doing research are different. Despite the fact that lecturers in both Saudi Arabia and Vietnam have the same main reason of not having time for doing research, those in Vietnam have two important inhibitions that do not exist in Saudi Arabia and both relate to financial factors. It is worth mentioning that although the authorities and employers encourage lecturers to do research, they do not do it by means of financial support. It is not easy to get funding in the field of educational research in general and English language teaching and learning in particular. A very clear example illustrating that claim is the latest announcement from the Department of Scientific Research Affairs, CTU issued on September 19, 2016 about the fields that the university give priority for funding. Among the five fields and 47 topics that are given priority of the university for the year of 2017, only one topic that English lecturers can do research on. Unfortunately, the topic itself is about improving the quality of training in general, not about applied linguistics, translations, interpretations or multicultural communication - the fields that English lecturers specialize on. This may stem from the fact that impact in the educational field is harder to be seen than that

in other "practical" fields such as food technology, aquaculture and agriculture. In addition, once lecturers get funding, they feel lost in the huge pile of paper work that they have to complete in order to get reimbursement. Although the situation has been improved in the past few years with simpler procedure and less paper work, not many English lecturers feel willing to reapply for funding because of the not-very-good impression they had before.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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

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

In addition, lecturers should receive better support from others. More specifically, there should be research mentors who have a lot of experience of doing research available to guide and give consultations to English lecturers, especially the inexperienced ones in every step of conducting research. These mentors themselves should be given some rewards for the jobs they do. Moreover, lecturers who want to do research should be exempted from teaching too much. If one lecturer has to teach one thousand hours per year, he will obviously have no time for reading research, not mentioning doing research. However, if they do not teach that much, another problem arises. Teaching fewer classes and hours is equivalent to decreasing income. Therefore, they should be given further supported by means of paid hours allocated for research activities. For example, according to the regulation of CTU, one international published paper is equivalent to about 100 hours. However, it takes at least one year after many harsh reviewing and revising activities until one paper is published in an international journal. Thus, the lecturers surely feel discouraged to write an article.

The lecturers must be fostered for the love of research engagement. They should be trained and updated on how to do research by inspiring researchers on their fields of interest. Then, they should be sent to domestic and international conferences to find out inspirations and ideas for research. They should also be encouraged to do research by their employers and colleagues.

Once these suggestions can be put into practice, it is strongly believed that the perception and practice of English lecturers on research engagement will change positively.

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