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Topics, aims, and constraints in English teacher research: A Chinese case study

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There is no doubt that teachers benefit from engaging with research, either as consumers or as researchers themselves. Through such engagement teachers become “expert knowers about their own students and classrooms” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16), and consequently better understand how what they do impacts on their students’ learning (Freeman, 1996). Furthermore, research-active teachers develop a sense of agency in their working lives, taking an active role in managing their learning, organizing their work environments, and making changes to school communities, curricula, and their classroom practices (Everton, Galton, & Pell, 2000; Shkedi, 1998). In general education, interest in teacher research has been around for a number of years, especially in the form of the teacher research movement (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and debates regarding evidence-based practice (see Davies, 1999).

In English language teaching, interest has been more recent, with much of the early commentary reflecting concerns in the general education literature, focussing, for example, on the use of research for teachers (McDonough & McDonough, 1990), standards for teacher research in TESOL (Nunan, 1997), the quality and sustainability of teacher research (Allwright, 1997), and the potential of teacher reflection for understanding teaching, learning and classrooms (e.g., Freeman & Richards, 1996). More recently, Borg (2007a) has called for empirical research into the research engagement of English language teachers, covering the topics just mentioned as well as those issues raised in the general education literature; for example, teachers’ conceptions of research, the benefits of teacher research for teachers and their learners, conditions that facilitate

teacher research, institutional policy regarding teacher research, support for teachers engaged in research, teacher attitudes towards research, and teacher research knowledge and skills. Borg's own work (2006, 2007b) has covered a number of these areas. He points out (2007a), however, that further empirical research into these issues, and in different contexts, is required "if we are to develop an evidence-base which can inform policy and initiatives aimed at promoting research engagement by teachers in ELT" (p. 733).

This article contributes to this evidence-base by reporting on one aspect of a larger study which aimed to explore the context-specific experiences of English teachers at tertiary institutions in China (Wette & Barkhuizen, 2007). Data were collected during a professional development program run in the summer of 2006. The program overall aimed to cover recent trends in the field of second language teaching and learning and consisted of six courses. I taught two of these, one of them focusing on research methodology. This course aimed to introduce teachers to qualitative research methods, including finding a research topic, collecting and analyzing qualitative data, and writing research reports. As part of the research project, and in order to generate research topics for the teachers, they were invited to identify through means of a narrative frame (see below) a problem they had encountered in their work environments. They were asked to consider the type and aim of a research project which might be undertaken in order to investigate the problem, and finally they were asked to suggest potential constraints which may hinder successful planning and completion of the proposed project. In doing so, teachers were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in their own working contexts in relation to what they were currently experiencing during the professional development program's research methodology course. The findings of the study thus reflect this perspective. This article reports on these findings. It also provides a brief background to English teaching at the tertiary level in

China, describes the methods used to collect and analyze the data, and finally it suggests some implications of the study.

Tertiary English Teachers and Teaching in China

Recent reports on English language teachers and teaching in China (e.g., Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) have highlighted vast changes that have taken place over the past 20-30 years. For example, educational authorities have endorsed communicative language teaching (CLT) methods over the traditional focus on linguistic competence and text analysis. Disparities have been noted, however, between policy and classroom contexts (Yu, 2001), and students exhibit mixed attitudes towards CLT activities in their classes. Unless they intend to pursue postgraduate study, work for international organisations or take up employment in the tourist industry, many can see few practical benefits of learning English (Rao, 2002). The motivation of these students is therefore strongly extrinsic. English is a compulsory subject for most university students, including non-English majors, and achievement at Band 4 level on the College English Test (CET) is usually a graduation requirement (Chen, 2002). This test and university internal examinations have a significant influence on classroom practice as well as students' attitudes to learning English. Henrichsen's (2007) observations of English language instruction in Chinese universities in recent years indicate that great advances have taken place. He witnessed students' eager participation in pronunciation activities and well-organised small-group activity such as discussions and debates, mini-dramas and role-plays, with the result of big improvements in students' speaking skills. These observations may not be typical, however, since they took place in classrooms in universities ranked "the best in the nation" (p. 10) taught by American "foreign experts".

Critiques of changes towards a more communicative approach in China have raised a number of issues including the extent to which CLT is compatible with Chinese cultures of learning, and contextual constraints such as class size, and the accuracy-oriented requirements of the CET (Liao, 2004). CLT is also seen as being in conflict with the traditional social, moral and pedagogic responsibilities of teachers. Zhang and Watkins (2007) in a study examining conceptions of the good tertiary EFL teacher in China, indicate that teachers should excel in almost every aspect (see also Gao, 2006). They should be “equipped with high language proficiency, solid knowledge about foreign language teaching, and the ability to facilitate positive personality development” (p. 784). They should also demonstrate appropriate personal qualities and morality. The Zhang and Watkins’ study does not explicitly address research familiarity, experience or ability as attributes of a good teacher, though references to subject and pedagogical knowledge could possibly imply that such knowledge is acquired through engagement with research.

The Teacher Education Program

Data for the study were collected during a 10-day teacher education program held in Beijing for over 200 English teachers from 130 universities and colleges across China. The overall aim of the program was to update teachers on recent trends and developments in the field of second language teaching and learning. During plenary lectures the instructors presented theoretical overviews of selected topics within each of six courses, and the teachers, working with experienced tutors from the host institution, followed up on some of the content in small-group workshops. During the workshops the teachers had the opportunity to relate the lecture material to their own teaching contexts and work experiences.

Each course consisted of three two-hour lectures, two one-hour workshops (one after each of the first two lectures) and a final plenary report session during which workshop groups made presentations relating directly to the content of the course. Two of the courses were taught by professors from the host institution and four courses were taught by two visiting instructors, including the author of this article. Two courses ran concurrently throughout the 10-day period (each course lasting three days). The six courses covered topics in language assessment, language description, psycholinguistics, and curriculum development, as well as research methodology, the focus of this article.

Methodology

A narrative frame was used to collect the data for this study. The frame consists of a template of seven sentence starters followed by space after each starter for the teachers to complete the sentence in writing. The frame provides teachers with a coherent structure within which they can concentrate on communicating their experiences and reflections. The sentence starters for the *Research Methodology* frame were the following:

1. I remember once in my classroom I had a very difficult time trying to...
2. The main reason for this problem was that...
3. I tried to solve the problem by...
4. It would have been very helpful if...
5. In relation to this difficulty, the type of research I'd like to do would...
6. The aim of the research would be to...
7. A major constraint, though, might be that...

As is evident, this frame was designed to enable teachers to focus on a research topic stemming from the identified classroom problem that would be appropriate and feasible to investigate in

their university teaching contexts. They were also asked to consider the type and aim of the project, and finally a potential constraint which may make it difficult for them to carry out the project. There were no specific instructions to focus on small-scale projects of the action and practitioner research kind. Many teachers were keen to embark on quite large-scale projects for publication in scholarly journals. ‘Research’ then for the purposes of this study could mean either or variations of these types.

A total of 83 fully completed *Research Methodology* frames were collected from the teachers, all of whom provided written consent after reading appropriate ethics information approved by the author’s institution. The teachers came from towns and cities across the whole of China. The personal information they were prepared to share indicates that they taught mainly undergraduate, non-English majors in a range of university types; e.g., military, medical, science and technology, education, provincial, finance and economics, including those the teachers rated as “not first rate”, “very famous”, and “ordinary”, and located in, amongst other geographical regions, “remote countryside”, “a famous city”, the “middle of the country”, and of course Beijing.

All the data were captured electronically in the following way: Each teacher’s written responses to the seven starters were combined into one file (one ‘story’) which represented that teacher’s research experiences and reflections. There were 83 separate stories. Commonalities among teachers were then sought in the data. To do this, the same sentence starters from each of the individual files were extracted and placed in a new file (i.e. all 83 responses to the first starter, *I remember once in my classroom I had a very difficult time trying to...*, were collated in the same file). All the data were then analyzed by following the procedures of qualitative content analysis: that is, themes were coded and categorized (see Miles & Huberman, 1994), patterns in the themes were identified (i.e., how the themes and categories are interrelated), and during this

process interpretations of these arrangements were made. For instance, the first two starters in the frame obviously generated content relating to problems experienced in the classroom. When carefully analyzing this content details of a theme relating specifically to speaking issues in the classroom became evident because of the frequency with which they occurred; e.g., oral presentations, speaking about a topic during whole-class discussions, reading aloud, and other unspecified oral activities (see Table 1). Each instance of these details was coded and grouped into the theme concerned with speaking. Other related themes (see Table 1), namely, motivation, materials, interaction, participation, and individual differences were then categorized as *problems* experienced by the teachers. The same approach led to two further categories mentioned at the start of the next section. Frequencies of the various details representing the themes were also calculated (see Tables below). The frequencies represent the number of times a particular detail was mentioned by the teachers. Sometimes more than one detail was evident in any one response to a particular starter. Numbers do not, therefore, add up to 83 (i.e., one per teacher).

Findings

The analysis produced three main categories of findings: (a) the classroom-based problems identified by the teachers, (b) the focus, aim and types of related research projects, and (c) potential research constraints. Within each category the most frequently cited themes (and their details) are described.

Classroom-Based Problems

Table 1 shows that students' unwillingness to speak in class presented teachers with a problem (23 references). One teacher, for example, simply said that her problem was to "make my students open their mouths to speak English", and others expressed similar sentiments by

saying they struggled to “get the students to volunteer to express their idea on a topic” and to “inspire my students to speak English.” The reasons the teachers give for this problem are diverse and many. Some relate directly to the students, including their lack of English proficiency, not knowing enough about a particular topic, being too shy (and afraid to be laughed at for making mistakes), lacking confidence, and being far too focused on the CET and university examinations. Sometimes the syllabus gets the blame; it is ‘fixed’ and doesn’t allow enough time for speaking activities. The teachers also suggest that they too might be responsible, not spending enough time preparing the speaking activities and giving poor instructions.

Place Table 1 about here

A similar set of reasons (see also Weathers, 2006, in her study of Chinese students’ willingness to communicate) is given for the lack of student-student interaction during communicative activities (11 references) such as group discussions and pair-work. One teacher sums up her desperation: “I offered them a [CLT] task, students seemed to have no mood, no desire, no motivation to do it. So the classroom was so quiet that I changed the classroom activities unwillingly”. Student lack of participation and involvement in class activities (without specific reference to CLT) was mentioned 9 times by the teachers, and together with the speaking (23 references) and interaction (11 references) categories make up 43 references by the 83 teachers. This clearly indicates that a relatively high proportion of the problems identified by teachers in their classes relate to students’ lack of speaking, interaction and participation, all hallmarks of CLT.

Perhaps the most salient theme in the frames (in response to all seven starters) is the teachers’ perception that their students are not motivated (15 references); to learn English and to

participate in classroom activities. One teacher sums up this point by indicating that she had trouble motivating her students to “go with me along the path of learning”. Teachers give a number of reasons for this lack of motivation, including students being shy and afraid to make mistakes, their low level of English proficiency, difficult and outdated materials (14 references, see Table 1, and also Wang, 2006), and boring topics which are too “theoretical.” Students *are*, of course, motivated to pass the CET, but teachers believe that this overrides many of the learning opportunities made available to them by their teachers.

Mainly because of very large classes and because students are often reluctant to speak in class and interact with the teacher, some teachers find it difficult getting to know their students well (individual differences, 8 references). Teachers, therefore, struggle to discover the personalities of their students, their levels of proficiency, their needs and what interests them (especially with regard to materials, activities and content of lessons). Appropriate lesson planning and management of activities is therefore difficult.

Focus and Aim of Research

As a result of these problems, then, what do teachers want to focus their research efforts on? And what do they hope to achieve? Starters 5 and 6 (i.e., *In relation to this difficulty, the type of research I'd like to do would...*, and *The aim of the research would be to...*) were analyzed together to determine relevant themes and their particular details. Three main research topics were evident; a focus on (a) students, (b) teachers and teaching, and (c) language skills. Table 2 shows the details of each of these three topics. The teachers' students emerged as the main target for investigation. Identifying and understanding their needs, expectations, attitudes, learning styles and strategies received 22 mentions in the teachers' responses.

Place Table 2 about here

This focus on students is no doubt closely connected to two other frequently cited topics. Firstly, teachers are keen to find ways, through ascertaining and understanding these student attributes, to motivate their students to become more engaged and interested in their learning (21 references), and to participate more in classroom activities (12 references). Referring to one of her students, a teacher commented that “he is typical in terms of motivation in learning. He is very clever, learning a foreign language should not be difficult for him. But he is too passive, too exclusive from the classroom learning community.” Knowing more about this student (and others in her class) would enable the teacher to better tackle issues of motivation. Twenty-one references were made to finding ways to arouse students’ interest and motivation, and another 12 to stimulating their participation in class activities.

Secondly, reference to students is also directly related to the teachers themselves and their practice, especially discovering and using more effective methods, techniques and materials (22 references). Sixteen references were made explicitly to improving their quality of teaching. Borg’s (2007a) study involving EFL teachers in Turkey found that the two most highly rated reasons for teachers doing research were “because it is good for my professional development,” and “to find better ways of teaching” (p. 741). With Swiss teachers (Borg, 2007b) he found the same two reasons scoring the highest rating in his survey. The perceived outcome of improved teaching, of course, is better student learning. The close relationship is further exemplified by the teachers’ desire to find ways of coping with the varying levels of students’ English proficiency, organizing group and pair work more effectively, and developing good relationships with their students, all receiving five references (see Table 2).

Some teachers specifically mentioned a skill that they would like to focus on in their research (see Table 2). Not surprisingly, speaking received the most citations (10), since teachers identified it as a major source of problems in their classes (see Table 1). As far as the type of research goes (see Table 3), qualitative methods received the most support. This too is not surprising since qualitative approaches were the focus of the research methodology course the teachers were involved in at the time of data collection, but it does signal a shift, even if only temporarily, away from conceptions of teacher research necessarily being positivistic in design (Borg, 2007a; Nunan, 1997).

Place Table 3 about here

Potential Constraints on Research Activity

Just as Borg's studies reveal (2007a, 2007b), and those in general education (e.g., Shkedi, 1998), time is a major factor preventing teachers from carrying out research (see Table 4). Teachers are busy, and many simply say that conducting research is too time-consuming (14 references). Some feel under constant pressure to complete the examination- and test-oriented syllabus (4 references), and others (4 references) point out that research requires too much work out of class, competing with time needed for lesson preparation and grading. One teacher sums up this constraint: "It involves a lot of time and I myself have a heavy teaching load."

Place Table 4 about here

A second key constraint concerns teachers' perceptions of their ability to conduct research. They say, for example, that they lack appropriate research knowledge and skills (12 references). Typical responses include, "I lack a sound knowledge about the research methodology," and "I myself am not quite qualified." Because of this they lack the confidence to embark on a research project (4 references), and as a consequence some call for collaborative opportunities and support from their institutions and more experienced colleagues (7 references). These personal doubts are not unusual; Borg's teacher participants in Switzerland (2007b) had similar concerns, as did McDonough and McDonough's (1990), as well as EFL teachers in Vietnam (Khanh & An, cited in Farrell, 2006). Large classes is cited eight times as a constraint, and two teachers say, without elaborating, that "too many variables" makes research difficult. And another three reference the students' varying levels of English proficiency. These perceived constraints need not necessarily be so; certain types of research may in fact require them, and some researchers may welcome them. Mentioning them in this study, therefore, may say something about the teachers' conceptions of what research is.

Surprisingly, a number of the teachers (9 references) believe that their students would not be willing to participate in their research. One teacher says that in an earlier attempt at research her students "were unwilling to collaborate with me, and that meant they wrote 'sorry' in their exercise books". One reason may be, say the teachers, the students' low level of English proficiency (6 references). Two teachers mentioned that their students may become more anxious or passive if they tried to involve them in a study, and another two indicated that their students may be "dishonest in writing their true feeling" or would deliberately try to deceive the researcher.

Finally, a number of the teachers point to lack of financial resources as a constraint (5 references). The funding issue is not elaborated on much in the data, but is simply listed as a

constraint; for example, one teacher says “I cannot get any fund from our college and other places”, and another states baldly “not enough funding”.

Concluding Remarks

This article has focused on three aspects of the research lives of a group of 83 tertiary English teachers in China: (a) relevant research topics, generated by reflecting on a classroom-based problem, (b) the types and aims of proposed projects to investigate the problems, and (c) constraints on successfully carrying out the projects. The topics suggested are clearly related to concerns teachers have regarding the lack of student participation in their classes, especially in terms of speaking in class and their active involvement and interest in CLT-like activities. Students’ motivation and the availability and appropriate use of materials are identified as sources of the problems. The aims of proposed research reflect the teacher concerns; teachers desire to understand their students better (their needs and expectations, for example) in order to change (or “improve the quality of”) their teaching practice to ensure better student learning. The constraints on conducting such research in order to achieve these aims are perceived to be mainly lack of (a) time, (b) appropriate research methodology knowledge and skills, and (c) student cooperation.

This study makes a contribution to our understanding of English teachers’ engagement with research, in this case, in a Chinese context. It shows some of the teaching and learning problems these teachers would like to see investigated, and why, and it begins to explain why they have difficulty in actually doing the research. What, then, are some of the implications of these findings? Firstly, teachers need to make time, or be provided time by their institutions, to undertake research, especially if they and their institutions value research, both for the professional development of teachers and for the usefulness of the outcomes for the members of

the institution and the wider community. As Borg (2007a) says, “sustained and productive research engagement is not feasible unless the time it requires is acknowledged and built into institutional systems” (p. 744). Secondly, it is clear from the findings in this study that some teachers lack the requisite knowledge and skills to carry out research projects, and thus lack the confidence to embark on a project, however small-scale it might be. At least in some contexts, the problem appears to be located in the teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, that teachers participate in. Training in feasible, practical, and useful research methods that can be applied to the working contexts of busy teachers should be an integral part of these ELT programs (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Institutions too could facilitate opportunities for teachers to learn about research, by sponsoring and developing in-house professional development programs focused on the theory and practice of research. Thirdly, for those teachers who do carry out research projects, particularly classroom-based inquiry with their own students and within their own institutions, connections to their practice and their students’ learning need to be made. In other words, the results of their research work should be, or made to be, applicable to their particular teaching contexts. Teachers need to make use of their findings. At the same time, as Freeman (1996) says, “the knowledge that teachers articulate through the process of disciplined inquiry must become public” (p. 105). This involves sharing their findings with other teachers, curriculum developers, school policy makers, and the wider language teaching community. Not doing so would mean missing the opportunity and ignoring the responsibility to contribute to discussions and debates in the field of language education.

These recommendations, of course, are not always easy to implement. Financial, administrative, and resource limitations are powerful obstacles. So too are other contextual factors such as large classes, student motivation to participate, and “too many variables.” But, if teachers are to make better sense of who they and their students are, and to figure out ways of

improving their practice and bringing about change in their schools and classrooms, then these challenges need to be addressed.

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Table 1

Classroom-Based Problems Identified by Teachers

Theme: Problem experienced	Details of theme	Frequency N=83
Speaking	Oral presentations	23
	Speaking about a topic during whole-class discussions	
	Reading aloud	
Motivation	Unspecified oral activities	15
	Students' lack of interest	
	Students' unwillingness to learn	
Materials	Low level of motivation to learn English	14
	Teaching and learning materials	
	Engaging with the media	
Interaction	Using the teacher book	11
	Intensive and extensive reading texts	
	Group discussions	
	Working in groups	
	Working in pairs	
Participation	Role-play	9
	Dialogues	
	Encouraging students to be active	
Individual differences	Student involvement in activities	8
	Varying levels of proficiency	
	Meeting students' needs	
	Communication with students	

Table 2

Focus and Aim of Research Proposed by Teachers

Theme: Focus of research	Details of theme	Frequency N=83
Students	Needs, expectations, attitudes, beliefs, styles, and strategies	22
	Teaching to arouse students' motivation and interest	21
	Stimulating students' participation in class activities	12
	Facilitating student learning	6
	Independent learning	5
Teachers and teaching	Effective teaching methods, techniques, and materials	22
	Improve quality of teaching	16
	Understanding and dealing with varying levels of proficiency	5
	Organization of group and pair work	5
	Communication and relationships with students	5
Skills	Speaking	10
	Reading	6
	Listening	5
	Writing	2

Table 3

Type of Research Suggested by Teachers

Type	Frequency
Qualitative research (interviews, observations, journals, narrative)	10
Qualitative and quantitative	3
Action research	3
Experimental research	3
Case study	1

Table 4

Potential Constraints on Teachers' Research Activity

Theme: Constraint	Details of theme	Frequency N=83
Time	Research is time-consuming (unspecified)	14
	Syllabus completion takes priority	4
	Research requires much work outside of class	4
	Teacher workload too heavy	3
Conducting research	Lack of research methodology knowledge and skills	12
	Large classes	8
	Needing guidance and support	7
	Difficulty of designing appropriate data-collection methods	5
	Lack of confidence	4
	Students at varying levels of proficiency	3
	Too many variables (unspecified)	2
Student cooperation	Lack of cooperation and willingness to participate	9
	Low English proficiency	6
	Participating will make students anxious	2
	Students may not tell the truth	2
Resources	Funding	5
	Facilities (unspecified)	3