

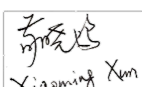
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**A Narrative Inquiry into EFL Teachers' Research Experience in  
Chinese Universities:  
Tensions, Institutional Endeavours, and  
the Role of Department Leaders**

**Xiaoming Xun**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics, the University of Auckland, 2021.



## ABSTRACT

While there is increasing research engagement by language teachers in higher education under the influence of the managerial revolution, individual and institutional barriers to teacher research engagement remain to be resolved. Despite the significant role of the institutional context in influencing teacher research engagement, little is known about how a supportive institutional research community is cultivated to facilitate teacher research and what role department leaders play in this process.

By examining both the perspectives of the leaders and teachers, this study aims to seek insight into (a) central tensions that EFL teachers perceive in their research experiences, (b) institutional endeavours to relieve these tensions, and (c) the role of department leaders in building up a supportive research environment to enhance teacher research.

Drawing on the theoretical lenses of self-determination theory (SDT), professional learning community (PLC), and transformational leadership (TL), this study adopts a narrative approach and employs a range of methods to collect relevant data, including: two narrative semi-structured interviews with each of two leader participants and three narrative semi-structured interviews with eight teacher participants from two university departments in China across one year; four monthly reflective journals by teacher participants about their research activities across one semester; public documents; and observation field notes.

The narrative analysis of the data configures into ten stories in which teachers' research experiences and the departmental leaders' research leadership experiences unfold. The analysis of narratives in the data results in three dominant themes of teacher research experiences within their institutional contexts: tensions, collective initiatives, and the role of leadership. The findings are interpreted and discussed in terms of three needs of teachers' research experiences, namely, relatedness, competence and autonomy, and how these needs are satisfied or thwarted within the institutional research communities. Based on the findings and discussions, recommendations are made to foster

a conducive environment for teacher research-focused academic development through joint endeavours from teacher members, the administrative leaders and the decision-makers at the universities.

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# CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

In this chapter, I first present the contextual background of the study. Then, based on this, I provide a rationale for the study by addressing the gap both in the research literature and in the practical needs evident in the contextual background. Next, I introduce my research purpose and the research questions that shape the study. I also briefly introduce my research sites, participants and major methods of data collection and analysis. I conclude the chapter by presenting the organisation of the thesis.

## Contextual Information

### *Increasing Research Emphasis in China's Higher Education*

In the global setting of the knowledge economy, it has been widely acknowledged that higher education, an incubator of new knowledge and innovation, plays a significant role in boosting economic productivity and development (Wang & Liu, 2016; Liu et al., 2019). Many developing countries, including China, have begun to increase investment in higher education to enhance its international competitiveness, which is generally measured by various global ranking exercises, such as the QS World university ranking system, and includes global overall and subject rankings. Among the six metrics against which universities are evaluated in the QS World university ranking system, academic reputation accounts for 40%, and citations per faculty accounts for 20%. Evidently, research performance and research impact are crucial for doing well in this ranking system. China is one of the many governments that embrace this global ranking exercise. By 2018, China had the largest higher education system with 2,663 higher education institutions, and more than 38 million enrolled students (Ministry of Education, 2019). Nevertheless, in the 2018 QS World University Rankings, only 6 universities in China mainland were among the top 100 universities (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2018). The Chinese government aspires for the transformation of China's

higher education from being the largest system to an international leading power with comprehensive strength.

Impacted by global trends and prompted by domestic long-term strategic development needs, in 2015, the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the Overall Plan for Coordinately Advancing the Construction of World-class Universities and First-class Disciplines, "*Shuangyiliu*" (hereafter referred to as the "Double First-Class Initiative"). The overall aim of the Initiative is to improve the comprehensive strength of China's higher education and to achieve worldwide recognition for its international influence. The strategic goals of the Initiative are that, by 2050, the number and quality of world-class universities and disciplines are to be among the best in the world, and China is to become a higher education power (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

To ensure the implementation of the Initiative, in 2017 the Chinese Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission issued the document *Implementation Measures to Coordinate the Construction of World-Class Universities and Disciplines*. This document specifies the goals of future development, selection criteria for eligible universities and disciplines, and procedures of selection, management and evaluation of the initiative (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, & the National Development and Reform Commission, 2017a). At the same time, the Lists of Universities and Colleges Participating in the Construction Plan for World-Class and First-Class Disciplines were released. Forty-two out of 2,663 universities were selected in the World First-class University Initiative primarily for their existing leading performance in research and innovation, as well as their great potential to become World First-class Universities. Ninety-five universities were listed for their strong disciplines in connection to national strategic development and advancement of science and technology (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, & the National Development and Reform Commission, 2017b). Substantial funding and resources are provided to support the development of the universities and disciplines by the central government

and local government. The Double First-Class Initiative operates according to a dynamic evaluation and adjustment mechanism, which are reviewed on a five-year cycle. Universities that do not perform well at the first five-year round evaluation will be removed from the Initiative's list. And those universities that are not included in the first round but manage to meet the criteria through advancement will have the opportunity to be included in the Initiative in the next five-year cycle. The Double First-Class Initiative with its dynamic evaluation mechanism is likely to produce a washback effect on the institutional performance of the universities to continually strive for research productivity. Strategic plans as a response to the Double First-Class Initiative are made across the universities, focusing on discipline development, talent recruitment, personnel and staff training, academic team building, and so on. The human resources recruitment policies no longer focus solely on teaching capabilities, as they did a decade ago, but are now designed to attract high-end senior academics with international reputations and young academics with excellent publication records and who show great research potential.

Meanwhile, recent years have witnessed new managerial reforms in higher education in China, which emphasize "the primacy of management, quasi-market competition, and accountability" (Huang & Guo, 2019, p. 2). As part of these managerial reforms, a regulatory evaluation scheme for faculty research productivity is widely adopted across universities in "the form of regulation and control that deploys technical rationality and judgements to incentivize and punish academics" (Sutton, 2017, p. 625, cited by Huang & Guo, 2019). Hence, research plays a pivotal role in teachers' professional advancement. In a large number of universities, two important indices in research excellence assessment exist: scholarly publications and research grants with an emphasis on both quantity and quality. The quality of scholarly publications in humanities and social science is generally based on the level of journals in which they are published. Almost every university has its own graded journal lists built upon research output benchmarks both national, such as CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index), and international, such as SSCI (Social Science Citation Index). In the research assessment for academic promotion, only research papers published in these

designated journals are counted as "research outputs". This research-output oriented evaluation system may undermine the autonomy of Chinese teachers in higher education and often confronts them as a "publish or perish" dilemma (Gao & Zheng, 2020).

### ***Disadvantages Experienced by College English Teachers in the Shifting Environment***

As core units of knowledge discovery and technological innovation in universities, all departments and faculties across different disciplines align their goals and plans with the research priorities of the university. Even College English departments, often viewed as service units for providing foundation English language education, are no exception. However, college English teachers generally demonstrate a low level of research engagement and achieve limited research outputs. They often find themselves at a distinct disadvantage with regard to their academic development compared with university teachers in other disciplines (Huang & Guo, 2019). These disadvantages are mainly due to five considerations embedded in the broader sociocultural and historical context.

First, college English teachers generally lack research knowledge and skills due to low qualifications (Wang, 2018). In response to an urgent need for English teachers as a result of the growing enrolment of non-English-major university students, there has been a large increase of college English teachers recruited across China since around 2000. The threshold of recruitment for college English teachers at that time was generally a Bachelor's qualification with an English major, and preferably a Master's qualification, which was much lower than that for university teachers in other disciplines, who have to be PhD holders. The criteria for the recruitment of college English teachers primarily focus on candidates' English language competence and teaching capability. Therefore, in the early stages of their career, these college English teachers devote almost all their energy and time to teaching, and most of their professional development centres around improving their teaching knowledge and skills. This means neglecting advancement in their research life (Zhou & Zhang, 2016). Many teachers continue their Master's studies as a part-time student. Only in recent years has the threshold for college English teachers been increased, with a PhD degree now being



required as a minimum in most universities. Table 1 shows the result of a survey among 230 universities regarding the qualifications of college English teachers one decade ago.

**Table 1**

*Qualifications of College English Teachers in China (Wang, 2009, p. 7)*

Qualifications	2001 (%)	2008 (%)
PhD	0.3	1.2
MA	21.9	53.5

Second, college English teachers are often subject to the constraints of time to do research since they typically have a heavy teaching load (Borg & Liu, 2013; Yu, 2019; Wang, 2018) as well as family commitments, especially for female English teachers. It is estimated that there are approximately 100,000 college English teachers responsible for English education to around 38 million students across 2,660 universities in China (Hu, 2017). In general, no research time was incorporated into their workload, though in recent years research has gradually been counted as an essential part of their obligations (Xu, 2014). The average teaching load is 13.20 hours per week and the ratio of number of teachers to students is 1:163 (Wang, 2009). Meanwhile, nearly 80 per cent of college English teachers are females, who are most often simultaneously burdened with family duties, teaching load and academic load. The multiple sociocultural expectations of roles undertaken by female college English teachers are more likely to result in a struggle for a balance among their multiple identities (Jiang & Mao, 2014).

Third, there exists a prevailing misalignment between college English teachers' research focus and their everyday teaching practice (Bai, 2018). The research focus of college English teachers in China may vary, including fields such as theoretical linguistics, English language literature, translation,

cognitive linguistics, and English language education. The focus depends largely on their past research experiences in their Master's programmes. Nevertheless, their teaching focus in the classroom is generally to transmit language knowledge and improve students' English language skills. The disconnection between college English teachers' research focus and their teaching practice gives rise to their struggle for balance between teaching and research and the questioning of the value of research for practical application.

Fourth, college English teaching has a lower status relative to other disciplines in universities. College English teaching is often perceived by administrative leaders of the university and other disciplines as merely teaching the four language skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Wang, 2018). Despite the importance of college English as a compulsory subject for millions of university students, college English departments are often viewed as a service unit rather than an academic department which contributes to university-generated knowledge. This misperception is more likely to make college English teachers, particularly those who have years of teaching experiences yet low qualifications and a poor research performance, a vulnerable group in the eyes of management, and leads to a lack of university support and reputation (Huang & Guo, 2019).

Lastly, a limited publication channel creates an unfavourable research environment for college English teachers, who are continually driven by the requirement of publication for professional advancement. The chance for publishing in top-tier journals is slim considering the low ratio of top-tier journals to foreign language teachers. In the recently released CSSCI journal list (2019-2020), only 6 journals in foreign literature and 24 journals in linguistics and applied linguistics are listed. This limited number of high-quality journals and dissemination channels is detrimental to the development of the discipline of foreign language and literature (Wang & Han, 2011). The emotional stress caused by harsh competitiveness in publishing and research grant applications results in college English teachers feeling exhausted and frustrated with their professional development (Gu, 2016).

Weak research competence, a heavy teaching load, the disconnection between research and teaching, low discipline status, and limited publication channels all converge to result in disadvantages experienced by college English teachers in the shifting managerial and research environment and pose one of the greatest challenges to their professional development.

### ***Challenges and Opportunities in College English Teachers' Professional Development***

Besides the external pressures exerted by the Double first-class Initiative to transform themselves from teacher practitioners to teacher-researchers, the effectiveness of college English teaching has been increasingly questioned as "time-consuming yet inefficient" (Cai, 2013, p. 13) by all sides of society due to unsatisfactory teaching outcomes in recent years. The English communicative competence of university graduates is insufficient for them to meet their social needs even though they have devoted much time and effort to learning English at university. Consequently, the legitimation of college English as a course at the tertiary level has been threatened and college English is increasingly devalued in the university curriculum, which is reflected in the fact that some universities have decided to reduce the teaching hours of College English courses. This measure results immediately in the reduction of teachers' income as their pay is basically dependent on their teaching hours. Even worse, college English teachers are now marginalised in higher education and confronted with the potential loss of employment since the university may not need so many English teachers anymore (Yu, 2019). To align with the strategic goals of universities and to secure their positions, a number of Departments of College English Teaching (CET) are taking initiatives through various teaching reforms, in both teaching modes and teaching content, with the aim to better serve social and economic needs. Some departments are pioneering MOOCs and flipped-based blended learning to enhance teaching effectiveness, and some are extending the curriculum from general English teaching to English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes so as to better cultivate talent in favour of other disciplines (Wang & Wang, 2019). These reforms pose great challenges to college English teachers, such as education technology and cross-disciplinary

knowledge. However, they also create opportunities for college English teachers to come up with pedagogical innovations through teaching-oriented and curriculum-based inquiry. The nexus of their research focus and teaching practice, as well as the alignment of their individual and institutional goals, may ultimately help them to transcend the contextual constraints and empower them for their professional development in the changing environment.

The macro analysis of the research context provides a broader lens for our understanding of the life experiences of the participants in this study, who demonstrate the complexities of vulnerability and agency through various levels of contexts in which they are situated.

### **Research Rationale**

The study first originated from my work experiences at an educational publishing house in China before I started my PhD programme in New Zealand. My main role was the project manager of intensive themed teacher training programmes for the continuing professional development of English language teachers in tertiary education. The number of the participants was generally over 200, and the participants came from different universities across China. The main goal of these one-shot programmes is to formulate a professional learning community to promote the nexus of teaching and research and to enhance teacher's teaching and research knowledge and skills. I felt very satisfied to discover the changes experienced by teachers as retold in their reflective journals towards the end of each program. Their beliefs about research had changed, their motivation for teacher research was ignited, and their research skills had improved to some extent. However, when they went back to their institutions, their research practice or engagement in doing research did not change as much as they had expected, and their application of the learning was not satisfactory. Meanwhile, the professional learning communities built up during the programmes were hard to sustain (Duan & Chang, 2020). These scenarios made me curious about the research experiences that these EFL teachers have in their institutional contexts and the differences between teacher

professional learning in these one-shot intensive training programmes and department-embedded professional learning in their workplaces. I intended to do more research on these phenomena. However, I often found myself struggling with my own weak research competence and the time competing for my professional life, family life and research. Doing full-time PhD study, consequently, became one option for overcoming this personal dilemma. My work and life experiences provided me with an insider perspective on teachers' research life and led me to this study.

The need for this study also arises from two considerations: a research gap in the existing literature and implications for practice. As one way of teacher learning, teacher research has received growing attention in the field of language teacher education, and its potential value has been increasingly recognised by academic researchers (Borg, 2009; Bullock & Smith, 2015; Burns, 2009; Dikilitaş et al., 2019; Xerri & Pioquinto, 2018). A stream of studies began to explore how language teachers engage in/with research and what factors contribute to their research engagement, including individual factors, institutional factors, and broader sociocultural contexts (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2007; Borg & Liu, 2013; Le, 2017; Vu, 2020; Wang & Han, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017). Among these studies, institutional support has been found to impact language teacher research engagement significantly and, consequently, has been suggested to enhance teacher research engagement regarding their beliefs, motivation, competence, and collaboration with colleagues. Administrative leadership is also considered to be crucial to establishing and maintaining a favourable research environment for teachers. However, there is scant empirical evidence of what workplace support is provided to language teachers, how support initiatives are experienced and perceived by EFL teachers, and what role leaders play in building workplace support. While most studies focus on teachers' perspectives on their research engagement, little is known about leaders' perspectives on teacher research engagement and workplace support.

On a practical level, the increasing research demands on teachers in China's higher education pose great challenges for EFL teachers, who often find themselves in dilemmas related to their research

engagement. To increase teacher research productivity, universities are taking various initiatives, such as monetary incentives and output-oriented evaluation systems, which tend to invite unexpected side effects (Huang & Guo, 2019). These scenarios suggest an urgent need for a deeper understanding of how teachers engage in research and how they experience workplace support within particular institutional contexts. The exploration of these issues may not engender an ideal solution to the dilemmas. However, it may shed light on the endeavours of all involved to enhance teacher research and to promote teacher professional development.

### **Research Purpose and Research Questions**

Bearing the above considerations in mind, this study sets up to better understand teachers' research life in institutional contexts. I asked *who, what, how* and *why* frequently in relation to teachers' experiences of tensions, institutional support initiatives, and leadership. I investigated teachers' research experiences from both the leaders' and teachers' perspectives. I adopted a narrative approach and employed a range of methods to collect relevant data, including: two narrative semi-structured interviews with each of two leader participants and three narrative semi-structured interviews with eight teacher participants from two university departments in China across one year; four monthly reflective journals by teacher participants about their research activities across one semester; public documents; and observation field notes. A narrative approach with a complementary use of narrative analysis of the data and the analysis of narratives in the data (Polkinghorne, 1995) enabled me to accomplish the primary purpose of the study.

The following three research questions guide and shape the study:

- 1) What central tensions are perceived by EFL teachers in their research experiences?
- 2) What collective initiatives are undertaken in the two departments to relieve the tensions and enhance teacher research practice and what are their impacts on teachers regarding their research life?

3) What are the roles of the department leaders and the challenges they are confronted with?

### **Organisation of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into nine chapters in total. In this chapter, Chapter 1, I first introduced background information about the study. I also justified the study by addressing the gap in the literature and practical needs evident in the contextual background. I then presented my research purpose and research questions that shape the study. I concluded the chapter with the organisation of the thesis.

Chapter 2 clarifies the operational definition of teacher research in the present study and reviews existing studies according to two threads: (a) constraints in language teachers' research engagement; and (b) supporting teacher research, including the role of administrative leaders in enhancing teacher research engagement and shaping a research-oriented professional learning community in the departments. The research gap is then identified. I also introduce three theories that inform the current study: namely, self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000), the professional learning community (PLC, Hargreaves, 2019; Hord, 1997), and the theory of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The literature review paves the way for the research questions and analytical framework of this study.

Chapter 3 presents the research paradigm and the research methods adopted in the study. I first justify how a qualitative research paradigm and a narrative approach fit the nature and purpose of the present study. Then I continue to explain the process of participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis. I conclude the chapter by describing the methods used to monitor and evaluate the methodological and the ethical procedures followed in the study.

Chapter 4 first introduces the two departments as workplace contexts based on the data sources of public documents, official websites, the interview transcripts of the participants, and field observations and accompanying fieldnotes of my visits to the two departments. The two leader

participants and the eight teacher participants are then introduced individually through ten academic life stories retold and reconstructed from their narrative frames, interview transcripts, and reflective journals.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 address three research questions respectively based mainly on the findings of the thematic analysis of the narrative frames, interviews, reflective journals, and public documents.

Chapter 5 addresses the first research question, focusing on the four central tensions perceived by all the participants and how these tensions are created. Chapter 6 addresses the second research question, exploring collective support initiatives undertaken in the two departments to enhance teacher research practice and their impacts on teachers regarding their research life. Explanations are given about what makes the support effective or ineffective in relation to teachers' research collaborations, their conceptions and beliefs about research, their research motivation, their research competence and research self-efficacy, and their identities as teacher-researchers. Chapter 7 addresses the third research question, investigating the roles and challenges of the administrative leadership.

In Chapter 8, I discuss the relevance of the findings of the study to the previously reviewed literature, particularly with reference to the theoretical lenses of Self-Determination Theory, the Professional Learning Community, and the theory of Transformational Leadership.

In Chapter 9, I review the study and the major findings. I then summarise the main contributions of the study regarding theory, methodology, and practical applications for language teachers, the administrative leaders, and decision-makers at the university level. I also point out the study's limitations and provide some recommendations for future research. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on my own growth along my PhD journey regarding my academic and personal life.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW OF THEORIES AND STUDIES**

### **Introduction**

I begin this chapter by clarifying the operational definition of teacher research in the present study. Then I review the origin of teacher research in historical contexts and justify teacher research as a tool for teacher professional development. Rooted in a synthesis of relevant studies, the literature focuses on two threads: (a) constraints in language teachers' research engagement; (b) supporting teacher research, including the role of administrative leaders in enhancing teacher research engagement and shaping a research-oriented professional learning community in the departments. Finally, three theories are introduced in relation to the current study: namely, self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000), the professional learning community (PLC, Hargreaves, 2019; Hord, 1997), and the theory of transformational leadership (TL, Bass & Riggio, 2006). The literature review informs the present study in terms of both knowledge and methodology and paves the way for the analytical framework and research questions.

### **Origin of Teacher Research and Operational Definition**

The movement towards promoting teacher research in education has been traced back more than half a century when a divide was recognised between the two worlds of research and teaching practice (Wallace, 1991). For a long time in the world of educational research, teachers were mostly the objects of studies carried out by academics who entered their classroom contexts and observed what was happening there (Stenhouse, 1985). The investigations were generally published in academic journals that few teachers read, or converted into curriculum or guidelines for teaching to inform and guide their teaching in the classroom. In the process, what was missing were the teachers' own questions, concerns, and voices. As Freeman and Johnson (1998) state, it is ironic that teachers have primarily been bystanders while they are principal players in these classrooms. The teacher's role had long been confined to a craftsman who consumes the fundamental theories

generated by university-based scholars and implements the prescribed ideas in their teaching contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Teachers' roles as "theorisers, interpreters, and critics of their own practice" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 1), though, have traditionally been ignored in this division of labour, reflecting "a hierarchy of kinds of knowledge" (Schön, 1983, p. 36).

Against this backdrop, the movement of teacher research was launched to bridge the gap between research and teaching practice. As early as the 1900s, Dewey (1904) urged teachers to be "both consumers and producers of knowledge about teaching" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 9) because observing and reflecting on their own practice is essential for teachers to generate their own theories of teaching and learning. The idea of teacher research was then further developed by the curriculum reforms in the UK in the 1970s, particularly reflected in the work of Stenhouse (1975; 1981) that argued for the inevitable and intimate involvement of teachers in the research process. In parallel, in the US, Schön (1983) highlighted the value of reflective practice by teachers, contending that teachers were "not unthinking technicians but reflective practitioners" (Borg, 2013, p. 10).

In the movement of teacher research, there was a radical shift in understanding the teachers' role, from "receivers to researchers, users to knowers, and subjects to participants". Consequently, a redefinition of "a professional knowledge base" was proposed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 2).

The role of teachers was highlighted and reconfirmed as "transformative intellectuals" in contributing to the knowledge base of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are activities that are complex and context-specific. Teachers are prime actors in the process of teaching and learning. The accumulated experiences and understanding of the context enable them to identify problems of essential concern, to collect data with their sensitive observation skills grounded in the contexts, to interpret the findings with a truly emic perspective, and to display their power by legitimising their local ways of understanding (Johnson & Golombek, 2011). By constructing knowledge of teaching and learning in their contexts and taking action to improve it, teachers not only increase the effectiveness of their individual teaching and student learning but, through sharing

with peer colleagues and other members in their community, inform others in similar or a wider variety of contexts. While accumulating this emergent, local knowledge, teachers play a participatory role in generating and using knowledge in the field of education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). More importantly, as Stenhouse (1985) argues, research, bestowing autonomous power on teachers, was the route to teacher emancipation. In essence, “teachers should be at the heart of the education research process, as the proper audience for research and as researchers in their own right” (Rudduck, 1988, p. 36).

In the field of language teaching, the local, classroom-based research emerging in the 1980s offered an alternative in the search for better ways to promote teacher learning (Burns et al., 2016). Local, classroom-based research has provided opportunities for teachers’ own voices to be heard. And accordingly, teachers started to explore and develop their own understandings of their teaching practice. The last two decades have witnessed a burgeoning of language teacher research and the potential to be a substantial element of language teacher education and professional development. A number of studies were conducted in various contexts to gain a better understanding of how language teachers engage in teacher research and how language teacher research could be enhanced in teacher education programmes (e.g., Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Borg, 2013; Bullock & Smith, 2015; Burns, 2009; Dikilitaş et al., 2019; Freeman, 1998; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Nunan, 1989; Olson, 1990; Xerri & Pioquinto, 2018).

In advocating for teacher research, many academic researchers have provided varying definitions of “teacher research” (e.g., some widely referenced definitions by Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Borg, 2013; Nunan, 2018; see Appendix A). Though contested to some extent, these definitions commonly focus on four aspects of teacher research: agents who initiate and carry out research, the contexts in which teacher research is carried out, the primary purpose of teacher research, and the basic characteristics of research retained by teacher research.

First, teacher research is initiated and carried out by the teachers themselves. It starts from teachers' curiosity and interest to reflect on and inquire into what is happening in their professional contexts, why it happens, and how it could be done in a better way. Rather than being a passive recipient of the knowledge produced by academic researchers and implementers of curriculum designed by external experts, teachers themselves become inquirers and knowledge-generators, playing a role in contributing to the knowledge base in their discipline (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Secondly, teacher research is conducted by teachers, usually in their own professional contexts, for example, in their institutions or classrooms. Classrooms as a primary context for teacher research makes it a "localised, feasible, and meaningful" (Borg, 2016a, p. 119) professional activity. Action research (Burns, 2010) and exploratory practice (Hanks, 2017), for example, are both approaches to teachers studying their own classrooms by going beyond the pure teacher's role and taking on research-related perspectives (Freeman, 2018). The professional contexts, though, can be expanded beyond the classroom, as Lankshear and Knobel (2004) and Nunan (2018) suggest. For example, for English language teachers, reading and critically evaluating knowledge from disciplines such as English language and literature, sociocultural studies or psychological studies, and even investigating issues in these disciplines, may inform their understanding of broader contexts in which their immediate classroom contexts are embedded and subsequently guide their current teaching practice. Academic discipline-oriented research and pedagogy-oriented research are not exclusive to each other but interconnected.

Thirdly, the primary goal and purpose of teacher research is for pedagogical benefits. It is a meaningful and feasible activity in which teachers engage themselves with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of what is happening in and beyond the classroom. The aim is to try out possible ways to achieve better quality teaching and learning. However, in the context of higher education, the primary goal of some discipline-related research that teachers are

doing may not necessarily be to benefit pedagogy but to enhance their vocation as professionals.

Finally, like all other forms of research, teacher research is “a fundamentally social and constructive activity” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993, p. 24). Consequently, it needs to follow certain norms and genres that are acknowledged and shared among the research community in order to be robust and trustworthy. Since the word *research* is used in the term *teacher research*, it should retain some basic characteristics of research. Quite a number of scholars who advocate for and support teacher research agree that to ensure trustworthiness, teacher research ought to be conducted in a robust and systematic way, be embedded in an appropriate research paradigm, adopt psychometric and/or naturalist approaches, and should involve collecting and analysing qualitative and/or quantitative data (Borg, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Hanks, 2018; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Nunan, 1992).

Despite these criteria to ensure the quality of teacher research, some critics question the feasibility and quality of teacher research if left entirely in their hands (Brown, 2005; Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989; Foster, 1999). Conversely, some scholars argued that teacher research, as a new genre, should not necessarily be bound by research traditions. Instead, teachers should develop their own research questions out of their concerns, collect data at their convenience and analyse it in light of their existing theories (Mohr & MacLean, 1987; Bissex & Bullock, 1987). Similarly, Smith (2015) strongly opposes imposing criteria or norms of research quality from external academic sources on teacher research since the time and effort required to meet those criteria would potentially pose apparent barriers for teachers with heavy teaching loads and thus constrain engagement in teacher research. Smith (2018) insists that teacher research should not necessarily contribute to the knowledge base by “filling some generally applicable research gaps” (p. 31). Rather, its primary goal should be understanding and improving their own practice in their particular contexts. Notwithstanding these controversies over research quality, teacher research needs to follow systematic steps to

demonstrate that teachers' understandings and answers to the puzzles are reliable and robust. As Nunan (1997) argues, "the key distinction should not be whether an activity is practitioner research or regular research but whether it is good research or poor research" (p. 367).

Apart from research being systematic, another contentious issue is the "publication" of research findings. Smith (2015) argues that teacher research is an activity primarily by teachers and for teachers (and their students). Therefore, it is inappropriate and unjust to promote teacher research and evaluate it against academic research criteria for "rigour, quality, publication, and contribution to the field" (p. 208). Publication, though, is not necessarily limited to formal dissemination in academic journals. It can be formally and informally shared and made accessible in a wider variety of contexts, ranging from academic conferences, teacher journals, teacher seminar groups, or even talks with peer and colleagues. Though disseminating teacher research outputs to wider audiences still challenges teachers, it should become "part of a community of critical discourse" (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 111) because "research is not research unless communicated" (Crookes, 1993, p. 137). Otherwise, teachers doing research without disseminating the findings may mean missing the opportunity not only for individual teachers to contribute to the knowledge base of the language teaching and learning field, but also for other teachers to learn and, in turn, to confirm the implications of findings in different contexts (Barkhuizen, 2009).

Considering the above aspects of teacher research and the context of the present study, which is the tertiary educational context, I define teacher research as a continuous process of systematic, individual, or collaborative inquiry by teachers, with the primary concern for bridging research and practice. Teacher research is underpinned by research paradigms and carried out by teachers with rigour in a wide variety of contexts, from their particular classroom contexts to their subject disciplines. It needs to be made public for critique,

application and possible replication with potential benefits at three scales of context: at the micro-level, enhancing teaching practice and empowering their professional development; at the meso level, informing institutional curriculum changes and policies; and finally, at the macro level, contributing to the knowledge base in their disciplines and academy community. In this definition, three points need to be clarified to delimit teacher research in the present study's specific social context.

In the study, *English language teacher research* is used as an umbrella term. It encompasses teaching-related research in English language teachers' own teaching contexts, such as action research (Burns, 2010), exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003; Dikilitaş, 2015), and reflective practice (Farrell, 2007). It also includes discipline-related research in teachers' professional contexts. For example, any systematic inquiry in linguistics, English literature, translation, and intercultural studies. The discipline-related research might go beyond their teaching contexts but remains significant for their academic development and informative for their teaching practice.

### **General Trends of Empirical Research**

A search of literature over the past three decades shows an increasing body of work that demonstrates an understanding of and also advocates for language teacher research. The majority of these studies were published in the past decade (2010-2020). This situation indicates that teacher research has become an essential part of the research agenda in the field of language teacher education and professional development. A list of empirical studies with their research focus included in the literature review can be found in Appendix B.

Some general trends can be observed based on a review of these empirical studies. First, the inquiries of previous studies on language teacher research tend to shift from teacher research engagement to teacher research-related beliefs and values (e.g., Allison & Carey, 2007; Bai, 2018; Borg, 2009; Gao et al., 2000; Qu et al., 2014; Sadeghi & Abutorabi, 2017; Tavakoli, 2015; Tavakoli &

Howard, 2012), from understanding barriers to teacher research engagement to action to promote teacher research (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2007; Borg & Liu, 2013; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Vu, 2020; Wang & Han, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017), and from individual research experience to contextual influences (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Edwards, 2019; Gao & Zheng, 2020; Pham, 2006).

Much attention has been paid to the frequency of teacher research engagement and factors contributing to that frequency, or more specifically, barriers to the low research engagement among English language teachers (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2007; Borg & Liu, 2013; Le, 2017; Vu, 2020; Wang & Han, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017). Most of these studies show that English teachers commonly view teaching and research as being disconnected, which poses a crucial barrier to teacher research engagement. Consequently, more and more studies focus on teacher cognition in research engagement, including what language teachers know about research, how they perceive their identity as a teacher-researcher, and what they think about the relationship between research and teaching practice (e.g., Allison & Carey, 2007; Bai, 2018; Borg, 2009; Gao et al., 2000; Qu et al., 2014; Reis-Jorge, 2007; Sadeghi & Abutorabi, 2017; Tavakoli, 2015; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). The findings of teacher cognition in research engagement necessitate further exploration of other essential dimensions in teachers' research experiences, such as motivations in teacher research (e.g., Peng & Gao 2019; Tao, 2019; Yuan et al., 2016; Zuo & Yang, 2019), teacher-researcher identity construction, negotiation and development (e.g., Burns, 2015; Dikilitaş & Yayli, 2018; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Tran et al., 2017; Xu, 2014; Yuan & Burns, 2017), emotions in research engagement (e.g., Gu & Gu, 2019; Tran et al., 2017), autonomy and agency in teacher research (e.g., Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019), specific teacher-research activity, such as reading literature, writing and publishing (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019; Meng et al., 2018), research culture, and leadership and contextual influences on teacher research (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Edwards, 2019; Gao & Zheng, 2020; Pham, 2006). These, though, are quite limited in number compared to studies on the frequency of teacher research engagement and teacher cognition in relation to research. Based on a growing



understanding of the diverse dimensions of teacher research experiences, more and more initiatives to promote teacher research have been undertaken in recent years as an integral part of teacher professional development, and their impact has been examined at various levels: individual, institutional and sociocultural (e.g., Aga, 2017; Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Burns et al., 2016; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016; Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Edwards, 2019; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Hanks, 2015; Hanks, 2017; Hanks, 2019; Jin, 2015; Lehtonen et al., 2015; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). The above-listed studies can be categorised into two threads: One is understanding teacher research, and the other is promoting teacher research. A group of studies explores contributing factors to existing teacher research engagement, where research engagement results from a complex, non-linear combination of individual dimensions and contextual dimensions. The individual dimensions include teacher research beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of research, teacher motivation, teacher identity, teacher autonomy, and teacher emotional experiences. And contextual dimensions include research management, support of knowledge and resources, teacher collaboration, collective identity as teacher-researchers, and so on. The other group focuses on impetus and initiatives to promote teacher research, which, as a form of professional development, becomes a cause of change and transformation in those individual dimensions and contextual dimensions.

Meanwhile, there is a tendency for these studies to move from mixed contexts to more specific contexts, for example, a country or an institution. In the earlier studies on language teacher research engagement and teacher cognition in research engagement, participants were mostly from various countries worldwide. For example, in Rainey's study (2000) on the knowledge, practices, and opinions of EFL classroom teachers concerning action research, the survey collected answers of 229 EFL teachers from 10 different countries, including China, Colombia, Greece, Japan, Morocco, and Poland. Similarly, in Borg's (2009) investigation of English language teachers' conceptions of research, he surveyed 505 English teachers of mixed teaching backgrounds from 13 countries. The findings of these studies show that "the nature of teacher research engagement is likely to vary globally depending on the specific conditions and factors which characterise different language

teaching contexts” (Borg & Liu, 2013, p. 271). Therefore, more studies were conducted in one specific country, for example, in Vietnam (Pham, 2006; Tran et al., 2017; Vu, 2020), China (Bai, 2018; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg & Liu 2013; Xu, 2014), England (Tavakoli & Howard, 2012), Turkey (Kutlay, 2013), and Iran (Mehrani, 2015; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013). It became widely recognised that the institutional context has a significant influence on language teachers’ research engagement.

Therefore, more and more studies zoomed in on a particular institution and examined how English language teachers’ research engagement and motivation were shaped by and reshaped the research culture or institutional contexts where they live and work (Bai et al., 2013; Edwards, 2019). Again, more in-depth studies were conducted in one specific institutional context on initiatives to promote teacher research so as to meet local needs and conditions, as well as teachers’ identities, emotions, and autonomy in these initiatives (Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Hanks, 2019; Huang & Guo, 2019; Jin, 2015).

As stated in the Introduction, the current study aims to explore what tensions language teachers are experiencing in their research engagement and what the departments do as a professional learning community to help relieve these tensions. Therefore, the following literature review will focus on two threads of topics: (a) constraints in language teachers’ research engagement; (b) supporting teacher research, including administrative leaders’ roles in enhancing teacher research engagement and shaping a research-oriented professional learning community in the departments.

### **Constraints in Language Teachers’ Research Engagement**

Despite the rhetorical argument in favour of teacher research, studies show that in the field of language teaching, teacher research has not become a widespread activity yet, either in high schools or tertiary sectors (Bai & Hudson, 2010; Borg, 2009; Borg, 2017; Borg & Liu, 2013; Heng et al., 2020; Kutlay, 2013; Xu, 2014). Besides, the research outputs by English language teachers are generally unsatisfying. For example, in a recent study by Meng et al. (2018) in the Chinese university context, it is reported that less than 50 per cent of university teachers from 60 universities and across 15

provinces and regions publish one or more articles per year, and 85 per cent of them publish primarily for instrumental purposes, such as an academic promotion or stringent research requirements by the universities. Among these publications, less than 20 per cent are published in core peer-reviewed journals and less than 2 per cent are published in international journals. The low publication rate, to some extent, implies the unsatisfying quality of teacher research and weak research capacity (Wang & Han, 2011).

Evidently, the reality of teacher research as a minority activity contrasts with the rosy prospects of teacher research that academic researchers stress and promote. This contrast necessitates further exploration into the barriers that stand in the way of teacher research practice. A wide range of barriers has been identified across many studies for teachers in different countries (Allison & Carey, 2007; Bai et al., 2013; Barkhuizen, 2020; Borg, 2013; Borg & Liu, 2013; Chen & Wang, 2013; Huang & Guo, 2019; Le, 2017; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012; Teng, 2019; Peng, 2020; Wang & Han, 2011; Xu, 2014). These barriers interweave and transcend three levels of contexts: individuals, the workplace environment, and the broader sociocultural environment. At the individual level, the obstacles include teachers' limitations in research knowledge and skills, lack of motivation, lack of time for research engagement, and conceptions of research as disconnected from their everyday teaching practice. Barriers in the workplace include limited access to academic resources and research funding, lack of mentoring and structure to guide teacher research, non-collaborative school cultures, lack of acknowledgement and support from leaders, no opportunities to disseminate their research, no prescribed research policies, and so on. In a broader sociocultural environment, the barriers include narrow publication channels and the legitimacy and status of teachers' research disciplines. A close analysis of the obstacles and tensions identified in the literature results in four themes, which reflect the urgent needs of language teachers in their research engagement: (a) lack of collaboration and sense of belonging in research engagement; (b) weak research competence and low research self-efficacy; (c) teacher research as officially sanctioned obligation or personal choice; and (d) conflicts among multiple identities of teachers.

### ***Lack of Collaboration and a Sense of Belonging in Research Engagement***

Previous studies have shown that language teachers have generally not experienced collegial collaboration and often feel isolated, particularly in their research engagement (Edwards, 2019; Qu et al., 2014; Xu, 2014, Wen & Zhang, 2017). In practice, teachers' research in most cases is individual work, and they have to "fight alone" in performing their research activities (Wen & Zhang, 2017). Meng et al.'s study (2018) indicates that among more than 1,000 English language teacher participants from 60 different universities across China, 40 per cent of English language teacher participants in Chinese higher education have never collaborated in publication and only 16.5 per cent of participants admitted that they have ever experienced substantial cooperation in research with other colleagues. In the same vein, many teachers in Borg and Liu's study (2013) revealed that they had little idea about their colleagues' research activities. In Wen and Zhang's (2017) study, one of the teacher participants with 18 years' teaching experience describe her trajectory of professional development as "a lonely traveller in a desert". This isolation in professional development within the higher education context has been attributed to a lack of opportunities for interacting professionally with their colleagues, a busy teaching schedule, and the "egg-crate" architecture of classrooms that physically separate teachers (Lortie, 1975). Besides, what also hinders teacher research collaboration, particularly for university English teachers in the Chinese context, is the lack of shared research interests because of their research training in various research fields, such as literature, linguistics, and translation (Wen & Zhang, 2017). However, as Flinders (1988) pointed out, teacher isolation is more complicated than merely being "reactive to the physical and social 'realities' of their workplace" (p. 20). It is also a "psychological state" that depends on how teachers perceive and experience their interactions with colleagues in the workplace. Teachers in the same workplace may regard the physical working conditions in quite different ways. For example, as Little (1987, cited by Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) recognised, isolation could keep teachers private, away from the review of others and thus reserving "the right to conceal their failures" (p. 60). Since collegial collaboration in research often indicates open communication and exposure to others' scrutiny and

comments, some teachers may feel hesitant even when they are provided with opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

Teacher isolation was early on identified as one of the most critical obstacles to teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). The lack of professional dialogue and collaboration has been shown to limit their research engagement (Bai et al., 2014; Borg & Liu, 2013). Language teachers in these previous studies expressed an urgent need for a professional learning community in which they could be guided and supported by each other, and communicate and collaborate with regard to their research activities. Most importantly, they could achieve a sense of belonging (Wen & Zhang, 2017). A healthy number of studies suggest that supportive and nurturing communities of research be initiated and sustained, which are characterised by a collaborative and collegial discussion about research (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Borg, 2018; Burns et al., 2016; Rainey, 2000; Wen & Zhang, 2019; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016).

Whereas research communities are anticipated to promote teacher research and produce a sense of belonging among teachers, they are not always ideal. Lai and Li (2020) discovered that an unreasonable research approval mechanism and a weak research accountability system in Chinese higher education contexts might motivate early career researchers to actively join various collaborative research teams, which are expected to increase their possibility of winning high-level research grants. However, the collaboration in these research teams is often distorted in that early career researchers are not seriously involved in the design of research but are only expected to implement research tasks assigned by principal investigators or senior researchers. Their contribution to the collaboration of the research project is limited and rarely gets acknowledged because of the lack of genuine professional dialogue and unequal power relationships among team members. This distorted collaborative research could consequently hinder the development of some teachers' sense of belonging in the community, particularly for early career researchers.

### ***Weak Research Competence and Low Research Self-Efficacy***

The inadequate research training and lack of research methodology knowledge and skills are widely acknowledged as another significant impediment to language teachers' research since many language teachers have not received formal "research education", as shown in previous studies (Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2013; Huang & Guo, 2019; Pham, 2006; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013; Tran et al., 2017; Wang, 2018; Yuan et al., 2016). The lack of research knowledge and skills may negatively impact the quality of research teachers are doing, thereby undermining the trustworthiness and value of the findings (Borg, 2006). It may further limit teachers' chance of publishing their research in quality journals, which often leaves teachers struggling and frustrated, particularly when they are pressed to publish research as part of their work obligations (Liu, 2009). Therefore, in many studies teachers' voices are heard concerning their need to improve their research methodological knowledge and skills and their desire for research mentoring and guidance (e.g., Pham, 2006; Yuan et al., 2016).

Besides having research knowledge and skills, believing that one can fulfil the research tasks (i.e., having research self-efficacy) is equally crucial to teachers' commitment to research (Bandura, 2000; Lynch et al., 2009). Many studies show that lack of confidence in their capacity to do research-related tasks and particularly to publish diminishes language teachers' motivation to engage in research (e.g., Bailey, 1999; Xu, 2014; Yuan et al., 2016; Zuo & Yang, 2019). This low self-efficacy could partly be explained by the fact that language teachers lack first-hand experience of successfully carrying out research due to their limited research knowledge and skills (Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016). Frequent rejections in attempts at publishing and receiving negative feedback from gatekeepers of academic journals could also lead to language teachers' perception of research as overly-challenging and unattainable, which further undermines their confidence in research-related tasks (Bai et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). Therefore, there is an urgent need for language teachers, particularly those with limited research education, to develop a feeling of

confidence that they, as “research-engaged professionals”, are capable of finding answers to their classroom puzzles through systematic inquiry in their own contexts and the sharing of their findings through various ways of publishing (Xerri & Pioquinto, 2018).

### ***Teacher Research Motivation: Officially Sanctioned Obligation or Personal Choice***

Teachers' research motivation is another significant aspect that influences teachers' efforts in research engagement. In earlier studies, language teachers often lacked “a good reason to do research” (Borg, 2010, p. 409). However, a number of recent studies indicate teachers' mixed motivations for research, particularly under the backdrop of increasing demands of research performance and productivity in higher education, including in countries such as China (Peng & Gao, 2019; Tao, 2019; Xu, 2014; Zuo & Yang, 2019) and Vietnam (Mỹ, 2018).

Findings in the above studies indicate that four primary sources ignite teachers' motivation for research engagement: external pressures, pedagogical benefits, professional responsibility and development, and finally, genuine interest and passion for research.

These four sources of language teachers' motivation are not equally significant in studies across different contexts. Borg's survey (2009) investigated 505 English teachers of mixed teaching backgrounds in 13 countries. The results from this wide global context showed that teachers are primarily driven by teaching improvement and professional development rather than external pressures such as their leaders' expectations or academic promotion. In the same vein, Sadeghi and Abutorabi (2017) found in a survey with 100 participants that in the context of Iran, the most common motivators for Iranian English language teachers' research engagement are professional, pedagogical, and personal, whereas external pressure is the least mentioned motivator. In contrast, there is a consensus among quite a number of studies in the Chinese higher education context that language teachers are predominantly driven to research engagement by these external pressures while intrinsic motivation tends to be marginal (Xu, 2014). Additionally, Aga (2017) found that few

available opportunities such as research funds, training opportunities, as well as expectations from institutional and national policies, might motivate English teachers in Ethiopia to do action research.

These four sources of language teachers' motivation for research are also found to differ across different demographic groups of teachers. In Tao's study (2019), statistical analysis among 202 college English teachers in China shows that there is a significant difference in research motivation between male and female teachers, PhD degree holders or candidates and Master's degree holders, teachers with less than ten years of teaching experience and more than ten years' experience, and high-ranking universities and average universities. Those who have senior academic titles demonstrate higher intrinsic motivation. This is supported by findings of a narrative study by Zuo and Yang (2019), in which intrinsic motivation among teachers varies at different stages of their academic development: initial, breakthrough, and mature.

A recent study by Peng and Gao (2019) identified four dimensions of research motivation of language teachers and examined how they were associated with research productivity in terms of formal academic journal publication. The four dimensions are external regulation (promotion and performance, for example, "will not do research if there is no requirement for publication"), introjected regulation (reputation and recognition, for example, "to increase income" and "to improve my social reputation"), identified regulation (self-fulfilment and obligation, for example, "to better guide my teaching" and "fulfil a kind of social responsibility"), and intrinsic motivation (interest and aspiration, for example, "like the feeling of constantly exploring and researching"). Similar to the results of previous studies, it was found that language teachers demonstrate stronger external and identified motivation than intrinsic motivation. Unfortunately, extrinsic motivation proved to significantly negatively associate with formal research output, while the more intrinsic motivation language teachers exhibit the more productive they are in terms of publications in high-quality journals. The findings of Peng and Gao's study are in line with the argument by Deci et al. (2017) that there is a positive association between autonomous motivation in the workplace with



“work satisfaction, work commitment, and performance” (p. 25). Based on the findings, Peng and Gao argue for attention to the importance of igniting and enhancing academic’s intrinsic motivation and the need to create a supportive and motivating research culture because in most cases intrinsic motivation is not necessarily where teachers’ research engagement starts.

Evidently, these sources of motivation do not always ideally converge to drive teachers to take action to engage in research. Instead, they continuously negotiate and co-function towards either integration or conflicts within individual teachers (Huang & Guo, 2019; Tran et al., 2017). This process of negotiation of motivation is, in fact, a process of negotiation among various identities of language teachers, which serve as a compass for both their long-term and short-term effort.

### ***Conflicts Among Multiple Identities of Teachers***

A paucity of studies have discovered tensions in teacher-researcher identity construction and negotiation against the backdrop of an increasingly stringent research policy environment (Huang & Guo, 2019; Long & Huang, 2017; Tran et al., 2017; Xu, 2014).

The studies by Xu (2014) and Long and Huang (2017) both adopted a narrative approach to uncover participants’ stories of their identity as teacher-researchers. Their studies displayed the fragmented trajectories of teacher-researcher identities, which are constantly shifting at different professional stages, and are mediated by the interconnected influences of individuals, workplaces and broader social, cultural and political contexts. Xu (2014) recounted four teacher-researcher identity construction scenarios, including a struggling periphery research practitioner, a self-contented established researcher, a passive would-be researcher, and a disheartened non-researcher. While the four participants are working in the same department, the four different scenarios reflect how they, with varying academic competence levels and various professional career stages, responded to contextual affordances and constraints. Xu (2014) argues that favourable policies and institutional encouragement may not be enough for supporting teachers’ research engagement as teacher research should not be taken as “a prescriptive activity” (p. 256). Instead, it should be embedded in

the long-term professional learning system and could only be achieved by joint efforts from all stakeholders, such as acknowledgement from administrators, scaffolding from teacher mentor or educators, and the agency of teachers themselves.

Unlike Xu's (2014) study, Long and Huang (2017) focused on the dynamic and relational nature of identity construction and found three stages of teachers' researcher experiences, namely, the beginning, the stagnation/development, and the struggle. Each of these stages is characterised by unbalanced negotiation between individual influences and various scales of social contexts. The beginning stage is mostly experienced by novice researchers with external drives for promotion and a high sense of agency to learn to do research either through self-learning or mentoring from supervisors in formal education programmes. In contrast with the beginning stage when teachers themselves have more control over their own research engagement, the stagnation/development stages highlight the prominent social influences from both outside and inside institutions. While institutions impose more and more pressure for research productivity, support for teacher academic development is limited. Some teachers seek affordances from other academic communities outside their workplaces. Conflict and rejection seem to permeate the struggle stage as a result of misalignment between teaching and research practice, as well as between individual beliefs and imposed rules and norms by institutions and broader sociocultural contexts. The four participants in the study are situated in the same institutional context and broader socio-ideological context. They displayed researcher identities of varying degrees of importance through these three stages because of their various levels of motivation, research competence, and academic networking with other researchers.

Teacher emotions have emerged either as an integral part of professional identity in Huang and Guo's study (2019) or as a research lens through which professional identities are examined in Tran et al.'s study (2017). Both studies by Huang and Guo and Tran et al. are situated in higher education contexts that are experiencing "a turbulent process of change and transition" (Tran et al., 2017, p.

73) from being teaching-intensive to research-intensive universities in China and Vietnam. Some teachers show a positive attitude towards the increasingly stringent research policy and take it as a challenging opportunity. However, it is more than common for teachers to also experience more negative emotions such as excessive stress, frustration, and vulnerability. These negative emotions are mostly generated while teachers confront identity conflicts between externally imposed self and internally claimed self or self-discrepancies between different selves, such as *ideal self*, *ought self*, and *actual self* (Higgins, 1987). Despite variance in academic qualifications and career stages, this divergence in teachers' emotional responses, as Tran et al. (2017) argue, is mainly attributed to the agreement or disagreement between values, beliefs and goals of individual teachers, and expectations, strategies and policies of institutions. These mixed emotions, in turn, shape teachers' research actions, for example, passively conforming to the external requirements or even resistance and non-participation. As illustrated by teachers' lived experiences in Huang and Guo (2019), the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of teachers' professional identities are inextricably interconnected. Given this, both studies call for a research culture where open discussion about what could be counted as "research" and "quality research" is encouraged, and where the teaching-research nexus is emphasised and valued both by institutional leaders and teachers. When a shared belief is reached among teachers and leaders that teaching is research-informed and that research is a way of self-empowerment and professional growth, the research policies and evaluation should be process-oriented rather than output-oriented and quality-emphasised rather than quantity-emphasised. The consistency between teachers' beliefs and evaluation criteria helps teachers assimilate the external drive into their own value systems and cultivates their sense of ownership of the research demands, which subsequently fosters their internal motivation for teacher research engagement and sustains it for the long run. The findings of the above studies are in concert with findings of a recent study by Barkhuizen (2020), in which identity dilemmas are highlighted as a result of tensions between research valued by teachers and research standardised and prescribed by academic institutions for the sake of neoliberal research evaluation systems in higher education.

Another identity tension often overlooked in previous studies is the relationship between professional identity and personal-life identity, such as being a member of a family who undertakes household responsibilities. In a series of studies by Mitton-Kükner (2014, 2015, 2016, 2019), time constraints are typically caused by competing roles teachers, particularly female teachers, play in their professional and personal lives. Mitton-Kükner (2016) even expressed deep concern about the sustainability of teacher research because the increasing workload and competing demands in teachers' busy lives constrain female teachers' efforts in teacher research as a form of professional learning.

The tensions discovered in the studies reviewed above centre on teacher research collaboration, teacher research literacy, teacher research motivation, and teacher identities. Underpinning these tensions is the significant influence of the institutional environment. As a consequence, institutional support is continuously called for to help relieve these tensions. And supportive and enabling professional learning communities embedded in the institutions are desired, where teacher research collaboration is boosted, teacher research literacy and self-efficacy are enhanced, teachers' autonomous motivations for research are increased, and teacher-researcher is integrated as an indispensable part of individual as well as collective identity (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Gao & Zheng, 2020; Gu et al., 2014; Pham, 2006).

### **Supporting Teacher Research**

Based on the literature, Borg (2010) suggests an extensive list of workplace conditions that make teacher engagement in research more likely:

- Time for teachers to do research
- Resources (including access to research reports or summaries and funding, where necessary)
- Positive attitudes to teacher professional development
- An expectation that staff engage in professional development
- An awareness of the value of teacher research engagement

- An open, trusting culture
- A collaborative ethos
- Incentives for teachers to be research-engaged
- Support from management for teachers to be research-engaged
- A commitment to giving teacher research a high profile within the school
- A desire to use teacher-generated research evidence for school improvement
- Opportunities for staff to be engaged in research
- A culture of inquiry
- An openness to change
- Recognition of teachers' attempts to engage in research
- A genuine interest in the outcomes of teacher research

While this full list of conditions provides some diagnostic insights into whether a workplace can be judged as supportive for teacher research, workplace support is not merely a measurement against these yardsticks. Instead, the overall functioning of embedded professional learning communities in the workplace is dependent on how all the different parties involved, such as teachers and leaders, co-work dynamically. The rest of this section focuses on previous studies that show how initiatives and professional learning communities satisfy the above conditions to support teacher research and what role administrative leaders could play in this effort.

### ***Research-Enhancing Initiatives and Programmes***

A host of workplace-embedded initiatives and programmes have in recent years promoted teachers' research engagement and helped them along their trajectories towards becoming teacher-researchers. Some of them are the results of the continuing effort by the IATEFL Research SIG (see Barkhuizen et al., 2018; Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Bullock & Smith, 2015; Burns et al., 2017; Dikilitaş et al., 2016; Dikilitaş et al., 2019). Collections of studies carried out by teachers have been published, elucidating evidence of the effectiveness of these initiatives and programmes for empowering and

energising teacher-researchers. However, most of these studies are situated in fixed-term research-enhancing programmes. Some are carried out outside the institutions where teachers continuing professional development takes place and participants in these programmes are not necessarily colleagues (Edwards, 2019; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Wen & Zhang, 2019; Zhang & Wen, 2020). Others are external expert-guided or university-based programmes in one specific institution as part of its strategies to enhance teacher research, normally structured over one or two years (Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Burns et al., 2016; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016; Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Jin, 2015; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). Therefore, these studies' foci are mainly about the effectiveness of these programmes and individual teachers' professional development through research engagement. These research-enhancing programmes become tangible research learning communities of practice, "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Despite the various contexts in which these research-enhancing programmes are situated, they share a lot regarding the ways activities are organised to help teacher research, the impact they produced, as well as the factors or principles contributing to the effectiveness of the programmes.

In all these programmes, mentoring and collaborative opportunities are provided primarily to enhance teacher research knowledge and skills. The teacher members of these programmes mostly started with a low research self-efficacy and a lack of research experience. With the ongoing support of the mentors, teachers are exposed to knowledge of research methodology and theories and examples of teacher research as a kind of modelling. They are provided customised coaching in their research activities, including: choosing research topics, designing research plans, collecting and analysing data, and presenting and writing up research findings. Besides, mentors scaffold teachers by convincing them that teacher research distinguishes itself from purely academic research and is achievable and feasible for them, showing understanding for challenges that teachers are confronted with and encouraging them to fulfil their potential. Equally important, opportunities for

peer collaboration are created for open discussion and professional dialogue. Teachers share the research load, reconcile different perspectives, and arrive at a synthesis of ideas, potentially leading to the theorisation of teacher knowledge (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016). As an important part of these programmes, opportunities for the dissemination of research findings are offered to teacher members. Teachers present their research findings either in informal in-house seminars or formal national and international conferences. Written forms of research findings are also published in various channels (Burns et al., 2016; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016).

The studies also examined the impact of these programmes on teachers' research engagement. The mentors' ongoing support and participant-sensitive coaching enhance their research knowledge and skills and increase their research self-efficacy. The programmes develop a professional learning community and promote teacher collaboration, which becomes a "dominant theme" in the programmes. With increased confidence in doing research, teachers display a shift from dependence on the mentors to a more autonomous teacher-researcher (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016). With mentoring and peer collaboration, teachers participate in the activities on a more voluntary basis even though initially they are often obliged to do so. Moreover, oral and written dissemination of research findings as an essential outcome of the programmes contributes to teachers' sense of identity as teacher-researcher (Burns et al., 2016). Through participating in teacher research, teachers' beliefs about teacher research are shaped and reshaped. Meanwhile, they tend to embrace researcher as an indispensable part of their teacher identity. They are no longer only practitioners but knowledge-generator as they emancipate themselves in their professional life through teacher research (Jin, 2015).

These studies also analyse contributing factors and underpinning principles to achieve the positive impact of the programmes. Firstly, it is crucial to have top-down support and reasonable expectations. Context support includes providing or inviting external experts as mentors, valuing and encouraging teacher research, respecting teachers' professional knowledge, recognising various

ways of disseminating teacher research findings, and providing financial or academic resources. In Wen and Zhang's study (2019), highly structured management of the research-enhancing programme is stressed, including setting up both long- and short-term goals (both collective and individual goals) and operating through the mediation of both policies and research tasks. In these policies and research tasks, teachers are both "pulled" and "pushed" cognitively and emotionally. In all programmes, top-down support also includes support for dissemination of research findings through either presenting at academic conferences or publishing in journals. This goal is considered at the very outset and serves as an instrumental motivation and external pressure for teachers to be initially engaged in and committed to the research activities involved in the programmes. Secondly, mentors play a central role in organising the programmes and supporting teachers by modelling, coaching, and scaffolding. Wen and Zhang (2019) point out that the mentors' organisational skills and personal commitment are the keys to building the professional learning communities and motivating the teachers. Thirdly, mutual respect and trust between mentors and teachers, as well as among teachers, are essential to cultivating a safe and open research culture for peer collaboration. Finally, the effectiveness of these programmes is also dependent on the commitment of the members, who are committed to continuous reflection, pro-active in their learning, and willing to abide by the code of practice and engage in process-based development.

All the above studies provide valuable "insider" insights into these research promoting programmes as teacher learning communities. These research promoting programmes also shed light on a new mode of "practitioner-oriented, knowledge-generating" teacher professional development. In these studies, the data collection is mostly longitudinal and involves multiple sources, ranging from questionnaires, interviews, workshop and meeting recordings, and observation notes to teachers' reflective accounts. The data lays a foundation for a trustworthy recount of both mentors' and teachers' experiences in these teacher learning communities of practice. However, the research-oriented programmes in these studies are just part of the overall research-enhancing strategies of the relevant institutions, and most of them are fixed-term support for one or two years. Therefore,



in practice, there is always an issue of transition from the small-scale learning community of these research-oriented programmes to an all staff teaching-oriented working environment. This transition is so important that it gives rise to the concern of sustainability of research engagement (Edwards & Burns, 2016), as Burns et al. (2016) query, “how the outcomes of the research can be progressively built into the ongoing curriculum and teacher development of the institution” (p. 69).

As shown by the studies reviewed above, there are other issues besides mentoring in an institutional research culture that converge to exert impact on teacher research, such as an ethos of research, research policies and management, leadership, collegial collaboration, and the balancing of teaching and research workload (Aga 2017; Bai et al., 2014; Qu et al., 2014; Zhou & Zhang, 2016). Distinctive from other studies, Lehtonen et al. (2015) illustrated how the University of Helsinki Language Centre, through supportive leadership and management procedures, cultivated an institution-contextualised collaborative research culture. The Language Centre considers the institution as a fruitful breeding ground for new ideas. As a consequence, a series of in-house activities were organised, including mini-conferences and research seminars, an in-house publication series, teaching development seminars and common room coffee afternoons, and university pedagogy course modules for staff. These inhouse activities aimed to promote and enable the integration of teaching and research in teachers’ professional development. As part of the policies, the teaching workload was reduced to allow more time for research and travel grants were awarded for academic communication outside the community. In the study, one research project by two teachers was taken as an example. The research project was initiated with the encouragement from their seniors and colleagues. They were scaffolded in the research design and writing up of the research in discussions with senior lecturers and other colleagues. In-house publication committee members and editors as peer reviewers provided them advice on improving the quality of their paper in terms of depth of analysis and methodology. Their publishing in the in-house publication triggered interest in other colleagues and subsequently led to further research projects built on their findings. It is also shown in the experiences of these two teachers how the common barriers, such as low research self-efficacy, lack

of motivation for research engagement, and time constraints, were overcome by the teachers, who were nurtured in such a clearly defined and workable organisational framework and collaborative working culture. The freedom to develop ideas, the support and encouragement offered at various stages, and the trust in their expertise shown from the leaders all converge into an initial motivating force for teachers to engage in research. More importantly, when the potential of research engagement is fully utilised and realised in these initiatives, teachers tend to become more aware of the significance of their research and hence more motivated to commit themselves further. In this sense, teachers actively integrate external expectations into their own and consciously align their actions with the expectations. Based on the practical experiences, Lehtonen et al. (2015) summarised certain preconditions to transmit the idea that “research is possible and significant”; for example, the pedagogical development through research orientation, the regular, low-threshold research activities, an annual timetable for research arrangement, and institutional research strategic goals taking research-based development as an integral part (p. 181). Furthermore, in responding and interacting in these initiatives, teachers as agents contribute to fostering a collaborative working culture and thus influence their own institutional settings.

### ***Administrative Leaders’ Role***

Throughout the above studies, managers’ support is continuously pointed out as playing a crucial role in building and enabling the organisational strategies and frameworks that encourage positive attitudes towards research and create conditions for research collaboration among colleague (Bai et al., 2013; Edwards, 2019; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Ford & Ware, 2018). Leaders are perceived to “create the mechanisms for cultural development and the reinforcement of norms and behaviours expressed within the boundaries of the culture” (Bass & Avolio 1994, p. 543). However, few of these studies present leaders’ voices and examine their role and work in-depth. In these studies, leaders often appear to be an invisible hand that exerts influence on the effectiveness of the programmes.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to include leaders' perspectives in understanding teacher research.

In the area of research productivity in higher education contexts, Bland et al. (2005) identified key leadership characteristics:

being highly regarded as a scholar, serving as a mentor and peer model for other group members, possessing a 'research orientation', playing critical leadership roles such as a manager, fund-raiser, group-advocate, and being a participative leader by using an assertive, participative style of leadership, creating formal mechanisms and setting expectations for all members to contribute to decision making and holding frequent meetings with clear objectives. (p. 227)

These leadership characteristics are proven to be favourable in cultivating a conducive environment for a productive research organisation. However, Borg (2010) suggests some leadership attributes as barriers to language teacher research engagement, including depreciating the value of teacher research and being research inactive themselves. Additionally, Borg & Liu (2013) point out that a product-oriented and support-absent management would negatively influence teacher research engagement. Nevertheless, leaders' perspectives have not been explicitly addressed and have not become a research focus in previous studies that examined teacher research experiences.

Despite the importance of institutional research culture and leadership, the topic is scarcely explored in the area of teacher research. Therefore, there is an urgent need to seek more evidence on what roles leaders play and how their leadership is achieved to promote teacher research.

Moreover, both leaders and institutions are situated in a broader sociocultural environment, such as universities and the research communities of the disciplines. Therefore, investigating and learning about contextual constraints on leaders and the interaction between institutions and the broader sociocultural environment would probably produce a comprehensive understanding of institutional research culture.

## **Investigating Teachers' Needs and Needs Support: Theoretical Lenses**

The current study aims to understand the tensions that language teachers in higher education experience in their research engagement, the institutional effort in promoting the professional learning community to relieve these tensions, and the role of administrative leaders in this effort. Accordingly, three theoretical lenses are used and interwoven into the research framework of this study: self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000), the professional learning community (PLC, Hargreaves, 2019; Hord, 1997), and the theory of transformational leadership (TL, Bass & Riggio, 2006).

### ***Self-Determination Theory***

As a macro theory which focuses on human motivation and the social and cultural conditions that promote it, self-determination theory has been applied in many domains, including health care, organisational management, and education (Deci et al., 2017). As discussed above, studies have found four main sources of teacher research motivation: external pressures, pedagogical benefits, professional responsibility and development, and finally, genuine interest and passion for the research activities. These four types of motivation fall along “a relative-autonomy continuum anchored by external regulation on the controlling end and integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation on the autonomous end” (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 7) in SDT.

Controlled motivation involves external regulation (external contingencies of reward or punishment) and introjected regulation (poorly internalised extrinsic motivation in an attempt to avoid shame and achieve contingent self-esteem). External pressures identified in previous studies resonate with controlled motivation, including institutional research requirements and obligations for academic promotion and annual appraisal, which significantly influence acknowledgement from university leaders, teachers' income, tenure applications, and even job security. The perceptions of these external pressures may drive teachers to research engagement when they feel guilty or insecure for not fulfilling these obligations (Meng & Chen, 2019; Peng & Gao, 2019; Tao, 2019; Xu, 2014; Zuo &

Yang, 2019). This motivation is categorised by Tao (2019) as “motivation to survive”. In other words, when teachers do not feel any threat to their survival, even if they do not engage in research, they may not have any motivation to do research.

Autonomous motivation involves volition in self-directed behaviours. It consists of three subtypes: identified, integrated, and intrinsic. When people recognise the underlying value or importance of an activity, they autonomously act with identified regulation. Teachers may engage in research activity as they recognise the value of research in that research would better inform their teaching practice (Peng & Gao, 2019). These are pedagogical benefits or benefits for professional development identified in previous studies. Besides, when language teachers incorporate ‘researcher’ as an integral part of their professional identity, they tend to readily engage in research and consider it as self-empowering and a way of professional development. This identity-related motivation is correspondingly labelled “motivation to develop” in Tao’s study (2019). When teachers invest effort in a research activity because of enjoyment and interest, they are intrinsically motivated. Teachers may become engaged in research because of their curiosity about new knowledge and consequently may develop a sense of achievement acquired in the process of inquiry or publication (Xu, 2014). This is again represented in Tao’s study as “motivation of interest”.

Given the powerful impact of autonomous motivation on productivity, wellbeing, and thriving, SDT proposes a process in which controlled motivation could be internalised into autonomous motivation with the scaffolding of an autonomy-support social environment. Self-determination theory suggests that this internalising process could be promoted and advanced with the satisfaction of three interconnected psychosocial needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT likens the process of supporting these three psychosocial needs to growing of a plant with the satisfaction of its biological needs – sun, soil, and water – as nutrients (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011, p. 41).

Autonomy refers to a “sense of personal agency and self-determination” (Ushioda, 2011, p. 224). It is perceived as the “origin or source of one’s own behaviour” (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 8). In other words, autonomy indicates “volition, willingness, and endorsement” (Ryan & Deci, 2011, p. 54). When individuals feel their perspectives are acknowledged and respected, and they are provided choices and options, individuals feel self-initiated in their actions, actions which align with their interests, beliefs, and values. When autonomous, individuals potentially incorporate and act on the values and expectations requested by others as long as they are in accord with their own. For example, when the importance of teacher research is acknowledged, and teachers are provided with an opportunity to make decisions about what topic to explore, how to conduct the research, and how to implement the findings to improve their teaching practice, it will be easier for them to align the research with their professional concerns and will be more likely to internalise teacher research activity as part of their professional life.

Ryan and Deci (2002) consider competence to be not “an attained skill or capability”, but rather “a felt sense of confidence and effectance in action” (p. 7). This is similar to the core socio-cognitive theory construct of “self-efficacy”, which is defined as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). In teacher research, Wyatt and Dikilitaş (2016) articulate dimensions of “teacher research efficacy” in this question:

To what extent are teachers efficacious in identifying issues that need researching, in developing specific research questions and focused literature reviews, in choosing suitable research methods and justifying these, in designing appropriate research instruments and using these for data collection and analysis in deeply ethical ways, in being critical while producing research that contributes to knowledge, and in producing coherent research reports in both oral and written form? (p. 554)

Self-efficacy, as Bandura asserts, lays the foundation for motivated actions. Therefore, the satisfaction of the psychosocial need for competence or the growth of teacher research self-efficacy plays a significant role in transforming teacher research motivation. For instance, when teachers believe they have acquired specific research skills, they are more likely to engage in research projects that adopt those research skills even when the project is challenging. And they are more likely to sustain their commitment to the research.

Relatedness refers to “feeling connected to others ... to have a sense of belongingness” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 7) in one's community. When the innate need to connect with others is met, a sense of security and belonging is achieved, participants' autonomous motivation strengthened, and engagement in activity sustained (Beachboard et al, 2011). SDT asserts that in some situations, relatedness is less vital to intrinsic motivation than autonomy and competence. Nonetheless, in teacher research, where a professional learning community and collaboration are key features, relatedness in the local community is critical since it is the context where the inquiry is initially inspired, knowledge is produced, shared, and opened up to the critical review of other teachers, and finally applied and reconstructed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). For example, when teachers feel trusted and safe, they are more willing to discuss and express their disagreement with colleagues about the data and its analysis informing their teaching decisions. When they feel respected and valued to see their research contribute to the school curriculum and syllabus innovation, their intrinsic motivation for research will more likely flourish and be sustained over time. Therefore, mutual trust among teachers, who value each other personally and professionally, is the precondition for a sense of connectedness with others. Much attention also needs to be given to “develop strong cultures of trust, reciprocal engagement and mutual critique” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 184), while enhancing teacher research competence is often more focused on institutional top-down research-enhancing initiatives. It takes a joint effort to establish a climate of trust and openness and to sustain it over time through constant and daily interactions among the members of the PLC.

The basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy proposed by SDT provide insights into the tensions experienced by language teachers in the process of their research engagement, which have been discussed in previous sections. SDT stresses the vital role of the social context for the full internalisation of extrinsic motivation by supporting these three basic psychosocial needs. A professional learning community in the field of teacher education and teacher learning is widely recognised as a site that facilitates teachers' needs of belonging, competence, and autonomy.

### ***Professional Learning Community***

SDT suggests that people are more likely to thrive and fully realise their potential in contexts where they experience necessary support in their own ongoing learning: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This idea resonates with the recent conceptualisation of teacher learning that stresses the importance of “socially and politically sensitive forms of professional activity within teachers' own workplaces” (Burns et al., 2016, p. 56). Teacher learning is not merely an individual acquisition of professional knowledge. Instead, it is situated in the contexts where teachers work; teachers' own sense of agency is socially mediated by “the localised norms, assumptions, and conditions” of the context (Burns et al., 2016, p. 57; Burns & Richards, 2009). Workplace-embedded PLCs, with their attributes and widely recognised positive effects, are perceived as promising social contexts which help nurture teachers' professional development with regard to teacher collegiality (Qiao et al., 2018), teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy (Zheng et al., 2020; Zonoubi et al., 2017) and teacher autonomy (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Wang & Zhang, 2014). The concept of PLC can be traced back to the rise of teacher research (Stenhouse, 1975) and the “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983). A PLC, as Hord (1997) defined in a literature review, is a collective inquiry in which both teachers and administrators “continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning” (p. 10) for the sake of students' benefits as well as teacher professionalism. The generally recognised features or components of an ideal PLC for teachers



include supportive and shared leadership, mutual engagement and shared responsibility, norms of continuous critical inquiry for innovation and creativity, shared values and visions, possession of a knowledge base that enables effective teaching and learning, a physical or structural setup that allows time and space for teacher communication and collaboration, and mutual trust, respect and caring among staff members and leaders (Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 2010; Stoll et al., 2006). The PLC is not a fixed form defined by these features but functions as a flexible and dynamic interaction process among these components. Whether the PLCs can develop and be sustained over time as expected, depends on how these components co-function together (Stoll et al., 2006). These components may focus on different aspects, but they work together to create a space where teachers' basic needs are satisfied, and where teachers rise to be more autonomous and responsible for students' benefits, their own professional growth, and collective wellbeing.

The ideal PLC would be a site in which teachers' need for competence, or self-efficacy is enhanced. Bandura (1994) pinpoints four main sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and positive emotional states. The most powerful source is the experiences of success, particularly after overcoming obstacles through sustained effort and sometimes with the aid of others. Collective inquiry towards innovation continually expands their teachers' "capacity to create the results they truly desire" (Hord, 1997, p. 19), which helps reinforce a robust belief in their capability in specific tasks and similar situations. Seeing other similar members in the PLC succeed through perseverance will also help individuals adjust their own self-efficacy and result in them believing that they too possess the capability and potential to succeed. The more similar they perceived themselves to be to the model, the more significant its impact will be. Moreover, when people have been persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to fulfil a challenging task, they are more likely to give it a try and put in greater effort. Besides the persuasive boosts, the attainable tasks are also crucial. They need to be challenging while still achievable and within reach of teachers' capability with considerable effort. Positive mood, if

perceived as “an energising facilitator of performance” (Bandura, 1994, p. 73), also helps enhance and strengthen individuals’ perceived self-efficacy.

In the ideal PLC, teachers’ need for autonomy is satisfied in two senses. First, in PLCs where leadership and responsibilities are shared among leaders and teachers, teachers are involved in the decision-making and are provided freedom for their choice as much as possible. Teachers’ perspectives are acknowledged, and their voices are heard and respected. While being valued and respected, teachers tend to gain a sense of autonomy and take ownership of their actions. Secondly, with the increased pedagogical knowledge resulting from collective, reflective, and professional dialogue, teachers tend to become more confident in making evidence-based decisions in their teaching practice, which concurrently promotes teacher autonomy.

An ideal PLC supports teachers’ needs for relatedness by cultivating a climate that encourages a sense of belonging, mutual caring, acknowledging and being responsive to people’s feelings, more focus on collaboration than competition, and close and trustful relationships. Collective inquiry in the ideal PLC could promote a sense of connectedness as Griffin (cited by Hord, 1997, p. 20) points out:

As principals and teachers inquire together, they create community. Inquiry helps them to overcome chasms caused by various specialisations of grade level and subject matter.

Inquiry forces debate among teachers about what is important. Inquiry promotes understanding and appreciation for the work of others. ... And inquiry helps principals and teachers create the ties that bind them together as a special group and that bind them to a shared set of ideas. Inquiry, in other words, helps principals and teachers become a community of learners.

Whereas the idea of professional learning communities is promising with regard to providing support for teachers’ three psychological needs, challenges may rise in the implementation in specific social and cultural contexts. These need to be addressed in the process of coming to grips

with imperfect realities and developing sustainable learning communities (Hargreaves, 2007; Stoll et al., 2007).

For example, research shows that China's PLCs are rooted in historical, institutional, and cultural contexts. They share some common features with the PLCs in other global contexts, such as shared visions to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness through collaborative work and sharing individual practice. Moreover, the PLCs in China display institutional-specific and cultural-specific features. For instance, teachers are often organised in subject-based teaching research groups (TRGs), which are often called *jiaoyanzu*, a Chinese version of the PLC, in which teachers discuss teaching plans, prepare lessons together and share individual teaching practice. Participation in these collective activities is institutionalised and embedded in teachers' daily work. Therefore, TRGs in China have both professional and administrative functions (Zheng et al., 2020). Besides, influenced by Confucian philosophy, a TRG is often characterised by social harmony, emphasising consensus, and avoiding disagreement and conflict to maintain interpersonal harmony (Qiao et al., 2018). Although these institutional-specific and cultural-specific features may make it easy to organise the so-called work-based PLCs, critical and meaningful dialogues for authentic learning may not be guaranteed in these policy-mandated, product-oriented, and harmony-prioritised collective activities. This kind of collaboration is labelled "contrived collegiality" (Hargreaves, 2019), which is characterised by administratively contrived interactions, with teachers as passive implementors of predetermined strategies rather than the ones who deconstruct, co-construct and reconstruct the knowledge through the inquiries they themselves initiate. In this sense, what counts in building up and sustaining the PLCs is not the presence of collaboration but the type and quality of collaboration.

To address the above-discussed challenges, scholars (Hargreaves, 2007; Louis, 2008; Louis et al., 1995) have articulated several principles for establishing the PLCs at the outset and sustaining them as a long-term endeavour. These principles essentially:

- prioritise teachers' learning and growth over short-term achievements under external pressure;
- emphasise the collegial relationship of trust and an ethic of interpersonal caring among leaders and teachers as the backbone of a healthy and sustaining PLCs;
- focus on reflective professional inquiry and work-based collaborative learning opportunities;
- highlight the balance between divergence and convergence within the community;
- advance redistribution of leadership and responsibility to diminish the vulnerability caused by the replacement of leaders.

Central to applying these principles is the administrative leaders in the PLCs, especially when the leaders recognise PLCs as a space to empower teachers in continuous learning rather than only as a way to organise teachers to collaborate for strategic reasons or short-term achievements (Hargreaves, 2019).

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Literature has recognised the vital role of administrative leaders in creating school conditions that foster school-embedded professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006; Vanblaere & Devos, 2018). Previous evidence suggests that transforming the school organisation into a learning community can be done only with the leaders' sanction and active nurturing of the staff's development as a community. Over the last four decades, the literature in the field of leadership has provided a rich discussion on the full range of leadership, encompassing three broad behavioural classes: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Antonakis & House, 2013). Transformational leadership addresses followers' sense of self-worth and emphasises their intrinsic motivation and their development by inspiring, encouraging, and empowering them and by aligning the goals of individuals, groups and organisations (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Four core components of transformational leadership are idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration, and inspirational motivation. Studies have shown that

these transformational leadership behaviours are conducive to the satisfaction of teachers' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness by creating a learning culture and a trusting and open professional community (Deci et al., 2017; Hetland et al., 2011).

As for idealised influence, transformational leaders in PLCs serve as a role model of commitment and enthusiasm. They participate in collective inquiry along with teachers, "questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions" for school improvement (Kleine-Kracht, 1993, p. 393). Instead of viewing themselves as being all-wise and all-competent, transformational leaders communicate their value of continuous professional learning and act as life-long learners themselves. Leaders' modelling provides vicarious experiences as a source of teachers' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Moreover, the consistency between words and actions and their competence in pedagogical inquiry help foster a collegial relationship of trust between leaders and teachers (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Louis, 2008). There is consensus that teacher-administrator trust promotes teachers' buy-in to organisational visions and goals, boosts their willingness to commit themselves to optimal changes, and at the same time is a product of the united effort of administrators and teachers in pursuit of innovation and changes (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Meanwhile, transformational leaders serve as a source of intellectual stimulation, encouraging innovation of teaching, and providing collaborative learning opportunities with optimal challenges through cultivating learning-oriented PLCs (Deci et al., 2017). Transformational leaders attend to individual teacher's needs and scaffold them towards increasing competence in pursuit of the realisation of their full potential.

Transformational leaders value and respect teachers as professionals and strive to generate inspirational motivation in them. They remain open to changes and encourage teachers to be innovative. They provide them with choice and opportunities for decision making in order to help teachers develop collective ownership of changes (Harris & Jones, 2010). Transformational leaders inspire teachers with a strong awareness of the value of their endeavours and vitalise them with confidence in pursuing higher goals through positive feedback and verbal encouragement. Shared

leadership and responsibilities help teachers internalise the externally initiated endeavours and connect them with their own future self-goals. The leaders' encouragement for innovation builds teachers' sense of autonomy and a sense of ownership of collective enterprises.

In contrast, transactional leadership emphasises social exchange and relies on contingent rewards (CR) for productivity. For instance, to motivate teachers to achieve higher levels of research outcomes, leaders may clarify the role and task requirements for teachers, promising monetary rewards or professional promotion in exchange for satisfactorily fulfilling the goals of research productivity. They may also impose punishment for lack of productivity. This mode of management creates a controlling context where followers are coerced to be engaged, which may even lead to an impairment of their intrinsic motivation. Every leader displays characteristics of both transactional and transformational leadership but may embrace more of one and less of the other (Bass, 1999, p. 11). Meanwhile, Bass proposes that transactional leadership is a prerequisite for transformational leadership, which augments the effectiveness of transactional leadership. Laissez-faire leadership is at the other extreme of the leadership range, indicating an absence of leadership or non-leadership whereby leaders avoid making decisions or abdicate their authority.

The studies reviewed so far in this chapter suggest that contextual support and supportive leadership are crucial to the interconnected dimensions of teacher research, such as teacher autonomy, teacher self-efficacy, and a sense of relatedness. Yet, few studies adopt an organisational stance and explore the values, actions, and perspectives of institutions and administrative leaders in response to the constraints that teachers experience in their research life. Organisations and leaders deserve detailed scrutiny for a better understanding of the breeding ground where teachers grow. Moreover, most previous studies tend to zoom in on one dimension of teacher research, for instance, research motivation or teacher-researcher identity. Few, though, take an integrative and dynamic approach to explore how these dimensions of individual teachers are interconnected and converge to shape collective cognition, collective identity as well as collaborative research

engagement in a specific context, and how these collective dimensions help shape and contribute to organisational wellbeing. Given these concerns, the current study aims to fill the gap and examine teachers' research experiences in an institutional research community of practice, integrating the perspectives of both leaders and teachers. The following research questions about teachers' research experiences as well as the theoretical lenses of SDT, PLC, and transformational leadership serve as "navigational tools" that help me "map possible directions" and at the same time get me ready to "inquire about the unexpected" (Agee, 2009, p. 432):

- (a) What central tensions are perceived by EFL teachers in their research experiences?
- (b) What collective initiatives are undertaken in the two departments to relieve the tensions and enhance teacher research practice, and what are their impacts on teachers regarding their research life?
- (c) What are the roles of the department leaders and the challenges they are confronted with?

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I first justified teacher research as an empowering activity for teacher professional development. I then synthesised the findings of previous studies which highlighted the constraints and needs of teachers in their research engagement, the relevance of workplace support, and the role of administrative leaders. I finished the chapter by identifying the gaps in these previous studies and stated the research questions of the current study.

Methodologically, to achieve an understanding of the unfolding research life and perspectives of both teachers and institutional leaders, more qualitative studies embedded in the particular institutional contexts are called for, particularly longitudinal studies, which help trace the dynamic and interactive process and avoid relying heavily on teachers' ability to recall information. In the next chapter, the methodological considerations will be discussed in detail.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter presents the research paradigm and the research methods adopted in the study. I first justify how a qualitative research paradigm and a narrative approach fit the nature and purpose of the present study. Then I continue to explain the process of participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis. I conclude the chapter by describing the methods used to monitor and evaluate the methodological and ethical procedures followed in the study.

### Research Paradigm and Research Design

#### *Qualitative Research Paradigm and the Present Study*

The research paradigms followed by researchers set the foundation of the investigation process and shape the types of research questions formulated by them and the methods they choose to answer the research questions. Along a quantitative-qualitative research continuum, research paradigms differ with respect to ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values in research), and methodology (the process of research) (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Quantitative research, represented by positivism, takes on a realist perspective. Positivists believe that reality exists independently of the points of views of researchers and can be understood objectively. Therefore, to obtain an objective and accurate representation of reality, researchers aim to eliminate all their influence and bias from the object of inquiry in the investigation. Reality is quantifiable and measurable by "defining and controlling variables and manipulating the research setting in carefully designed experiments" (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015, p. 10). In short, quantitative research tends to lean towards "a realist ontology, an objectivist epistemology, and an experimental, manipulative methodology" (Duff, 2010, p. 47).



On the other hand, qualitative research takes on a subjective and constructivist perspective. The advocates of qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, cited in Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015) contend that social realities are multiple and co-constructed by the people who are involved in the investigation and their relationships in the investigation, the way the investigation is carried out, and the contexts in which the investigation takes place. They believe that research is value-bound, and subjectivity and intersubjectivity are inherent and unavoidable because the "subjective knower is the only source of reality" (Guba, 1990, cited in John & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14). To gain an in-depth and detailed understanding of the subject or phenomenon, qualitative inquirers enter a natural research setting and adopt a range of strategies to collect data; e.g. in-depth interviews, direct observations and document analysis. In sum, qualitative research is more connected to "an ontology of multiple realities, a nonobjectivist epistemology and a naturalistic, nonmanipulative methodology" (Duff, 2010, p. 47).

The process-oriented, meaning-making prioritised nature of qualitative research is in line with the issues I intend to explore in the present study. As mentioned earlier, the study originates from my initial curiosity into a prevailing phenomenon in Chinese universities: English language teachers remain non-engaged or poorly engaged in research activities even after they are reportedly inspired with a great passion for doing research at the end of in-service teacher research-enhancing training programmes. The initial intension was to address the questions: "How do these teachers do research in their workplace?" and "Why do these teachers tend to have less research engagement than they anticipated after they return from a research-training programme?". These initial questions articulate my desire to understand the interactions of individual teachers and their workplace contexts and their research life experiences situated in social and cultural contexts from their perspectives. My initial questions correspond to a qualitative research paradigm that focuses on a contextualised understanding of people's lived experiences from their points of view (Bryman, 1984). The present study aims to extend the understanding of institutional research communities of practice in which English language teachers and leaders work and interact. This understanding is

shaped by participants' lived experiences co-constructed by the researcher and participants and reached through multiple forms of evidence. In this sense, the qualitative approach offers an appropriate way to fulfil the aim of the present study.

Qualitative research also advocates close involvement of researchers with the participants and with the natural contexts where participants live their lives. This close involvement significantly provides rich information about and an in-depth understanding of people's lived experiences. Throughout the research process, I have always been aware of and reflexive about my contribution to the current study. My prior knowledge of the two research sites and my working experiences as a coordinator of in-service university English teacher education programmes have shaped the purpose and research questions of the current study. At the time of the study, I was in my first year of the doctoral programme. As a developing researcher, I was also experiencing the challenges of designing and implementing research, writing up research reports and even with publishing my research. The act of sharing my own research experience helped me relate to my participants more closely and often aroused their empathy for me. I acknowledge that this relationship of trust and closeness was vital for my participants to be more willing to share their research experiences with me.

Within the overarching qualitative research paradigm, narrative inquiry, which recognises the "possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality" (Bruner, 1991, p. 5), accords with my intention in the present study to explore individual teachers' lived experiences as told through their stories.

Instead of primarily aiming for generalising findings of teachers' research experiences, I wanted to enter their individual worlds and prioritise their individual values and goals by listening to their particular research life stories and make sense of the processes they have been through. Chase (2011) points out that narrative inquiry "revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (p. 421). The complexities of the process are evident in the lived and told

experiences of members in these two departments, which lends the present study to a narrative orientation.

### ***Narrative Inquiry and the Present Study***

Narrative inquiry is one type of qualitative research and therefore shares the core philosophical roots of "an ontology of multiple realities, a nonobjectivist epistemology and a naturalistic, nonmanipulative methodology" (Duff, 2010, p. 47). Narrative inquiry views human experiences as storied lives, individually and socially (Clandinin et al., 2007). What makes it distinct from other approaches in qualitative research is the assumption underlying it: stories are a "fundamental structure of human experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). In narrative inquiry, "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). In other words, as Bruner (2004) pointed out: "a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 708).

The last decade has witnessed the rise of narrative inquiry as an alternative approach to research in applied linguistics, particularly in teacher learning and teacher professional development. Teacher learning, from a sociocultural perspective, is negotiated and constructed through their experiences in social interaction with other people and particular social contexts, "as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and as members of communities of practice in the schools where they teach" (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 6). To arrive at a profound understanding of teacher learning in a particular social context, it is necessary to collect retrospective and introspective accounts or told stories of their lived experiences as situated actions. Narrative inquiry is a "simultaneous exploration of all three commonplaces" of these situated actions: temporality, sociality and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). By temporality, narrative inquirers try to understand events and people in the temporal continuum of past, present and future. By sociality, both personal conditions and social conditions need to be

taken into consideration. Personal conditions include individual emotions, desires, and moral dispositions of the inquirer and participants. Social conditions refer to the environmental conditions and surrounding forces which constitute the social contexts where the individuals are situated. The relationship between the narrative inquirer and the participants is also crucial in narrative knowledge co-construction. Place refers to "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). The simultaneous exploration of temporality, sociality and place in narrative inquiry provides rich data and enables an understanding of teacher learning experiences, actions, motivations, emotions in a narrative space. In the present study, I take a narrative view of the phenomenon of teacher research, which is "extended over time, shaped by personal and social conditions, and situated, correspondingly, in a multiplicity of places" and therefore, narrative in nature (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 26).

Apart from the fact that narrative inquiry is well-suited as an approach for me to understand teachers' research experiences as lived stories, two other particular reasons have drawn me to narrative inquiry in the present study. First, what is at stake in narrative inquiry is "less a matter of working theories and ideologies and more a question of the place of research in the improvement of practice" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12). By listening to participants' stories of their research experiences, I hope to reconstruct narratives of what it means for teachers to engage in research. The collaborative stories, co-constructed by participants and me, the researcher, are intended to help us better understand "the inner mental worlds" of language teachers and the nature of language teacher research as both a cognitive and social activity. This understanding of the phenomenon will, subsequently, inform and guide policy-makers in framing and introducing policies that enhance teacher research in the long run. Stories are powerful in that they "preserve our memories, prompt our reflections, connect us with our past and present, and assist us to envision our future" (Kramp, 2004, p. 107). By engaging in narrative activities, teachers are assisted in making

their life experiences meaningful, which potentially helps foster personal and professional growth for teachers (Johnson & Golombek, 2011).

Second, narrative inquiry has emancipatory potential in its capacity to give voice to the otherwise voiceless "lives of the ordinary, the marginalised, and the muted" (Langellier, 2001, p. 700). The participants of the present study are a particularly vulnerable group of teachers in higher education, who are experiencing challenges and an unexpected shift of focus on research productivity in universities across China. Narrative inquiry can contribute significantly to the knowledge about this group of people, who are challenged by life changes and adaptation, by inviting them to tell their storied experiences, make sense of them and claim their own identities (Bruner, 1990; Riessman, 2008). In addition, the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry positions participants equally with the researcher rather than as objects for the study. The understanding of teachers' research experiences is approached through joint effort by both participants and me to establish a caring and collaborative relationship in which both participants and I have voices and trust each other. This sense of equality and connectedness developed in the research process set the foundation for their willingness to share their stories with me. Teachers feeling heard by others and seeing themselves as part of the research community are also part of the present narrative inquiry, which has value for both the participants and me as co-researchers. After justifying the adoption of narrative inquiry for the nature and purpose of the present study, I move on to clarify and delimit what narrative means in the study.

### ***Narrative as Both Phenomenon Under Study and Method of Inquiry***

Concepts in narrative vary across disciplines, ranging from life stories and stories of events, to personal narratives constructed in an interview (Riessman, 2002). How narratives are used in research may also be dependent on the research focus across disciplines. In the present study, narrative inquiry is defined as both phenomenon and method of inquiry because they name "the

structured quality of experience to be studied," and "the pattern of inquiry" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Narrative is the phenomenon under study in the present study in that teacher research is a phenomenon that is narrated through lived stories by teachers. That is, these stories lived and told by participants are sources of data for the present study. The cognitive and social nature of narrative inquiry informs the present study of teachers' research experiences within their institutional research communities. Institutions and organisations are represented in the narratives of their members, as are their identities and their relationships with other members in the community (Linde, 2008).

Wenger et al. (2002) note that stories are one of the crucial measures of value creation in a community of practice; they are "the best way to traverse the knowledge system in a way that explains the linkages between community activities, knowledge resources, and performance outcomes" (p. 168). Systematic collection and analysis of stories within the community will enhance the understanding of complex relations in specific contexts. In the process of story collection and analysis in these communities, the participants in my study made meaning out of their stories and reconstructed their knowledge about themselves, other people and the social contexts in which they work. They achieved this by telling about and reflecting on their past and present research experiences as well as their imagined futures as teacher-researchers with regard to other people and the environment where they are situated. Transformation of research beliefs and research practices may take place during the process as benefits of participation in narrative inquiry.

Narrative is also a means of analysis and a way of understanding teachers' research experiences. The inquiry is a narrative process in nature, which creates an imaginary three-dimensional life space defined by a temporal continuum (past–present–future), a personal–social continuum, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Xu & Connelly, 2009). In the present study, teacher research takes place and therefore needs to be seen in temporal flow from the past, through the present and into the future. Participants are essentially understood as interpersonal beings with personal conditions,

such as beliefs about research, motivation for research and self-perception as a teacher-researcher. These personal conditions are in continual interactions with social conditions, including leaders and colleagues in the department, academic resources available, research ethos and collaborations, research policies, and other sociocultural factors and forces. Along with experiences in these interactions, changes take place in personal conditions and social landscapes over time. Apart from the temporal continuum and a personal-social continuum, the places where teacher research experiences unfold are also relevant. Teachers' identities change as they move from classroom to academic conference, from workplace to home, for example. To summarise, understanding this experienced and imagined life space in three interconnected dimensions of time, personal-social and place is essential as a means of narrative analysis in this study.

By adopting narrative as both phenomenon under study and method of inquiry, the present study represents a process of "narrative knowledging", which consists of "making sense of experiences through narrating, analysing narratives, reporting narrative research, and consuming research findings" (Barkhuizen, 2013, p. 4). Different participants in this narrative inquiry community, including participants, me (the researcher), and readers of the findings, make contributions from different perspectives to this knowledge creation process through interactions in the process of living, telling, retelling and reliving. In this sense, the present inquiry is both a fluid cognitive activity and a social activity or a social mediational tool for transformation, embedded in both physical places and imaginary social landscape (Barkhuizen, 2011).

In the following section, I narrate the process in which the two departments as specific places were chosen and the ten participants as protagonists in the inquiry were approached and recruited.

### **Research Site Selection and Participants Recruitment**

Three considerations drove me to choose Department A and Department B as my research sites. First, the focus of my concern is on a vulnerable group of English language teachers. Therefore, I purposefully chose universities where the discipline of English languages and literature is at a

peripheral position compared to other disciplines and where the College English Department is predominantly viewed as a service unit rather than an academic faculty.

Second, though the primary purpose of the present study is not to generalise, I purposefully chose universities that represent top-ranking and average universities. University A, where Department A is affiliated, is one of the top 42 universities, which are selected by the central government of China in the Double World-class Initiatives to develop into research-intensive universities that top the world-class university rankings. It is funded by the central government and supported by more favourable policies and budgetary schemes. On the contrary, University B, where Department B is affiliated, is primarily a teaching-intensive local university. There are no doctoral programmes in any disciplines in University B. However, it is making an effort to transform itself into a research-intensive university so as to be selected for the Double World-class Initiatives. University B is funded by a province located in the northern part of China and is economically less advanced. More differences in research evaluation policies and teacher recruitment will be discussed in the next chapter, which provides a backdrop to understand how the broader social, cultural and economic forces shape the life spaces of the two departments as well as the teachers who work in them.

Third, I have a good personal relationship with the two leaders of the two departments. This enabled me to get easy access to the two departments. When I worked as the coordinator of teacher training programmes, I invited the two leaders and their core teams to share their innovative experiences of English teaching curriculum reforms in the programmes. Since then, we have maintained contact and both of them expressed their support when I decided to suspend my career to pursue PhD study. They shared with me their painful experiences of collecting data in their PhD journey and therefore were willing to help me in any way for my study. In addition, in informal communications, these two leaders display a strong awareness of teacher research and a great passion to encourage teacher research in their departments. This also aroused my interest in how teachers engage in research in the context of strong leadership in the two departments.



After I developed my initial research plan, I contacted the two leaders and sent them Participant Information Sheet (PIS) approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (see Appendix C and Appendix D). With the PIS, the purpose, procedures, benefits and potential risks of the study were communicated to the two leaders, both of whom expressed interest in my study as it would explore the issues they themselves are concerned about. At the same time, they accepted my invitation as leader participants in the present study and signed relevant Consent Forms, which I collected when I first visited the departments.

Jerry, the Associate Dean of Department A, invited me to give a seminar to teachers about my overseas PhD experience and my study. He helped me advertise the seminar to the teachers in the department. At the time of the seminar, ten college English teachers and 12 master's students, including Jerry, participated voluntarily. Taking up this opportunity, I met some teachers in person, including those who would potentially participate in the follow-up interviews. I shared my research learning experiences, explaining what ignited my interest in teachers' research experiences, and why and how I decided on a qualitative research design. At the end of the seminar, the teachers and students in the audience were encouraged to ask me questions about my research. Some teachers questioned the generalizability of my research as there were only two universities and no more than ten participants in my study. In the seminar, I mentioned the prevailing obstacles found in the literature regarding teacher research engagement. These obstacles were widely echoed by the teacher audience. For example, some teachers even complained that more forms of teacher inquiry should have been counted as research in the research policies, instead of focusing only on top journal articles and research grants. The heated discussion with the teachers in the seminar helped assure me of my study's practical value. Even though fewer teachers attended the seminar than I had expected, the interaction during the seminar helped me collect the responses to the narrative frames (one of the data collection instruments, which will be introduced in detail in the next section) distributed to teachers to fill in after my presentation. In addition, the communication in the seminar helped build up an initial research relationship between potential participants and me for the follow-

up interviews since they left their contact information at the end of the frames if they were willing to be interviewed to share their stories with me. Jerry provided me with a list of all college English teachers in the department and introduced basic information about each teacher. Jerry had his first interview with me in his office. Later, he arranged a private office for me to conduct interviews with the teacher participants. However, he was kept uninformed about whom I contacted for further participation in my study. I spent one week in Department A doing the first-round interviews with Jerry, the leader participant, and four teacher participants, who had read through the PIS and signed the consent form before the interview.

In Department B, I was given by Jason, the Dean of Department B, half an hour in a staff meeting to share my overseas PhD experiences and to introduce my study. All the college English teachers were required to attend this staff meeting as their routine task. Again, I took up this opportunity and spent ten minutes sharing my research learning experiences, explaining what inspired me to explore this topic, and why and how I chose this qualitative research design. Around 80 teachers attended the meeting. Unlike the situation in Department A, no questions were asked by the teachers after I gave the presentation though they were encouraged to. I then distributed the narrative frames to all the teachers who were present. Ultimately, only less than 15 teachers filled the frames, which took them around ten minutes. The rest of the teachers put the frame aside and chatted with their neighbours. When they gave me back the blank frames, they complained that the time was too limited, and they were in a hurry to catch the school shuttle. Seemingly, they were giving an excuse for not being willing to do it. After the staff meeting, some teacher participants comforted me by telling me that it was quite common in the department as most of the teachers were not interested in research at all. Jason arranged an office for me to do my research work, which was shared with one of the teacher participants. Jason was also not informed about who the teacher participants were and who had agreed to do the follow-up interviews. I spent one week in Department B doing the first-round of interviews with Jason, the leader participant, and four teacher participants, who had read through the PIS and signed the consent form before the interview. Since I shared the office

with Zoe, one teacher participants, I had the opportunity to observe how she spent time after class on campus.

After collecting the narrative frames, I selected 4 participants from each department with as much variation as possible: (a) their participation in a community of research practice, either as core or peripheral members, (b) their academic background and qualifications, either professors or lecturers, either holding a PhD degree or Master's degree, (c) research productivity, and (d) their teaching experience, either beginning career teachers or teachers with more than ten years teaching experience. In this sense, the selection was purposive. In another sense, the selection was also opportunistic (Creswell & Poth, 2017) in that there were only a few teachers who completed the narrative frame survey, which thus limited my choice of participants. An email was then sent later to those teachers who were not selected for interviews to explain their non-selection for the study. The demographic information of the two leader participants and the eight teacher participants will be presented in the next chapter. The eight teacher participants were not intended to represent all Chinese College English teachers even though as much variety as possible was aimed for regarding their demographic information. They were sampled as particular cases with the potential to enrich our understanding of teachers' research experiences, in their particular workplaces.

After introducing how I approached the research sites and selected the participants for the present study, I now continue to elaborate on the methods and processes I adopted to collect data.

### **Collecting Data: Methods and Procedures**

Recent narrative studies in the field of language teaching and learning have resorted to multiple sources of data to arrive at a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon and to ensure the reliability of the investigation (Benson, 2014, p. 155) or in Bruner's term, "verisimilitude" (1991, p. 4). Traditional sources of data include autobiographical records or reflection, published memoirs, written language learning histories, and narrative interviews. Narrative frames, as a recent innovation in data collection in narrative inquiry, have been increasingly used and proven to be

useful in obtaining a snapshot of a research setting with a large number of participants (Barkhuizen, 2014; Barnard & Viet, 2010; Macalister, 2012; Shelley et al., 2013; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009; Xu, 2014).

The data were collected from five sources: (a) an anonymous narrative frame survey; respondents were given the option of identifying themselves, with contact details, as participants for follow-up interviews and reflective journal writing; (b) three rounds of in-depth interviews (eight college English teachers and two institutional leaders); (c) reflective journals written by eight teacher participants over four months; (d) the websites of the universities and departments, and other relevant public documents such as the participants' published research outputs, research policies and leaders' annual duty report, and (e) accompanying field notes, research memos and informal correspondence with the participants.

### ***Narrative Frame Survey***

Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) introduced narrative frames as a data collection instrument that invites participants to reflect on their particular experiences. It guides them in organising these experiences in narrative form. Barkhuizen (2011) defines a narrative frame as:

a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in skeletal form. The aim is for participants to produce a coherent story by filling in the spaces according to their own experiences and their reflections on these. (p. 402)

Narrative frames are useful to the researcher and the participants. From the participants' perspective, they are supported and guided in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written. From the researcher's perspective, content relevant to the research questions is elicited in narrative form from the responses by the participants, guided by prompts in the frame.

Furthermore, the narrative frames are "useful for entry into a new or unfamiliar research context (regional, social, cultural, educational, etc.)" (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 13).

Bearing the above in mind and with the aim of achieving a general picture of the two departments, I designed the first draft of the narrative frame survey, consisting of 25 statement starters and covering four parts: (a) teachers' past research experiences, including first experiences, and experiences of publication, winning research grants, and presenting at academic conferences; (b) their perception of departmental research culture and their engagement in collective research activities initiated by the department; (c) self-evaluation as a teacher-researcher and future vision of themselves as a teacher-researcher; and (d) demographic information. I invited four college English teachers in Chinese universities to complete the frames as a trial. It took each of them more than 40 minutes to complete the survey although they gave positive feedback on the participation experiences which provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their academic development. To shorten the frame, I deleted sentence starters about their past experiences of publishing, winning research grants and presenting at academic conferences, since at the initial stage of my study I was more concerned about what was happening to them currently and how they were engaged in the departmental research community. I also restructured the frame survey to make it more concise with 17 statement starters (see Appendix E), starting from the study they were doing at the moment, their research motivation and challenges they met and how they dealt with these challenges, then moving on to self-evaluation as a teacher-researcher and visions for their future academic development. Following their personal research experiences, they were prompted to share their experiences of engaging in collective research activities, their perceptions of research culture in the department, and expectations for departmental support. At the end of the survey, there were blank spaces for teachers to add anything they would like to share with me.

I had planned to send the Participant Information Sheets (PIS) with the narrative frames to all the teachers in the two departments through emails and expected anonymous responses from them

with notification about whether they would participate further in three in-depth interviews and four monthly reflective journals. It would take more than 20 minutes for teachers to seriously fill in the narrative frames. Therefore, both of the two leaders advised me to initially collect the narrative frames in person to ensure the quality of the data.

Hence, the narrative frame surveys were distributed to teachers in person at the seminars in the two departments. A total of 22 fully completed narrative frames were collected with 10 from Department A and 12 from Department B. On the day I collected the responses, I converted them into electronic form. To seek the commonalities among these responses, I extracted and placed the same sentence starters from each teacher's written responses in an Excel file. Then, I coded all the responses and categorised them into different themes relating to: (a) motivation for the studies they are doing, (b) challenges in doing research, (c) strategies to improve research competence, (d) types of collective research activities, (e) perceptions of research culture in the department, (f) participation in collective research activities, (g) communication with colleagues regarding research, (h) perceptions of the relationship between teaching and research, and (i) self-evaluation and future visions as a teacher-researcher (See Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Categories and Frequency of Responses to Narrative Frame Survey from Teachers (Department A and Department B)*

Categories	Frequency (n=22)	Examples from the narrative frames
	Motivation for the studies	
Promotion	A (1) B (3)	B11: I do research for academic promotion. I know it's utilitarianism.
Professional development	A (4) B (4)	A10: I do research for continuing professional development as I don't just want to be a teacher practitioner.

Categories	Frequency (n=22)	Examples from the narrative frames
Teaching improvement	A (4) B (3)	A1: I do research to reflect on and improve my teaching practice.
Interest	A (1) B (2)	B7: I do research because I'm interested.
Challenges in doing research		
Weak research competence	A (6) B (9)	B3: lack of theoretical knowledge system and weak in research skills
Time constraints	A (4) B (0)	A5: I don't have enough time as I have to take care of my family.
Teacher research not recognised	A (1) B (0)	A7: Teaching-oriented research is not equally recognised as theoretical research by the academic community
Lack of collaboration	A (1) B (1)	A1: It is hard to find some time when all of us are available, and there are few like-minded colleagues.
Access to academic resources	A (1) B (2)	B6: I have limited access to literature database, particularly in English.
Strategies to improve research competence		
Self-learning	A (8) B (8)	A1: I read the literature again and again.
Seeking help from others	A (4) B (2)	B5: I turned to experts in the field for help.
Types of collective research activities		
Research Forum	A (0) B (9)	B2: research forum
Staff meeting (teaching seminar)	A (2) B (0)	A1: course-based teaching group
Invited lectures	A (7) B (4)	B3: lectures by external experts
Funded in-service education programmes	A (4) B (2)	A2: teaching training programmes
Perceptions of research culture in the department		
Strong research ethos (leader, policy support)	A (6) B (10)	B3: Leaders encourage research engagement. B5: We are open and have trust in each other. A1: All the levels are supportive.
Just so so	A (0) B (1)	B11: I don't feel much support. The university should attach more importance to our discipline and professional development of young teachers.

Categories	Frequency (n=22)	Examples from the narrative frames
Weak research ethos (stressing policies, no leading expert)	A (5) B (0)	A7: There is a lack of leading expert in the department. The research interests of teachers are diverse, and no collective effort is made.  A3: The policies are output-oriented, and we have limited autonomy.
Participation in collective research activities		
Not often (no time, not practical)	A (6) B (2)	B4: It is time-consuming and challenging. And I have little autonomy to decide what I want to do.  A3: The contents are always too broad and meaningless.
Often (opportunity to learn and communicate)	A (4) B (10)	B10: The participation broadens my horizon and enriches my knowledge. It inspires me and helps me identify my research interest.  B3: I don't want to idle away my time. Neither do I want to impact my students negatively due to my lack of ambition.
Communication with colleagues regarding research		
Not often (no time, no shared interest)	A (7) B (6)	B11: Most colleagues are not interested, and they are all quite busy.  A6: Few teachers are like-minded and willing to commit.
Often (for peer encouragement and inspiration)	A (3) B (6)	B7: Mutual encouragement and inspiration.
Perception of the relationship between teaching and research		
Complementary and mutually beneficial	A (10) B (12)	A8: The ideal relationship is mutual enhancement though what I am doing is not related to teaching practice at all.  B6: Research is rooted in teaching and in turn empowers teaching.
Self-evaluation as teacher-researcher		
More qualified in teaching than in research	A (5) B (3)	A3: I'm an excellent teacher but a struggling researcher.
Beginner	A (0) B (7)	B11: I am a green hand in research.



Categories	Frequency (n=22)	Examples from the narrative frames
Committed teacher-researcher	A (5) B (2)	A9: I made an extraordinary commitment to research to learn and grow together with my students.
Future visions		
Gaining PhD qualification	A (1) B (2)	B10: I want to do PhD study.
Enhancing research competence	A (1) B (6)	B3: I will enhance my theoretical knowledge.
Have more outputs	A (3) B (3)	A5: Write and publish more papers.
Team building	A (1) B (0)	A3: I long for leading a research team, with the same passion and being like-minded.
Connecting teaching and research	A (6) B (1)	A7: I will make an effort so that my teaching and research are more integrated.

Although the number of responses was far fewer than I had expected, and it was hard to make any generalised statements, the collected responses I did collect indicated that the narrative frame survey served well its exploratory purpose: introducing these two research sites (Barkhuizen, 2014).

The initial analysis indicated that participants in both departments have research motivation primarily for professional development. All participants are surprisingly unanimous in their belief that teaching and research are complementary and mutually beneficial. However, teachers in Department B appear to be more challenged due to their weak research competence than teachers in Department A. Even though Department A is situated in a research-intensive leading university, a higher percentage of participants in Department A reported negative perceptions of research culture in the department, and less engagement in collective research activities and communication with their colleagues. A higher percentage of participants in Department B reported positive perceptions of research culture and more engagement in collective research activities in the department, predominantly because of the leadership's support and guidance.

Despite the limited number of responses, the preliminary result of the narrative frame surveys prepared me for the follow-up in-depth investigation. As suggested by Barkhuizen (2014), "to reach a fuller understanding of what is being investigated, and to verify one set of findings against another" (p. 22), the preliminary narrative frames should be combined with other methods, such as interviews and reflective journals.

### ***Interviews***

The aim of narrative inquiry is to explore human experiences which are storied and complex. One of the most widespread data collection methods for narrative inquiry is the narrative interview, "an open-ended invitation" (Josselson, 2013, p.31) for participants to talk about their subjective experiences from their perspectives on topics that the researchers are interested in.

For the present study, I adopted semi-structured interviews, which are interviews "with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 6). Given that I am a novice researcher with little interview experience, the pre-set topics in the semi-structured interviews helped frame the interaction between me and the participants while allowing some leeway for me to follow up on whatever topics and issues were deemed important (Brinkmann, 2017). I had trial interviews with two college English teachers. I listened to the interview recordings several times, noting down any issues that I needed to avoid, such as asking too complex or leading questions (Moser & Kalton, 2017). For example, I tended to stick to the pre-set questions and failed to follow up with the participants' thoughts on some topics that were obviously meaningful for them. Also, I found that some of my questions were too general, such as "what do you think of the department's support for teacher research engagement?". The responses I got in most cases were simply "very supportive". In the actual interviews, I tried to frame questions in terms of the participants' personal experiences rather than in general terms.

I had two rounds of interviews with each leader participant ten months' apart. The first interview was done face-to-face, primarily focusing on personal experiences with regard to: (a) their own academic development, that is, how they have developed as teacher-researchers and leaders; and (b) leadership in enhancing teacher research in the department (see Appendix F for the topics covered in the first interview with the leader participants). The second-round interviews with the two leaders were done through a social media tool, WeChat voice talk. They served the purposes of: (a) clarifying and confirming the themes emerging from the analysis of the first-round interviews; (b) tracing the development of events mentioned in the first interviews; and (c) triangulating experiences shared by other teacher participants in the department. Simultaneously, I had three rounds of interviews with each teacher participant within a period of ten months. Before the first interview, I contacted the selected teacher participant individually through the contact information they had provided on the narrative frame. I asked them to suggest the place where we would hold the face-to-face interview, a place where they would feel comfortable, and most of them chose the offices which I used during my visit to the two departments.

The first-round interview with each teacher participant was done face-to-face during my visit to the departments at the beginning of a new semester (March). It primarily focused on their personal experiences regarding: (a) past academic learning experiences, research engagement at the present and future vision as a teacher-researcher; (b) collaboration with colleagues and participation in collective research activities; and (c) their perceptions of institutional support to their research practice (see Appendix G for the topics covered in the first interview with the teacher participants). The questions were designed to invite participants to give descriptions of how they experience their lifeworld, which is "prereflective and pretheorised" (Brinkmann, 2017, p. 580). Before the second-round interviews, I transcribed each participant's first-round interview and constructed a plot outline of the academic life story of each participant. By initially arranging the data elements chronologically and identifying those elements that contributed to where the participant is now as a teacher-researcher, a "temporally patterned whole" for each participant was constructed

(Polkinghorne, 1995). At the same time, initial open coding (Saldaña, 2016) was done with the first-round interview data across the participants. Some categories of data were tentatively created; for example, the impact of research policies and support that was specifically needed in the research process. In a research memo, I noted down all the details that were not clear and also any emergent themes that needed further clarification and elaboration.

The second-round interviews were done with each teacher participant around six months later through a social media tool, WeChat voice talk. The following purposes were accomplished during the interviews: (a) clarifying any unclear details and confirming themes emerging from data analysis of the first-round interviews; (b) elaborating on teachers' reflections in the four monthly reflective journals; and (c) triangulating experiences shared by the leader participant and other teacher participants in the department. The third-round interview was planned for two months after the second-round interview, and aimed to focus on the teacher participants' research activities during the two-month summer break. However, most of the teacher participants did the second interview during and after the summer break, including their research activities during summer break in the interviews. Therefore, the teacher participants and I reached an agreement to do the third-round interviews four months later, at the end of the second semester of the year. The third-round interview was also done with each teacher participant through WeChat voice talk with the following purposes: (a) elaborating on the themes that emerged from the data analysis of both first and second round interviews; (b) tracing and updating their research activities during the previous four months; and (c) triangulating experiences shared by the leader participant and other teacher participants in the department. Since Maisie, one of the teacher participants, gave birth to her son and had parental leave, she did not engage much in any research practice. Therefore, we only had an informal talk about her personal life through email and did not have a third interview. Table 3 summaries basic information about the interview data-collection process in Department A. Table 4 summaries basic information about interview data collection process in Department B.

**Table 3***Basic Information About Interview Data Collection Process in Department A*

Participants	Date	Duration	Transcription (words)
1st Round			
Jerry	17 Mar	02:18:22	21,304
Lucas	14 Mar	01:51:40	22,274
Mia	15 Mar	01:49:35	22,183
Maisie	16 Mar	01:06:02	14,937
Ella	16 Mar	01:15:58	15,991
2nd Round			
Jerry	18 Aug	01:30:22	10,887
Lucas	1 Aug	01:06:16	13,045
Mia	1 Aug	01:15:41	13,025
Maisie	30 Jul	00:43:27	6,720
Ella	10 Aug	01:37:33	13,621
3rd Round			
Lucas	20 Feb 2019	01:03:41	9,909
Mia	25 Jan 2019	01:20:43	9,250
Ella	19 Feb 2019	01:16:13	15,326
Maisie	Not done		

**Table 4***Basic Information About Interview Data Collection Process in Department B*

Participants	Date	Duration	Transcription (words)
1st Round			
Jason	21 Mar	02:12:07	17,669
Sophie	19 Mar	02:13:30	22,177
Zoe	20 Mar	01:48:20	20,545
Genny	21 Mar	00:58:26	12,426
Lucy	20 Mar	01:17:22	14,968
2nd Round			
Jason	24 Jan 2019	01:52:16	17,178
Sophie	28 Aug	01:58:17	24,040
Zoe	8 Aug	03:24:59	16,627
Genny	7 Aug	01:58:04	14,707
Lucy	27 Jul	01:21:01	12,408
3rd Round			
Sophie	28 Feb	02:35:40	28,125
Zoe	31 Jan 2019	02:32:26	20,130
Genny	24 Jan 2019	02:24:54	18,062
Lucy	21 Feb 2019	01:28:06	13,507

The interviews were all conducted in Chinese, which was the participants' preference. The interviews lasted on average between 90-120 minutes. All interviews were recorded simultaneously with two recording devices, and transcribed verbatim. Only the parts included in the thesis were

translated into English by myself. For reason of confidentiality, I did not invite a second person to check my translation. Whereas the translation is by no means perfect, and I have 'cleaned it up' to omit some fillers and false starts, etc., I have tried to make sure that key meanings are conveyed, and that the tone of the original has been reproduced in a way that sounds natural to English native speakers.

During the interviews, I remained aware of the impact I may have produced on the process and outcome of the interviews. The relationship built up and developed between me and the participants defined to what extent they were open to me and what they chose to tell me. Our relationship played a significant role in determining the rigour of the data and also ethical integrity of the study. "A close relationship akin to friendship" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, p. 281) and a sense of belonging to a caring research community were certainly beneficial to both participants and me as a researcher and facilitated the cooperation between us.

The following strategies were employed to help foster a relationship of trust and respect. Before formally starting the first face-to-face interview, I clearly explained to each participant the aim of my study and what they were expected to do. All the benefits, possible risks and how they would be handled were discussed. The participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time. They were also informed about the way confidentiality would be maintained and the way the data of the study would be used. All these steps helped to lay a foundation of mutual respect for the subsequent research process. During the interview, I stayed open to those unexpected or unusual experiences, and let the participants know that their voices were being heard, their experiences understood, and their sharing appreciated. Throughout the one-year period of data collection, I constantly maintained informal communication with all the participants and provided help in relation to their research practice, if required. After drafting their personal academic life stories, I shared them with each participant, inviting their feedback or giving them the chance to delete any content they did not want to be revealed in this thesis. I then revised the story and sent it back again

to get their confirmation. Rather than being a passive respondent to the interview questions, the participants were active and played a participatory role in the interviews. Though each round of interviews was planned to take about one hour, it generally lasted far more than one hour. The second and third-round interviews often started with an informal chat about their personal life, my life in New Zealand, and my study's progress, which gradually and naturally moved to the topic of their research engagement. In the interview, some participants even discussed their child's education and were eager to know about my son's educational experiences in New Zealand. In the latter half of the year, two teacher participants went to the US as visiting scholars. They also shared with me their learning experiences and travel log. I was always pleased to listen to them as I took their willingness to share their personal life with me as a sign of "a close relationship akin to friendship" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, p. 281).

Whereas interviews in the present study provided rich data on teachers' recalled research experiences, it was necessary to complement the interviews with a procedure which does not rely heavily on participants' ability to recall information. One possibility was to invite participants to keep diaries of the events of interest. Between the first and second round interviews, teacher participants were then invited to write four monthly reflective journals (from March to June) to document their most recent research experiences.

### ***Reflective Journals***

Writing reflective journals has been recognised as a strategy to provide professional development for language teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2005). In reflective journals, teachers consciously and carefully document what they do, why they do it and how they do it while reflecting on both their beliefs and actions in their writing. The focus is not only on the "intellectual, cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects of practice, but also the spiritual, moral, and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflection that acknowledge the inner life of teachers" (Farrell, 2017, p.12).



The unfolding of experiences in reflective journals provides teachers with an opportunity to look backwards and make meaning of these experiences but ultimately to move "forward towards both an immediate and more tangible goal, such as getting to work on time and the less tangible and more slippery goal of all experience: growth" (Downey & Clandinin, 2010, p. 384).

All these characteristics and benefits of reflective journals make it an appropriate data collection method for the present study, which aims to explore the teachers' experiences systematically and to bring about benefits for them. The act of writing provides a chance for the participants to stop for a while and think about their experiences in relation to a particular topic. Such reflection may have consequences for their improved research practice in the future. To avoid the burdensome work required for the participants and to ensure data quality, the reflective journals were collected monthly as agreed by the participants.

Reflective journal writing took the form of narrative frames. A narrative frame (see Appendix H for a sample) was sent by email to each participant before the end of each month. The frames helped guide their reflections on topics relevant to the ongoing data collection and analysis, particularly related to their recent research practices. For example, in the reflective journal of March, a participant wrote that a new research project was initiated. Then in April, the narrative frame traced the progress of that research project and any challenges they were confronting. There were spaces for teachers' additional reflection and writing at the end of the frames. Table 5 summaries the length (in words) of reflective journals that teacher participants completed in the two departments.

The length of reflective journals varied across the eight participants. For example, in the last reflective journal of June, Lucas wrote around 6,000 words to share with me a critical turning point of his research and teaching project. Four of the 32 reflective journals were not finally collected since sometimes teachers said they were too busy during that month and would try to catch up with the journal later. I did not push them to finish the journals but tried to compensate for further

exploration in the second-round interviews, which were done after I collected all the reflective journals.

**Table 5**

*Information on Reflective Journals*

Participants	March	April	May	June
Lucas	989	1,883	3,500	5,932
Mia	646	Not written	Not written	709
Maisie	450	229	273	353
Ella	891	739	1,027	1,478
Sophie	513	1,323	520	Not written
Zoe	1,667	2,603	3,829	2,070
Gennya	571	1,220	1,356	551
Lucy	1,839	2,459	1,462	Not written

The significance of reflective journals to the present study lies in three aspects. First, as a data collection tool, the reflective journals, which timely documented the events, actors, conflicts, actions, interactions, emotions and motivations in a storied way, constituted a snapshot of the teachers' ongoing research engagement embedded in their everyday life. Secondly, they encouraged the teachers to become more reflective teachers and potentially promoted positive changes to their professional life. For example, Gennya, one of the teacher participants, wrote at the end of her reflective journal: "I should stick to the writing of reflective journals, even just once in a month. Never stop reflecting, never stop growing" (Gennya-R-M). Thirdly, they helped foster a caring and

trustful relationship between my participants and me, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the data. Lucy documented her feelings while writing reflective journals:

I am so sorry for not having been able to send you the reflective journal of this month earlier. I don't want to be hasty and just do it for the sake of completing a task. For me, every time I write the journal, it is a process of self-summary and self-reflection. I take down the most recent occurrences, and a long time after when I come back to them, they are all cherished memories. And when I think that all my whining will be sincerely treated and heard by you, I always feel a sense of warmth. (Lucy-R-A)

### ***Documents***

Institutional activities and decisions are usually informed and structured on a daily and long-term basis by public and official documents, such as teacher profiles, curriculum statements, professional promotion policies, and so on. Consequently, public and official documents, "the sedimentations of social practices" (May, 2001, p. 176), were collected and analysed when they were accessible. These documents helped to contextualise the data elicited from other methods.

Public documents related to teachers' research practice were collected on official websites of the universities and departments, such as tenure promotion guidelines and research funding criteria. Other relevant information was also collected after I entered the research field, for example, the participants' research records, advertisements of collective research activities, and annual reports of teachers' research outputs of the two departments.

The analysis was not confined to the content. What was also taken into account included the people involved in their production, the purposes they were produced for, the process of production, and even the social circumstances that might have influenced their production (Flick, 2014).

### ***Fieldnotes, Research Memos, and Informal Correspondences with the Participants***

Detailed fieldnotes were written from the moment I first contacted the two leaders to request a research visit. The notes documented my observations, understanding, and feelings throughout the data collection process, including the seminars, interviews, and any informal conversations with my participants. Meanwhile, throughout the whole research process, I maintained research memos concerning three aspects (Creswell & Poth, 2017): (a) segment memos on the particular phrases in the data; (b) document memos about an individual case or ideas evolving from a review across different cases; and (c) project memos, including how one concept was framed into the project, how the research questions were formulated and revised, how the choices of data collection and analysis methods were made and adapted, how the participants were approached and selected, and how the data were analysed. Apart from fieldnotes and research memos, all informal correspondence with participants was collected and stored, including emails and conversation logs through WeChat. Whereas public documents, fieldnotes, research memos and informal correspondence with participants are not primary sources of data in the present study, they served their functions well to contribute to understanding the wholeness of the storied settings and participants in the study. It is through field notes and research memos that the concurrent data collection and analysis was more easily achieved.

All the Word documents of the responses to narrative frame surveys, interview transcriptions, reflective journals, and research records were organised into a digital file for each individual participant. Before I describe the stage of analysis, it is necessary to recap the research aim of the present study and the initial research questions that guided data analysis and were accordingly refined throughout the data analysis process.

The research aim of the present study is to examine teachers' research experiences in their institutional contexts, and particularly to address the following initial research questions:

- 1) How do teachers and leaders perceive teacher research practices within their (institutional research community of practice (IRCoP)?
- 2) How do teachers and leaders participate in their IRCoP?
- 3) What is the impact of participation in IRCoP on both their research and their IRCoP?

### **Analysing Data: Methods and Procedures**

As elaborated above, narrative in the present study is both a method and a phenomenon.

Consequently, narrative inquiry in the study moves between both paradigmatic-types and narrative-types of analysis, a distinction made by Polkinghorne (1995). This distinction derived from two modes of thought designated by Bruner (1986): paradigmatic, which "employs categorisation or conceptualisation" (p. 12) to form a categorical system of description and explanation; and narrative, which is more concerned about particular human experiences and conditions and configures elements into a "believable" story of meaning-making in relation to both time and place. Thus, paradigmatic-type analysis, or "analysis of narrative" (Polkinghorne, 1995), is the conventional thematic analysis which searches for consistency and commonalities within narratives or across different sources of narratives, develops categories of themes, and identifies possible connections and patterns among them. Narrative-type analysis, or "narrative analysis" (Polkinghorne, 1995), turns elements of events, characters, intentions, beliefs, emotions and settings from the data set into a story as a unified whole. Whereas these two types of analysis operate differently and serve different purposes, they are not mutually exclusive but can constitute a unit together when adopted in research as complementary to each other (Bleakley, 2005; Sharp et al., 2018).

The aim of the present study is to understand the learning and research experiences of the EFL teachers and how they are constrained or supported regarding their research engagement by their immediate environment of the workplace. While narrative analysis is more concerned about particular individual storied research life, the thematic analysis focuses more on common and

contrasting themes across particular individual cases. Therefore, the aim can be better achieved when combining narrative analysis and thematic analysis. In the present study, both forms of analysis were considered throughout the analysis process despite *starting with narrative analysis* in the form of early open coding and labelling, even identifying themes. The primitive outcome of the analysis of narrative was noted down for further exploration in the systematic analysis of narrative. For the convenience of explanation, the procedures of narrative analysis and analysis of narrative are described separately next.

### ***Narrative Cognition and Narrative Analysis***

The analysis of the present study was informed and guided by the narrative inquiry commonplaces of temporality, space and sociality (Clandinin et al., 2007) and seven criteria for judging a life history stressed by Polkinghore (1995) and first proposed by Dollard (1935). These criteria include (Sharp et al., 2018, p. 11):

- (a) Descriptions are included of the cultural and social context of the story.
- (b) Information is provided about the subject of the story (the research participant), for example, their age, developmental stage, and other information relevant to the aims of the research.
- (c) Explanations are included of the relationships between the participant and other significant people in their life.
- (d) The story concentrates on the goals, choices, interests, plans, purposes, and actions of the participant, on their meanings, and their vision of the world.
- (e) Recognition is given to historical experiences and events that have influenced the participant's life story.
- (f) The story is bound by time; it has a beginning, middle, and end.

(g) The narrative offers a meaningful explanation of the participant's experiences and actions, drawing together separate data elements in a credible and understandable way.

In the first stage, narrative analysis was based primarily on the data sources of the narrative frame survey, interview transcripts, observations, and informal interactions with me. I first identified the current state of the participant as a teacher-researcher or a leader. For example, one of the participants described herself as "an excellent teacher but a struggling researcher".

Then I searched for parts of data that contributed to their current state. I identified key elements of the events or happenings with the three narrative inquiry commonplaces: temporality, place and sociality. These events or happenings are what Barkhuizen (2016b) calls "short stories", which can be analysed by integrating both an analysis of content and contexts. In relation to content, three dimensions of narrative are interconnected and analysed: "who, or the characters in the story, their relationships and their positions vis-à-vis each other; where, or the places and sequences of places in which the story action takes place; and when, or the time in which the action unfolds, past, present and future" (Barkhuizen, 2016a, p. 36). In relation to context, three interrelated levels of story are analysed. The first level of *story* (all small letters) is the intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts of teachers' lives, including their cognitive knowledge, emotions, and social interactions within their immediate contexts, for example, in a collaborative research project with their colleagues. The second level of *Story* (with a capital S) includes teachers' interactions with institutions or other communities in which they participate as members, and the affordances or constraints evident in these sociocultural institutions and communities. The last level, *STORY* (in capital letters), refers to a wider, macro-scale that includes socio-political and ideological structures. Examples are national education policies, belief systems and cultural values of the society (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). These three contextual scales are not distinct but interconnected. The narrative space created by the interconnecting content dimensions and the three scales of context enables a short-story analysis and an all-around examination and deeper understanding of these events or happenings. Although

my approach to short story analysis is not exactly as prescribed by Barkhuizen (2016a), I found short story analysis useful in guiding my analysis of the events and characters in each participant's narratives. I arranged these short stories together to produce an academic life story for each participant.

Finally, these events or happenings and how the participants interpreted them were arranged chronologically, and connections were explicitly revealed with my interpretation. Direct quotes from the participant were included in each participant's academic life story to ensure the story both participants and I constructed were "grounded in data and authentic in tone" (Sharp et al., 2018, p. 12). As a result, a narrative was constructed in which gathered data elements were refracted and configured into a trajectory of individuals' academic development and a coherent explanation of the outcome, for example, "an excellent teacher but a struggling researcher". These academic life stories are not intended to mirror participants' life as it "actually" occurred, but demonstrate knowledge co-constructed from interactions between participants and me (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The process of developing these academic life stories was iterative and recursive. I moved forward and backward between past, present and future, outward and inward in relation to the social interactions and inner worlds, as well as in relation to the three levels of contexts (Clandinin et al., 2007). Meanwhile, I moved back and forth between the data set and the emerging story, which were continuously tested against the participant's data to see if there were any contradicting and unexpected actions (Polkinghorne, 1995). The refinement was also done after the participants checked their stories and provided feedback, which often added new meaning to the story. For example, one of the participants evaluated herself as a passionate and active teacher-researcher. However, she stressed in her feedback that at that particular moment she did not have any motivation to do more studies as she could not recover from her unsuccessful tenure promotion application due to her lack of qualified research products.



### ***Paradigmatic Cognition and Analysis of Narratives***

The second stage of data analysis is 'analysis of narratives', which in the present study adopts the method of thematic analysis of data collected primarily from interview transcriptions, reflective journals, narrative frame survey and public documents. Themes, as viewed by Braun et al. (2018), reflect "a *pattern* of shared meaning, organised around a core concept or idea" (p. 3). Themes are often abstract ideas that capture the essential and common meaning of smaller units (codes) across different cases and different data sources. Hence, thematic analysis is a method of systematically identifying and organising patterns of shared meaning among themes. It aims to present a collective image of life by making sense of meaningful and significant commonalities in individual experiences. What is worth noting is that the "keyness" of a theme is not necessarily associated with numbers of codes it may cover but is dependent on whether it encapsulates something significant to address the research questions. I found the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012) to be a useful scaffold to conduct the analysis. Though the process of analysis was inductive and exploratory in nature, it was complemented by a deductive approach as it drew on my pre-existing theoretical knowledge of the topic and therefore largely moulded by my subjectivity and reflexivity. The software of Nvivo was used to help me organise the data in a more efficient way.

The six phases are self-explanatory: familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report. First, I familiarised myself with the data, which was done alongside 'narrative analysis'. I immersed myself in the data by listening to the interview recordings repeatedly and reading and rereading the responses to the narrative frame surveys, interview transcriptions, and the reflective journals. As I listened and read the data I took notes in a research memo about items that I was particularly interested in. I noted down questions to be addressed later, such as, what does the participant think of this experience, why do they think this way, what does this experience mean to their research

life? These notes helped me in the later phases as "memory aids and triggers for coding an analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61).

Then initial codes were generated and labelled to the segment of data which was potentially relevant to the research questions. Wherever possible, I attuned myself to words and phrases that featured participants' voices, such as clever or ironic phrases, similes and metaphors. Hence, most codes were participant-inspired and a few were generated by myself or were terms borrowed from my pre-knowledge of relevant theories (Saldaña, 2016). For example, several participants used the metaphor of orchard and the word "nurturing" to describe their perception of ideal support from the institutions. The metaphor and the word indicate that teachers need to be supported with various kinds of resources, just as water and nutrients for plants to achieve a high level of productivity. So I retained the word "nurturing" to capture the meaning of support from the departments. While I reread the textual data, I coded both large chunks of data, such as a recounted event, and small chunks of data, such as a sentence. However, I paid special attention to the texts associated with these items I coded and put the items together with the texts where they were embedded in the Nvivo coding system. The contextual information helped me with a contextualised understanding in the later phases of reviewing the codes and themes. Codes were constantly reviewed and refined to match the segments of data and to capture the essence of their meaning during the process. Although I focused on coding in the second stage, the deep and thorough understanding of each participant and the contextual information of these codes paved the way for my systematic coding and avoided the risk of decontextualised understanding of these codes.

After all the segments in the data set were coded, I began to shift these codes into themes, which represented patterns across the codes. This process was an active process involving my subjectivity and reflexivity. I reviewed the coded data and identified the commonalities or contrast between codes. My first interview with each participant, for example, was guided by some familiar topics, such as their experiences of academic development, challenges involved and strategies to cope with

them, collaborative experiences with colleagues, and participative experiences in collective research activities. In coding the first interviews, I tried to discover the similarities in these experiences across different participants despite some particularities within each of them. The data that shared the same meaning were clustered together under a subtheme or a theme. For example, the codes, such as "academic promotion", "secure the job", "self-interest", "improving teaching" were first clustered under the theme of motivation for research. Then they were collapsed into two subthemes: controlled research motivation and autonomous motivation, which were informed by and in turn supported the conceptual framework of self-determination theory. In this way, the deductive coding and inductive coding operated concurrently (See Appendix I for examples of categories and themes in the coding exercise).

The process of continuous clustering and collapsing of codes finally produced a list of themes, which again was reviewed against the coded data to see if themes captured the essence of the clustered data and if they could provide some focused insights to the research questions. I wrote a short paragraph about each theme, trying to sum up its essence. As I continued to write, revisions were made by renaming some themes or discarding those that were relevant but not significant enough to directly address research questions, such as prejudice against qualitative research by the academic community and the importance of social networks in publishing and winning research grants. Another example of remerging themes is the theme of tensions as identified in the analysis. For instance, when participants talked about their motivation for research, they tended to provide a list of various motivations, which worked together to motivate them in research practice. Instead of simply listing, they also stressed the tensions and discrepancy between these motivations, such as external pressure and internal motive, which indicated an important conflict that formulates many climaxes in the narrated accounts by participants. Therefore, instead of just generating *motivations* as a theme, I used the phrase *controlled motivation vs. autonomous motivation* to capture the essence of the theme.

While reviewing these themes, I also selected the quotes or extract of data that would be included in the thesis to illustrate the relevant themes. I wrote an analytical narrative for each of the extracts, encompassing what the extract was about, why it happened or what it meant to the participant. The process of writing enabled me to develop a deep understanding of the extracts and how they contributed to the essence of the theme they were clustered into. Subsequently, connections among these themes were identified, which led to a higher level of categorisation, the outcome being larger units of abstraction. For instance, the following contrasting situations were predominantly reported as challenges in the teachers' research engagement and their participation in collective research activities: participants' weak research competence and the lack of resources to enhance their research competence, controlled motivation and autonomous motivation, participants' desire for collegial collaboration and isolated work patterns, and the conflicting social identities participants intended to construct and which were imposed upon them. Hence, these situations were grouped into categories of tensions.

The collection of constructed categories with inherently connected themes fabricate a coherent whole to address the research focus of participants' research life in the context of their workplaces. Meanwhile, the initially disparate narrated accounts were brought into life for being situated and embedded in a big story about the institutions and in turn made the story convincing and persuasive. In the process of thematic analysis, I also moved forward and backwards between the themes and each participant's academic life story to check if the themes were meaningful, if happenings and actions in the academic life story were coherently (re)told and if their interpretation was well justified and theoretically grounded.

### ***Complementary Use of Narrative and Paradigmatic Approaches***

As illustrated in the two stages of data analysis above, the combination of narrative analysis and thematic analysis is iterative in nature. Narrative analysis which focuses on individual teacher's research experiences provides a foundation for the development of the thematic analysis from the

"superficial meaning" in the first order of open coding to a more interpretive and conceptualised level of coding. In turn, the findings of inherently interconnected themes from the thematic analysis offer a broad overview and overarching social landscape in which the particular teacher is situated. The integration of narrative analysis and thematic analysis (analysis of narrative) allows a lens in order to achieve an understanding of both particularity within cases and commonality across cases. Table 6 summarises the overall process of analysis.

The data analysis resulted in three prominent themes: tensions in teacher research engagement, initiatives intended to relieve these tensions, and the role of leadership. The findings extended my initial research focus on the role of leadership. Therefore, I refined my initial research questions into the final research questions as follows:

- 1) What central tensions are perceived by EFL teachers in their research experiences?
- 2) What collective initiatives are undertaken in the two departments to relieve the tensions and enhance teacher research practice and what are their impacts on teachers regarding their research life?
- 3) What are the roles of the department leaders and the challenges they are confronted with?

**Table 6**

*The Overall Process of Data Analysis*

	<b>Narrative analysis (narrative reasoning)</b>	<b>Thematic analysis (paradigmatic reasoning)</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	To produce knowledge of connectedness among experiences of each participant and to reflect the unique trajectory of their academic life course situated in different layers of contexts.	To produce knowledge of key concepts and relational networks of concepts through a theoretical lens.

	<b>Narrative analysis (narrative reasoning)</b>	<b>Thematic analysis (paradigmatic reasoning)</b>
<b>Dominant source of data</b>	Narrative frame, interview transcripts, observations, informal interactions with the researcher.	Interview transcripts, reflective journals, public documents.
<b>Analytical procedures</b>	<p>1 Pinning down the current state of the participant as a teacher-researcher or a leader;</p> <p>2 Searching for parts of data that contribute to the current state;</p> <p>3 Identifying key elements of the events with the scaffolding of narrative inquiry commonplaces: temporality, place and sociality;</p> <p>4 Restorying in a coherent way, refracting the trajectory of the academic development of individuals.</p>	<p>1 Familiarising research contexts;</p> <p>2 Labelling codes considering "what is happening" and "what it means to the narrator";</p> <p>3 Constructing themes by searching for common attributes among codes and categorising them into potential themes;</p> <p>4 Reviewing potential themes;</p> <p>5 Defining and naming themes;</p> <p>6 Identifying relationships among themes and constructed categories.</p>
<b>Results of analysis</b>	A collection of storied vignettes of teachers' academic experiences: Ten stand-alone academic life stories.	Three prominent themes in teachers' research experiences in institutional contexts.

## **Evaluating the Inquiry and Research Ethics**

As different research paradigms make various claims about "reality" and knowledge, a range of criteria for what is recognised as sound knowledge is applied across different paradigms. Similarly, there are multiple perspectives on the standards or criteria to be used to judge the quality of a qualitative study (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Schwandt, 2015). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria more appropriate and more logical to naturalistic paradigms than to quantitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility is

associated with the truth value of research, that is, how accurately the findings or research reports represent participants' subjective reality. Dependability refers to how one can ensure that findings of an inquiry are stable over time across different researchers following the same research procedure in a similar context. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry are relevant to other sites. The meaning and understanding represented in the research report should be able to initiate resonance in its readers in other contexts. Confirmability is associated with the degree to which the researcher's bias or intervention of the researcher influences the findings of an inquiry. To satisfy the above criteria and ensure the quality of the present study, I adopted the following strategies and procedures based on my chosen research paradigm.

### ***Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observations***

Fetterman (2010) argues that "working with people day in and day out for long periods of time is what gives ethnographic research its validity and vitality" (p. 39). I stayed in each of the departments for one week and had opportunities to observe teachers' day-to-day teaching and research practice on campus. The data collection lasted almost one year. I kept close contact with all the participants through face-to-face interviews, emails, and informal chatting via social media tools. This prolonged engagement and my identity as an outsider of the institution helped develop a relationship of trust between me and the participants, encouraging them to be more open to unveil information that is significant to the topic of my inquiry, as one of the participants indicated in the last round interview:

Sometimes, I chose my colleagues as my participants. But the relationship between me and them is quite different from that between you and me. You see, even though we do not meet each other frequently, we have an intimate relationship. ... I have nothing to worry about, for example, if you would gossip with my colleagues as you don't have contact with them. I am completely open to you. (Sophie-I-3)

Continuous follow-up of their research practice during the one year allowed me the opportunity to identify and trace those pertinent elements in their research practice and finally gain a thorough and holistic understanding of the two institutional research communities of practice.

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation refers to cross verifying the findings and providing corroborating evidence for them (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The methods of triangulation used in the present study include having multiple data sources (i.e., two leader participants and eight teacher participants; documents) and multiple data collection methods (i.e., narrative frame survey, interviews, reflective journals). Information about the same topics, such as participation in collective research activities, were collected from both the leaders and the four participants within one department. Consequently, multiple perspectives were heard, and different subjective "realities" were integrated and negotiated to arrive at a more convincing stored "reality". The data collection methods in the present study include narrative frame surveys, multiple interviews with the participants, reflective journals, public documents, research memos and fieldnotes. What was written as a response to the narrative frame surveys and reflective journals were consistently checked and compared with what was found in the interviews, what was read in the documents, and what was noted in the fieldnotes. Triangulation helps enhance the trustworthiness of the data.

### ***Respondent Checking***

Lincoln and Guba (1985) take member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314) in a study. Only three participants were sent their interview transcriptions to check for accuracy. The others did not wish to see them due to their busy schedule. However, the participants' academic life stories with my interpretation embedded in them were shared with the participants to check for accuracy. The participants all confirmed the accuracy of the content and my interpretations, with only a few revisions on details of information necessary. This respondent checking process ensured the accuracy of the account, ruled out my bias and misunderstanding, and



generated a better understanding of the situation based on the participants' feedback and comments. Furthermore, through inviting the participants to revisit their told experiences and comment on my interpretations, participants were prompted to reflect on their beliefs about research and their research practice, as illustrated by one of participants' feedback in her email:

I carefully read my academic story. Every word and every sentence bring me back to the time I've gone through. This is amazing. It has been so long ago but the story makes it still vivid. I don't think there's anything I need to add or correct. The representation is accurate and faithful. The expressions are precise. I am deeply touched for being heard attentively and documented with warmth.

### ***Thick Description***

"Thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83) of the participants, the contexts they live in and the themes categorised in an inquiry. In the present study, information about participants, the two departments and the broader sociocultural environment, was collected from multiple data sources and integrated to generate a detailed and comprehensive account. The first-stage narrative analysis integrated both content and context and explored in detail the told experiences of each participant. The themes analysed and categorised at all levels, and data displayed with rich raw data as evidence, are clearly illustrated as the findings in the next chapter. All this has opened up the possibility for readers to interpret the findings according to their own research practices and to potentially transfer them to their own contexts. The aim of the study was also achieved by attempting to understand the "intricate ways in which individual lives interact with social and structural forces" (Seidman, 2013, p. 55).

Thick description encompasses the detailed documentation of systematic research procedures. In the above content of this chapter, I have provided a comprehensive account of every step of the research process, such as how the research questions were initially formulated and how they evolved, how I approached research sites and selected the participants, how I collected data from

different participants and different sources, how I managed and analysed the data set through complementary use of both narrative analysis and analysis of narratives, and how the codes were developed and themes generated and grouped into categories. The detailed documentation of systematic research procedures makes it possible for different researchers to follow similar research procedures in similar contexts and thus meet the criteria of dependability.

### ***Audit Trail***

Clear and detailed documentation of all the research activities and decision-making provides consumers of any research reports an opportunity to "examine both the process and product of the inquiry, and determine the trustworthiness of the findings" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). In the present study, a research log and fieldnotes were used to record how the choice of data collection and analysis was made, how the data were collected, how the data were categorised and connected, how the interpretations were made, how the report was written up, and how my subjectivity might have impacted the findings and my interpretation in the study. As far as possible, I have documented details of this audit trail throughout the thesis, and particularly in this chapter.

### ***Researcher's Reflexivity***

Since a qualitative orientation embraces researcher subjectivity as a resource (Braun et al., 2018), I constantly reminded myself how the social, cultural, and historical factors shaped my interpretation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I included commentary on my role, and my position in the report, stating my personal background associated with the research contexts, and my assumptions and beliefs about the participants and the research topic. I hope my reflexivity throughout the inquiry and the explicit acknowledgement of my subjectivity and my status and position in the study helps readers better understand the co-constructed narrative knowledging in my account.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I first justified qualitative research and narrative inquiry as the research paradigm and methodology for the present study. Then I explained the methods I adopted to collect and analyse data. I also reported in detail the procedures followed in which I collected, analysed and organised data, co-constructed with ten participants their academic life stories highlighting the uniqueness of themselves as individuals, and produced a coherent system of categories and themes revealing the commonalities across individuals. I concluded the chapter by articulating the strategies I adopted to ensure the rigour, trustworthiness and transferability of the present study. In the next chapter, the big stories of the two departments and ten academic life stories of the participants are presented as part of the findings of the study.

## CHAPTER 4: THE TWO DEPARTMENTS AND THE TEN PARTICIPANTS

### Introduction

This chapter introduces the two departments as workplace contexts, the two leaders, and the eight teachers who not only took part in but made a great contribution to the present study. I begin with a short introduction to each department based on the data sources of public documents, official websites, the interview transcripts of the participants, as well as field observations and accompanying fieldnotes of my visits to the two departments. I then present each participant with their academic life stories retold and reconstructed from their narrative frames, interview transcripts, and reflective journals.

### Department A

Department A is under the direct management of School A, which is one of 23 academic schools in University A. The university has an enrolment of around 40,000 students with 2,600 full-time teachers. As a national leading research-intensive university located in the western part of China, University A is famous for its nuclear disciplines of electronic and information science and technology. As an elite public university, it is included in the Chinese Ministry of Education Double First-Class University (Class A) Initiative and therefore receives substantial financial resources from the government. With the overall vision of the construction of World First Class University, the university is striving to advance its rank in national discipline appraisal as well as in discipline ranking against the Essential Science Indicators (ESI) by producing more highly cited papers and recruiting highly cited researchers. These efforts focus mainly on five scientific disciplines, such as electronic science and technology, information communication and engineering, computer science and technology, and so on. The mission and target of the Construction of Double First-Class university and disciplines is assigned to each school across the university, which will

be predominantly appraised by their key research performance indicators every year. With a strategy of talent-based development, the university adopts and initiates various policies and schemes for talent training, recruitment, and evaluation so as to enhance the teaching and research expertise of teachers, which include abstracting and recruiting high-level talents, scaffolding young in-service teachers in their academic development, and rewarding outstanding research performance. Changes have also taken place in recruitment and employment policies in the past decade. The threshold for being recruited as a full-time teacher has been raised from holding a Master's degree to a PhD degree. Newly recruited teachers are required to sign a contract with the university which specifies requirements regarding teaching performance and research output that they are expected to achieve within 3 or 5 years. They will be relocated or even dismissed if they cannot meet the requirements. This is commonly called "to promote or perish" policy, which is similar to "publish or perish". All these changes spark feelings of insecurity among the in-service teachers even though they hold permanent positions and are not directly influenced by these changes. In University A, to encourage diversity of talents in teaching and research, three teacher pathways for professional progression and promotion were proposed in 2018. Pathway One (R&T Faculty) is the pathway for teachers whose duty covers both research and teaching. Pathway Two (R Faculty) is the pathway for teachers whose main duty and responsibility is research. Pathway Three (T Faculty) is the pathway for teachers whose roles and responsibilities focus primarily on essential teaching, but with some involvement in pedagogical research, to fulfil the educational mission of the university. The teacher recruitment and reward systems in each school need to be in alignment with those of the university.

While being in a peripheral position compared to other disciplines, the disciplines of liberal arts and humanities, taught in School A in University A, are expected to focus primarily on liberal education and to provide foundation courses to students in all other disciplines. School A is composed of several departments, including the Department of Teaching English to English-majors (TEM) and the Department of College English Teaching, together with five research centres in the School, covering

the fields of theoretical linguistics, foreign literature, translation, and cross-cultural communication, foreign language education, and cognitive-neurolinguistics. It has established undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in the discipline of foreign languages and literature. The basic demographic information of School A and Department A is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Demographic Information of School A and Department A*

	School A	Department A
Numbers of full-time teachers	105	57
Percent of PhD holders	43%	12%
Numbers of Professors & Associate Professors	56	30
Percentage of Female teachers		72%

While the School has been highly recognised by the University for its contribution to international exchange affairs and for providing English education to all non-English major students in other schools, it is largely overshadowed by other schools in terms of research development, research excellence, and academic influence at home and abroad. In the past few years, the School's applications for first grade doctoral programme of foreign languages and literature have all been rejected due to a lack of highly-qualified teachers and limited research outputs. Taking the research performance of Department A in 2018 as an example, the research outputs recognised by the university include 15 journal articles (2 in high-impact journals and most being educational research) and 3 university-funded research grants (based on teaching and assessment practice). These research outputs were mainly contributed by only 15% of the teachers in the department. As for the three pathways for academic development, only 10 out of 57 teachers chose the R&T pathway and all the rest chose the T pathway, which means they are expected to undertake more teaching and much less research.

To realize the vision and motivate teachers' engagement in research, the School has designed specific plans for an excellent result in its discipline evaluation carried out by the Ministry of Education and a successful application for a first grade doctoral programme of foreign languages and literature, which are signposts of research advancement of the discipline. The plans include teacher reward systems, key performance indicators in the annual evaluation of the teachers categorised in different streams, evaluation policies on research performance, sabbatical leave, and so on. Key professors are nominated to lead the research teams in five sub-disciplines respectively, and they are primarily responsible for the research output of the team they are leading. While being provided substantial financial support, the number of publications and research grants is specified in the contract with the key professors and they are evaluated against the achievements of these targets. The criteria for evaluation of research achievement are negotiated and set up by the key teachers and Department leader. Research achievement includes research grants, teaching or research achievement awards, research articles, talents recognised by talent pools, the writing of academic monographs, textbooks, and so on. Various research achievements are converted into numerical values by being ranked and assigned value points according to their prestige levels; for example, research grants awarded by the University (1 point), provinces (10 points), the Ministry of Education (15 points), and the nation (30 points). The journals are ranked as A (20 points for SCI/JCR Q1, some SSCI/ A&HCI journals designated by the School), B (15 points for SCI/JCR Q2, some SSCI/ A&HCI/CSSCI journals designated by the School), C (10 or less for CSSCI journals designated by the School). The more prestigious the journals and the higher level the research grants, the more points and the more rewards the teachers will get. Consequently, the annual evaluation of research performance is primarily based on the sum of the points. The incentive policies specify the conditions for winning financial reward. There is also a policy on rewarding or cancelling annual bonuses based on the individual teacher's accomplishment of the research output requirements. Those who fail to meet the requirements in terms of numbers of publications and research grants will be deprived of an annual bonus no matter how dedicated they are to teaching work. The

policy was implemented for the first time in the annual teacher evaluation at the end of 2017, right before I conducted my research in Department A. Demographic information of the five participants in Department A is shown in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Demographic Information of Five Participants in Department A*

Participant	Academic title	Gender	Qualification	Years of teaching
Jerry	Professor	M	PhD	11-20
Ella	Associate Professor	F	MA	11-20
Lucas	Lecturer	M	MA	5-10
Mia	Associate Professor	F	MA	11-20
Maisie	Associate Professor	F	PhD	5-10

The following are the academic life stories of each participant in Department A. All quotes are taken from the interviews with the participants, unless otherwise indicated.

***Jerry***

I came to know Jerry ten years before the study began when I was working as a coordinator responsible for organising nation-wide, in-service EFL teacher development programmes in China. He showed great passion for research and had been a frequent participant in our programmes in the early stages of his career. He was then promoted to be Associate Dean in charge of the College English Teaching Department at University A and responsible for promoting teachers' research productivity. Meanwhile, he devoted himself to an English teaching reform project based on MOOCs and flipped classrooms, which has been highly recognised by the Ministry of Education and widely followed by many other universities around China. He co-authored with his colleagues and published several articles in some refereed journals. It was all his professional achievements and his great concern about the role of research in teachers' continuing professional



development that attracted my attention and interest. In the two interviews and numerous informal conversations, Jerry told me about his academic journey and his work to cultivate a facilitative institutional environment for teachers.

Jerry, in his 40s now, obtained his MA in University A in 2004 and was recruited afterwards as a full-time English teacher in School A. He was nominated to work temporarily in the Ministry of Education from 2005 to 2006. His working experience in the Ministry of Education made him vaguely aware that engagement in research was “an obligatory part of a university teacher’s professional life”. Then he came back to University A and worked as an English teacher. He started his academic career by independently doing a teaching-related research project funded by the university. However, his “weak research competence became a hindrance” when he endeavoured to pursue his academic life. To enhance his research knowledge and skills Jerry began to seek any affordances within the university and beyond. By participating in several nation-wide, in-service teacher training programmes, and thus engaging in collaborative learning with experts in the field and many young teachers from other universities, Jerry enhanced his research knowledge and skills including the ability to read literature critically. More importantly, these learning experiences “inspired great confidence and passion” for him to start doing research.

Returning to his workplace, with a greater research awareness and a higher intrinsic motivation, Jerry started to improve his teaching quality through his systematic inquiry into problems arising from his teaching practice. Jerry “began reading literature extensively, studying others’ research in quality journals and applying research skills” in his own research projects. However, he failed to produce any research output as prescribed in the research evaluation policy by the university, such as publications in the CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index), even though he was acknowledged and awarded “Excellent Teacher” by the university in 2009.

Jerry felt “quite depressed and gloomy” before he started his PhD journey in 2010. He chose cognitive and neurolinguistics as his PhD research topic. This is a promising research field in

China and there is a Key Laboratory for Neuro-Information of Ministry of Education in University A, so he could take full advantage of all resources there. The typical PhD education model in the discipline of science was that all PhD candidates “worked closely together in one lab”, though each of them had their own research topic. The new members learned to do research by “first working as participants and then imitating peer experts”. This was again “another academic community” that Jerry penetrated, and it was at that stage that he had developed a strong awareness of international publication. He clearly remembered that his PhD supervisor had repeatedly stressed the importance of reading international leading peer-reviewed journals and getting published in those quality journals as they were “the proof of one’s research competence”, which meant one had been acknowledged as a member of the research community. Having been enlightened by the supervisor, Jerry began to write articles which targeted SCI (Scientific Citation Index-Journal Citation Reports) journals. With great effort in academic writing and acquainting himself with the routines for publication, Jerry subsequently published three research papers in SCI-Q1 and Q2 journals (the top 25% and 50% of its subject category). Jerry remarked on the publishing experience that “it enabled me to stand on a higher platform”. Again, this boosted his confidence in academic research.

Apart from his activity in pure scientific research in the areas of cognitive and neurolinguistics, Jerry, as a teacher-researcher, never stopped his engagement in educational research, which was rooted in his own English teaching practice. He believed that “intrinsic motivation is a primary contributor to the cultivation of research literacy as well as a sustained academic development”. These beliefs are rooted in his educational research and publishing experiences. The first CSSCI publication took Jerry four years of work. Nevertheless, it gave him great confidence and made him realize the value of doing educational research, which in turn spurred Jerry to be engaged in further educational research. He attributed his publishing success to the improvement of his research competence, which was developed and achieved by sustained effort and commitment in reading and doing research throughout his professional life.

Another source of “genuine happiness” for Jerry is sharing research ideas and knowledge with other members of the academic community. In retelling an unforgettable moment in his research life, Jerry highlighted one of his visits to a leading expert in his field. The expert was quite open and generous, offering him careful guidance and great encouragement. Jerry was deeply touched and “felt so grateful” for the expert’s help.

Jerry was promoted to Associate Professor in 2011 and Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages in 2012. The benefits and happiness that doing research had brought to Jerry personally make him a research-oriented leader, who firmly believes that “educational research is rooted in teaching practice. Any teaching reform, which needs to be implemented by frontline teachers, is fundamentally education research.” Consequently, in 2013 when Jerry and his team began to initiate a teaching reform that incorporated MOOCs into College English curriculum design and implemented a MOOCs-based flipped classroom model in their teaching, he encouraged teachers to take this opportunity to engage in research activities. He even helped every teacher make a learning plan but finally failed to implement it due to a lack of consistent guidance and supervision. He became aware that there was “no academic community” being developed in their department due to “weak research competence in general”.

To enhance teachers’ research literacy, Jerry organised various forms of collective research workshops, including reading and critically evaluating journal articles, studying research literature by relating it to their teaching practice, and discovering a research gap which they could possibly address through collective inquiry in their own teaching contexts. He also provided financial support for teachers to participate in online courses or in-service teaching training programmes which equipped them with comprehensive research methods and skills. Despite this effort, teachers’ research engagement did not increase to a large extent and the majority of teachers did not continue to do research after they were promoted to associate professors. Jerry attributed this to a “lack of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation”. For Jerry, “teachers’ intrinsic motivation is

prerequisite to their engagement in research” and only when teachers’ internal motivation is increased will they enact their agency and “seek external affordances” even if the circumstances are unfavourable, such as a weak research ethos in the department.

To inspire teachers, Jerry endeavoured to be a role model as a teacher-researcher. After he wrote an article based on the teaching reform, he sent the draft to one of his colleagues (See Ella below) and implicitly mentored her by inviting her to revise it. Having been enlightened by Jerry, the teacher finally published her first article in a CSSCI core journal and thereafter continued to be more engaged in research.

Realising that the direct relevance of educational research to teaching quality could be one thing that increases teachers’ inner motivation, Jerry encouraged teachers to observe and reflect on their teaching, formulate research questions, collect and analyse data systematically, and finally write up their findings. As a reward, he planned to publish a volume of collected papers and share them among the teachers. During my interviews with Jerry, he constantly reflected on his own academic journey and his leadership in the department. He addressed the importance of setting up “a regular collective research practice”, where everyone “contributed by sharing ideas and providing constructive feedback”. He also commented on the essential role of a coordinator and the importance of establishing routines to ensure the sustainability of this shared research practice.

With an innate desire for personal growth and with strong perseverance, Jerry developed from a new teacher to an excellent teacher, from a teacher-researcher to a research leader. He consistently exercised agency and expanded the possibilities for his ongoing professional development.

Meanwhile, his own research experiences and academic development shaped and confirmed his beliefs in the importance of research in teachers’ professional life, which underpinned all his effort to cultivate a facilitative institutional environment for the teachers.

## ***Ella***

Ella, a female teacher in her 40s, embarked on her academic journey when she enrolled in an MA Programme in Applied Linguistics. Before this, she had been teaching English for several years in a provincial college. Her previous teaching experience directed her attention to challenges and difficulties in students' writing. Ella learned to do empirical research on this issue by reading literature and designing experimental studies. The research experiences in the MA programme shaped her belief that the ultimate aim of doing research is not to publish "a worthless" article but to seek evidence by reading others' studies, and to collect and analyse empirical data to "inform action and solve problems in teaching practice". She began to realize that systematic inquiry into teaching practice is an essential means to improve teaching quality. For Ella, teacher research involves coming up with "tentative ways to improve teaching practice" by reading others' studies and self-reflecting, and then to "apply and testify them" in their own teaching contexts.

Upon graduating from the MA programme, Ella was recruited by University A as an English teacher in Department A. Due to her teaching excellence, she was chosen to participate in teaching reform of the MOOCs-based flipped classroom teaching model and soon became a core member of the reform project. Despite a heavy teaching load, Ella never stopped engaging in research activities, such as "participating in academic conferences and short-term in-service teacher training programmes" and learning research skills. Then, "a great stride in academic development", as she recalled, took place when Jerry sent her his first draft of a research report on the teaching reform and asked her to revise it. After several rounds of discussions and revisions, Ella came to realize that Jerry was indeed "mentoring" her in writing up a journal article, though he didn't say it explicitly. She felt "particularly grateful" and was "enlightened all of a sudden" about how to write up a research report for journals.

Motivated by Jerry who fulfilled the same teaching tasks but had much greater research awareness, Ella began to write up her own research paper, which was a reflection on her teaching practice in MOOCs-based flipped classrooms. The paper was finally published in a peer-review journal. During the process of writing, Ella received constructive feedback from Jerry and other colleagues who were also involved in the teaching reform and “had always been very supportive”. Instead of being exhilarated about the publication, Ella attributed the success to her continuous commitment to research practice and concluded that “success will come when conditions are ripe”.

Besides this publication experience, another crucial turning point for Ella was her involvement as a participant in a qualitative research project hosted by an expert researcher from a top university. She remarked that “in-person participation” in the research interviews, rather than being simply taught by some experts, demystified qualitative research for her as she mainly did quantitative research herself. She was excited to find that “it [qualitative research] was not that difficult”. Subsequently, she decided to collaborate with one of her colleagues to do a qualitative study into teachers’ beliefs about mobile-learning in language teaching, a study that she believed “genuinely stemmed from her interest in teaching practice” rather than “catering for research fund providers”. Apart from the pleasure and sense of achievement, another benefit that research engagement brought Ella is “a huge change” to her “life view and worldview”. She has become “more rational and more critical” while reading literature or analysing whatever she encounters in daily life. She herself has undergone a transformation from a teacher practitioner to a teacher-researcher with an inquiring mind.

In recent years, Ella was promoted to Principal Professor, an honorary position to acknowledge excellent performance in teaching and leadership in the teaching of teachers. With this title, Ella was expected to lead the team in teaching reforms as well as educational research. Acknowledging the fact that teachers “aspired to do research” while “having no idea how to do research” due to the lack of research knowledge and skills, Ella managed to initiate some

collective research activities to equip teachers with research skills and to encourage them to inquire into their daily teaching practice. Teachers are encouraged to first read literature, discover gaps in previous research areas, and then relate them to their own teaching practice. However, just as teachers were beginning this practice, a policy of financial punishment of poor research performance was initiated in the department. Those teachers whose research output did not meet requirements would be deprived of an annual bonus. Rather than being encouraged to produce research outputs, teachers were greatly demotivated and their engagement in these activities “was seriously hindered”. As a team leader, Ella highlighted the considerable impact of the institutional environment upon teachers’ academic development. She stressed that institutions should make every effort to “cultivate a facilitative environment for the growth of the teachers” rather than simply resorting to punishment or penalty. Instead of being subject to the detrimental institutional conditions, Ella attempted to enhance the immediate research environment by encouraging and collaborating with some colleagues to reflect on their teaching practice in relation to the MOOCs-based flipped classroom models and to conduct action research with the aim of improving teaching quality as well as producing research outputs. By collaboratively conducting research and writing up research proposals, she expected to provide mentorship to other young colleagues, build up their confidence to achieve academic success, and enable them to do research independently in the future, just as Jerry did with her. Nevertheless, few teachers responded to her advocacy efforts as the majority of them were restricted from being engaged in research for various internal and external reasons. “I will still try to do what we can do to make some changes in the immediate environment”, Ella insisted and continued her efforts in spite of the unfavourable broader environment.

### ***Mia***

Mia, a female teacher in her 40s, has been teaching English at University A for 11 years, since 2006. She studied medical English in her BA and MA programmes. She was very keen on doing

research at that time, reading a lot and making full use of academic resources in the university where she completed her MA programme. Mia still remembered “the joy” of writing her first journal article and “the excitement” when it was accepted and published by a core journal. The research idea of the article arose from being “perplexed” about a portrait of a “dragon” in an English-Chinese dictionary, in which “dragon” was depicted as an evil and malevolent animal with wings. This appears quite strange to Chinese people, as in Chinese culture “dragons” are considered very auspicious and have no wings. In the article, Mia questioned the appropriateness of this portrait and its cultural representation in the definition in an English-Chinese dictionary. Along with boosted self-confidence in her research competence, the first publication experience shaped Mia’s awareness that doing research should be initiated by genuine interest and intrinsic motivation.

Upon graduation, Mia was employed as an EFL teacher in University A. The recruitment and selection of teachers focused on prerequisites of effective teaching, such as language proficiency, discipline knowledge, classroom management and organization, planning for instruction, as well as implementing instruction. In the recruitment interview, Mia demonstrated great potential to be a quality teacher and stood out from other candidates in the intense competition. The recruitment experience was “very pleasant” to Mia, as University A attached great importance to teaching; her teaching competence had been “recognised” and valued there. Mia made every effort to improve her teaching in the first few years of her career. She observed the classrooms of experienced teachers, tried various and innovative approaches, and exchanged reflections on teaching with other colleagues. While playing an important role in the teaching reform of MOOCs-based flipped classroom teaching in the faculty, Mia improved her teaching practice. Based on this experience, she labelled herself “an experientialist”. She also “enjoyed the process of thinking up new pedagogical ideas and interacting with peer colleagues”. Yet, she did not produce any research outputs despite the fact that she did some research by collecting data from the students on the teaching reform and analysing the data so as to improve her teaching. Admitting that she read far less research literature than she used to in her MA programme, Mia remarked with great pity that



the writing and publishing of that journal article was “the first time as well as the last time” that she had such great motivation to do research. She added that she had enjoyed that experience so much. Afterwards, she experienced a hard time establishing a research interest and producing any outputs. After she came back from maternity leave in 2009, Mia perceived some environmental changes in the faculty. The university and the faculty began to “attach increasing importance to research” and research output had been taken as a significant criterion for academic promotion, while the value of teaching had been minimised. While one of her colleagues had published his research on their shared practice in the teaching reform, which contributed to his academic promotion, Mia was “somehow confused and depressed” because she felt her commitment to teaching was not equally recognised. Instead, she “did not do a good job” in terms of research outputs.

Meanwhile, the faculty’s policies to motivate teacher research were all output-oriented. Those who published in quality journals or attained research grants from different granting institutions would be rewarded with a financial bonus, whereas those who failed to meet the quantitative requirements for research output would be deprived of an annual bonus. The devaluation of teaching and the practice of coercing teachers into research engagement provoked “a strong feeling of displeasure and antagonism” in Mia. She showed her defiance to the faculty by doing nothing but concentrating solely on teaching. With a yearning for respect and understanding from the faculty, she compared her resistance against the pressure imposed by the faculty to “an act of adolescent rebellion against the control of the parents”, aspiring for more personal space and doing what she really enjoys. She used the word “deep depression” repeatedly in the interviews to describe her emotional reaction to the oppressive atmosphere of the faculty.

For Mia, doing research is a journey of inquiry driven by public wellbeing and one’s intrinsic motivation rather than for materialistic purposes, such as academic promotion or reputation. Research questions should be rooted in teaching practice in the classroom context and emerge from the problems that puzzle teachers. The aim of teacher research is to find solutions to these problems

and therefore contribute to better quality teaching and learning in particular classrooms. However, the striking contrast of her ideal and reality bewildered Mia when she saw other colleagues trying to publish and to apply for research grants even though their research topics were not even remotely related to their teaching practice.

In spite of feeling unenthusiastic about being engaged in output-driven research activities, Mia acknowledged that doing research was “part of university teacher professional life”. It could be “an endless virtuous circle” within which one reflected on their teaching practice, resorted to empirical studies for the sake of solutions to puzzles, and then applied solutions to actual classroom teaching. At the time of the interview, she began to realize that her refusal to be engaged in output-driven research activities was indeed yielding to external fetters including unreasonable policies and oppressive forces from the faculty. Having distanced herself from the struggle, Mia decided to “develop her own research interests” and “seek the true value” of being engaged in research.

### ***Lucas***

Lucas, a male teacher in his 40s, had been teaching English in a high school before he enrolled in an MA programme at a university in Hong Kong, China. The research topic for his MA thesis was about Chinese students’ acquisition of English articles. The MA programme provided him with “the opportunity to read literature in English intensively and extensively”, which as he commented, “helped enhance his reading ability and self-management”.

Upon graduation, Lucas was recruited as an English teacher at University A. In the first few years, he devoted himself to teaching. However, he was “aimless” in academic pursuits and had no idea what his real research interests were. He attributed his drifting state in research partially to his “lack of PhD experience”, which might have helped him develop and sustain an interest in research. Though he attempted to do some research in the field of cognitive semantics, which he used to be interested in, it was hard for him to get his research published. Meanwhile, he “felt alone” along the journey in pursuit of this specific area as it was not mainstream research in the Chinese academic context and

few people did it. Eventually he “had no further motivation” and chose to give up in this research area.

In 2013, he participated in an exploratory teaching reform on blended learning in MOOCs and flipped classrooms promoted by the department, and gradually he became a core member of the team because of his teaching excellence. During our interviews, he shared with me the good news that one online course he had designed and developed was selected into a national-level MOOCs Platform. However, he regretted not being able to do any embedded research based on his engagement in the flipped classroom education reforms because he “was fully occupied by heavy teaching load in the reform”, including course designs, video making, and production. Moreover, a lack of the theoretical knowledge and research skills hindered him from being engaged further in any blended learning research.

It wasn't until Lucas was nominated to be responsible for English assessment design and development that he developed a stronger inquiring mind into his own practice. English assessment design and development is an integral part of overall English teaching reform in the university. Upon realizing its decisive role as a form of washback on the implementation of English teaching reform, Lucas started to focus his efforts on the development of school-based language assessment. At the same time, he was offered an opportunity by the dean to work as a visiting scholar at another university in China for a year and received supervision there by a leading expert in language assessment. With guidance from the expert, he published his first quality journal article and started to develop a school-based language assessment system, which soon became a prioritised teaching and research project in the department. The close attention and all-around support by the leader of this project provided Lucas “an incentive” to devote himself to designing, implementing and evaluating the system. He soon established himself as an asset in the department and he felt that he was playing “a unique role”, which made him feel “safe” in his career. Moreover, no longer feeling “aimless” in doing research, he was happy that he finally found a sustained research interest in

language assessment; “there was always something that inspired” him to explore. He considered in retrospect that “a concordance between one’s own research interest and school goals” would definitely help ensure the sustainability of one’s academic development. His research focus underwent a shift from purely theoretical research to pedagogical research as he believed that “without practice and application, the theory would be lifeless”.

In spite of his increasing research awareness and beliefs in the importance of embedding research in teaching and assessment practice, Lucas and other department members involved in the project were “continuously overwhelmed by the heavy workload”, which involved developing large quantities of test items and managing the online testing system. They had scarce time to think about research topics, collect and analyse data, and produce research outputs. Moreover, Lucas and his team were also restrained by their relatively limited research competence. Lucas had always been “aspiring for some specific and practical guidance” in conducting embedded research on language assessment, either from within or beyond the department. Apart from concerns of time and competence, Lucas emphasised the importance of intrinsic motivation for teachers to engage themselves in research activities: “The individual agency should be activated, and transformation is desired from being forced to do research to engaging oneself in doing research by their own will”. As a team leader, he himself aimed to produce some substantial research output first so as to be a model for the team and encourage more collaboration in the future among colleagues with the same interests in assessment.

### ***Maisie***

Maisie, a young EFL teacher in her early thirties, is the only teacher participant in my study who has a PhD degree. Her first research experience dated back to the time of her undergraduate study. Driven by pure interest and curiosity, Maisie investigated the gap between the class activities that students really enjoy and those activities that teachers think students will enjoy. The research outcome was finally published in a journal. This experience contributed to her later pursuit of higher

qualifications in a top university in China, which provided her with comprehensive academic training and enabled her to become a teacher-researcher with a solid basis of research knowledge and skills and a continuous research interest in cognitive linguistics.

Upon graduation, Maisie chose to go back to her hometown and was recruited by School A at University A as an EFL teacher, teaching various courses to both English majors and non-English majors.

Even though Maisie is busy with a heavy teaching workload and household responsibilities, she manages to sustain her academic life, having given presentations at a number of academic conferences, published 6 CSSCI journal articles, and won 4 research grants from different sources. “You have to keep writing,” she explained, providing a strategy for her productive academic performance. To hone her research knowledge and skills further and keep updated about current trends in her research field, she regularly attends academic conferences to exchange ideas with other academics, and participates in teacher training programs to learn new quantitative research methods, about teaching material development, and so on.

Maisie does most of her research in cognitive linguistics individually as she cannot find colleagues with the same research interest in her School. She relies on the feedback from reviewers of quality journals because “only experts in the specific research field can provide constructive advice”. She sometimes collaborates with her PhD fellow students who have similar research interests to what she does. Moreover, she constantly receives support and guidance for her research from some senior professors in the School, where a mentoring scheme has been set up to scaffold young teachers’ growth both in teaching and research: “They discussed research ideas with me and helped me revise my writing”. She is immensely grateful for their help.

Maisie always believes that teaching and research are mutually beneficial rather than independent of each other and this belief stems from her teaching and research experience. Apart from her research in cognitive linguistics, she has also participated in some teaching-oriented research

projects and developed teaching materials to meet the needs of local students. She employs her subject knowledge and updated research ideas to inform the teaching of her graduate students in linguistics, particularly by critically analysing and evaluating current theories. In teaching non-English graduate students in other disciplines, she applies her expertise to help students analyse the linguistics features of the articles in *Economics* and then encourages them to imitate the writing. For Maisie, teaching and research can be achieved simultaneously: “I have always been stimulated by teaching. The interactions with my students can always spark research ideas.”

Apart from promotions-driven external pressure, Maisie’s research activity stems from her self-perceptions and identities both as a faculty member of University A and a university teacher. She feels greatly honoured to work at University A, which is one of the few universities listed in China’s Double First-Class Initiative. Her acknowledgment of the ranking status of University A means she accepts the “research-oriented” evaluation system, though “it does place the teachers under the pressure.” Maisie adopted an old Chinese saying while talking about the external pressure: “One thrives and survives under suffering and hardships, and withers if left overly-protected and contented with the current situation.” Instead of being content with her present comfortable life and “tortured by external evaluation system”, Maisie chooses to move her professional life forward by “accepting and fulfilling the duty of doing research with pleasure”.

Moreover, Maisie’s self-perceived identity as a university teacher distinguishes her from a primary school teacher or high school teacher. More than being a knowledge transmitter, Maisie aspires to be a knowledge producer with an innovative spirit. “The meaning of life lies in innovation”, she says. She enjoys doing research as it helps her avoid teacher burnout caused by repeated teaching work for many years. She stresses the importance of research as a teacher in higher education: “No matter what achievement you can make, at least you are inquiring, which is the key to higher education.” As a university teacher, Maisie addresses the importance and value of doing research for

“expanding a teacher’s professional knowledge landscape and developing expertise in the subject area”, which in turn informs and enhances teaching practice.

Her educational background and research experiences in the workplace have jointly contributed to Maisie’s self-portrait as a “proactive and passionate young academic”. Perceiving herself as “one of the backbones for construction of the School”, she consistently sounds positive when talking about research culture in the School, where “most young teaching teachers are working hard and active in doing research. The leaders are all supportive”. Instead of complaining about a lack of like-minded colleagues and limited resources in the School during our interview, Maisie talked more about her imagined future and her plans to overcome these barriers. She has begun to supervise graduate students with a research interest in cognitive linguistics, and with whom she has started to develop a collaborative team. “One alone may walk very fast while many together can walk a longer distance,” she emphasizes. With the small achievements made by the team, she plans to seek even more affordances from the School.

Like other female EFL teachers, Maisie has to grapple with balancing teaching, family life, and research. Having multiple identities such as teacher, researcher, mother, wife, and daughter means juggling numerous, sometimes competing roles: “Women have held up half the sky”. Besides, Maisie gave birth to a second child after our first interview. In one year, her research life changed to give way to her family life in preparing for the birth and then taking care of the new baby and her elder brother: “You’ll always have a different focus in different stages of your life.”

## **Department B**

University B is a provincially-funded key public university with strong disciplines in business, management, and law. Different from University A, a leading university in China, University B is among the average ranked universities across China. Although it is not on the list of the Double First-Class Initiative universities at a national level, the university is aiming for success in the next round of evaluation, particularly in its strong disciplines of applied economics and law, and will apply for

doctoral programmes in these disciplines. Along with the increasing demands of research performance are more stringent recruitment and evaluation policies. For example, all young teachers need to have a PhD qualification if they wish to apply for academic promotion. There are also policies both at the university level and department level that provide monetary reward for publications in high-impact journals and for winning research grants at different levels.

In University B, there are 15 departments that offer undergraduate programmes in various disciplines and three teaching centres with teaching-only teachers who provide foundation courses to all students in the University. Department B is one of the three teaching centres that provides English language education to all non-English majors, around 20,000 students (that is, students whose majors are, for example, economics and business, law, or engineering, and are therefore required to study general English or English for Academic Purposes as a compulsory course). There are 75 full-time English language teachers in Department B. It is essentially oriented as a teaching unit rather than an academic unit. Research performance based on research outputs is lower compared to other departments in University B. In the past five years, 55 journal articles have been published with only 4 published in high impact journals in the disciplines of education or linguistics and applied linguistics, and only 8 are relevant to educational research on English teaching. Fifty province-funded and university-funded research grants have been won, but only 11 of these are related to English teaching and learning.

The average teaching load per English teacher is around 25 hours per week, which is double that of teachers in other academic departments of the university. A heavy teaching load becomes one of the barriers that impedes teacher research engagement. Most of the time, teachers teach in individual classrooms and their work is independent of other teachers. They seldom have the chance to sit together, to share and reflect on their own teaching and research practice unless it is administratively scheduled. Teacher isolation, obvious in Department B, hinders teacher collaboration and collegiality, which has commonly been suggested as one vehicle for improving



teaching quality and professional development (Klette, 1997). Another obstacle lies in the low academic qualifications of the majority of the teachers, which manifests as poor research competence.

Table 9 shows demographic information of University B and Department B.

**Table 9**

*Demographic Information of University B and Department B*

	The University	Department B
Numbers of full-time teachers	1188	75
Percent of PhD holders	49%	5%
Numbers of Professors & Associate Professors	663	29
Percentage of Female teachers		72%

Among the 75 full-time teachers, only 4 have PhD qualifications. Most of the teachers only have MA degrees in research fields such as English literature, translation, and theoretical or applied linguistics, while a few are qualified in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). This means they, as an EFL teacher, lack general pedagogical knowledge, such as knowledge of learning and teaching, classroom management, curriculum and so on, before they enter the workplace even though they may have strong subject matter knowledge (Carlsen, 1999).

As Department B is a teaching unit, research performance does not carry much weight in the annual review of teacher performance and some university policies even exempt EFL teachers from higher requirements in research performance in their applications for academic promotion. This indicates that there is no immediate external pressure on EFL teachers to be engaged in research activities and the teachers are not confronted with the challenges of “to publish or to perish”.

Besides, almost 70 percent of teachers are females under 45 years old, who in Chinese traditional culture have major responsibility for taking care of children and housework. Consequently, their

pursuit of a PhD degree, which usually takes around 4 years away from their family and workplace, is often derailed by family life and a heavy teaching load. They constantly grapple with balancing teaching, family, and research, with the latter most likely being sacrificed for the former two. Table 10 shows the demographic information of the five participants in Department B.

**Table 10**

*Demographic Information of Five Participants in Department B*

Participants	Academic title	Gender	Qualification	Years of teaching
Jason	Professor	M	PhD	11-20
Genny	Associate Professor	F	MA	11-20
Lucy	Lecturer	F	MA	1-5
Sophie	Associate Professor	F	MA	11-20
Zoe	Associate Professor	F	MA	11-20

**Jason**

Jason, ex-Dean of Department B, started his career as a university English teacher at University B after gaining a bachelor's degree from a provincial normal university 23 years ago. At that time, it was quite easy for an English major graduate to find a teaching position in universities. Four years later, "to pursue a better self", Jason studied for a Master's degree and subsequently, a PhD degree. He attributed his great desire for a PhD to the influence of one supervisor in his MA programme, who demonstrated profound knowledge and vision as an academic researcher. However, the idea of pursuing a PhD degree was considered to be "weird" by other colleagues since an MA degree seemed to be more than enough for securing a teaching position at University B at the time. "I was only one of a few who readily perceived the trend that PhD degree was to be required and preferred as a university teacher", Jason reflected in the interview. The tough yet comprehensive academic training in the PhD programme at a top university in China enabled Jason

to be well prepared for his future academic journey with both strong research competence and research awareness. He compared his PhD experience to “a pilgrimage for knowledge and prestige”. As a consequence, he managed to move from a peripheral position to the centre of an imagined research community. Moreover, the PhD experience offered him an opportunity to establish academic connections with other researchers and experts in the discipline, which he often drew on afterwards as external expert resources after he was promoted to Dean of Department B. In retrospect, Jason listed the rewards of being engaged in research, including “analytical and logical thinking ability”, “strong research awareness”, and “rigorous attitude to details and truth”, which would even be unconsciously transferred to educating his child within his family.

On finishing his PhD programme, Jason came back to Department B and was promoted to associate Dean of the department, mainly responsible for enhancing teachers’ research competence and productivity. Together with Sophie, he initiated a monthly Research Forum as a learning community, in which teachers sat together and learned research knowledge and skills, read and evaluated articles published in leading journals, and shared and discussed teachers’ own research designs. Though all the teachers were welcome and were encouraged to join in the forum, a group of fewer than 20 persisted with this shared research practice throughout all the years.

At the early stage, all the activity in the Research Forum was focused on research. Teaching and research practices were covered separately, until the initiation of the teaching reform in the curriculum of English for Academic Purposes and university-based English tests. It was not until then that Jason came to understand the words by one chancellor of University B: “Teaching practice generates questions, research practice addresses those questions and the two benefit each other”. Gradually, the discussion in the Research Forum shifted to issues arising in the implementation of the teaching reforms, including teaching goals and principles, pedagogical practice, evaluation, and so on. Jason enjoyed sharing his ideas and learning from other members by

participating in the Forum though he admitted that the other members benefited from him much more than he did from this particular learning community. The strong academic competence developed through the PhD experience, together with a managerial position as Dean of Department B, empowered Jason as an expert and authority in this learning community. “Different from other teaching teachers”, Jason perceived his role of leadership to be “critical” because he had to make final decisions and his management directly steered the direction of his team’s teaching reforms and research engagement. For instance, he set up an evaluation policy for the annual excellent teacher award. One criterion for eligibility for this honour was research engagement by, for example, participating in the Research Forum or research projects, writing up research reports, or any other evidence of being engaged in doing research. As part of his leadership, Jason also tried to set a good role model for other participants by being fully prepared for the discussion and actively making his voice heard in the Research Forum, as he knew “the teachers counted on me”. Meanwhile, he mentored and guided some teachers by enlightening them with insightful research ideas and providing constructive feedback on their research proposals.

The collaborative work by Jason and that group of teachers eventually paid off. Based on their discussions and reform endeavours, the group members have succeeded in applications for various levels of research grants awarded by the university or the Education Bureau of the Province. In the group, as Jason observed, research engagement was increased, passion for doing teaching-related research was enhanced, research productivity was boosted, and perhaps most importantly, teaching quality improved. The establishment and development of the Research Forum won acknowledgment from the university and was selected as one of the top-brand research communities of practice across the university. The active research engagement and improved research performance also reshaped outsiders’ prejudiced attitudes and beliefs about English teacher research; that is, they were not “just teaching ABC” but were capable of doing valuable research.

As a leader, Jason perceived and identified a range of barriers and challenges to promoting teacher research both from inside the faculty and beyond. The barriers from within were prevailing low motivation of the teachers to become research active as well as their weak research competence, which made research engagement seemingly unattainable for them. In the interview, Jason repeatedly stressed the importance of team-building: “The team of competency and commitment is very important, and we are badly in need of such a team”. He felt helpless when he estimated that despite all his good intentions, only around 20 percent of the teachers were motivated enough to be engaged in teaching reforms and related research projects while the majority just acted as bystanders. He quite understood that apart from having a strong awareness of themselves as researchers, leaders also needed to help stimulate the inner desire of each team member to participate in research. He depicted himself as a train locomotive and drew an analogy between leading a team and driving a train. Just as “an express train with each car pulled by its own engine, the team could make great achievement only if all the individuals were self-propelled, their agency strongly enacted, and their skills fully developed”.

In addition to these internal barriers, what discouraged Jason was the lack of any substantial support for the teaching reform of the EAP Curriculum and its related research. There were also significant University-level administrative constraints. “Teachers’ dedication to the teaching reform was purely driven by their own ideals and passion for better education”, and this dedication could become quite fragile and prone to be shaken when the extra time and effort invested by the teachers were completely neglected in any evaluation or rewards. Jason spent three years requesting rewards or compensation for the teachers but all attempts failed, and he did not see any hope at all in the future. Some other barriers that Jason perceived lay in the university’s teacher evaluation policy and its implementation, which was beyond the influence of a faculty leader, who to a large extent shaped teachers’ teaching and research practice. In the teacher evaluation policy, English teachers were exempt from the basic threshold which stated that only those who had a PhD qualification were eligible for the title of Professor. Obviously, this policy was influenced by the

belief that the primary responsibility for English language teachers was teaching rather than doing research. Moreover, Jason felt “cheated” by the university’s failure to implement punishment for poor research performance when it came to annual teacher evaluation. The policies were announced but not put into action, which meant teachers’ engagement or not in research would not have any impact on their positions in the university. As a consequence, teachers did not see any need to do research and Jason’s leadership and his commitment to encouraging research were challenged in relation to the implementation of the policies. He said in the interview, with some despondency, “I have done all I could do as an administrative leader.”

At the time of the second interview, Jason had submitted his resignation to University B and taken over his new leadership role in University C, which, as Jason desired, provided him with a more favourable platform for doing his work position. While resuming his own research interests in academic competence and producing more research articles, he realised that having strong research competence and a good research record was like “possessing nuclear weapons”, which would be the only defence against any changes in teacher evaluation and thus made teachers confident about job security. He was dedicating himself to the promotion of teacher research in the new department, which, as he highlighted in the second interview, had great potential, as it had several teachers with PhD qualifications from top universities in China. The strong research competence and great desire to be engaged in research in the new team, even though it was only with a small group of people, gave Jason much confidence to advance his teachers’ research performance in the new workplace.

### ***Sophie***

Sophie, a female teacher in her 40s, has been working as an EFL teacher in Department B at University B since she obtained her BA degree from a provincial normal college 20 years ago. In the first few years, she “was thrown into the classroom” without any guidance in teaching or research. She described herself just as “a fragile seed in a desert” with little chance to survive. Despite this,

she made every effort to improve her teaching competence and establish herself in the department by being a competent teacher.

Not long after she felt “settled down”, Sophie started to think about “moving one step further” in her professional development and sought promotion from lecturer to associate professor as she was not content with the idea of remaining a lecturer till the day she retired. She sacrificed lots of family time to read literature and start some research, which was rare at that time in the department and therefore was considered to be “weird” and “too ambitious” by some of her colleagues.

“Another primary motivation” for Sophie to be engaged in research is to clear up “uncertainty and anxiety brought by ignorance” and solve puzzles in her own teaching practice. During her stay as a visiting scholar in a university in the US around 2007, she read widely in the field of second language acquisition. Gradually, she realised that the academic community was like a forum, where scholars posed different hypotheses while others agreed or argued against them by doing empirical studies in their own contexts. She recalled that academics was “no longer mysterious” and she decided not to “blindly follow” those so-called leading scholars’ theories but to think for herself and test hypotheses in her own teaching context. Once she broadened her horizons via reading theories and literature and understanding them through a critical lens, she attained “a sense of serenity” and became more confident. Meanwhile, she tended to observe her classroom with a keen research awareness and excitedly found that all “those theories or hypotheses were rooted in” her classroom. She remembered once one chancellor of University B had stressed in a staff meeting: “it is teaching practice that raises questions, research practice that addresses questions, and the two benefit each other”. Her researcher lens into her own teaching practice, again, proved this to be the case.

Along with increased research awareness and more research knowledge, the visiting scholar experiences also stirred up Sophie’s interest in the research area of teacher professional development. Consequently, driven by her real interests, Sophie carried out a series of studies funded by provincial research grants, with the research topics ranging from the challenges and

strategies of language teacher learning and professional development, the impact of a research community of practice on language teacher professional development, to comparative studies on the research of teacher professional development between China and abroad. All these commitments contributed to the improvement of her research competence as well as sustained academic development. Her research experiences confirmed her belief that “it is teaching that makes a teacher settle down while it is the scholarship of teaching that makes a teacher fulfil their life”.

In 2008, Sophie was promoted to associate professor. The experience, however, was distressing and painful. She felt quite lonely as no colleagues shared her vision and some expert colleagues even hesitated to share any experience with her. She wished deeply for open communication, trustful relationships, and mutually-beneficial cooperation among colleagues. To make a change in this isolated and enclosed institutional environment, Sophie initiated a regular collective research practice in the department with the help of the dean (Jason); the Research Forum, which I have described above. They began the Forum by reading and reviewing literature, learning research skills, such as SPSS, and making and sharing research designs and proposals. On seeing colleagues enthusiastically sharing their own research designs in the Forum, Sophie was “deeply touched” as they used to be top secret and one would never know what research other colleagues were doing until they were published. Following the development of the Research Forum, she published a monograph. In it, she summarised that the Research Forum had contributed to teachers’ increased research competence and had transformed the teacher collective culture from “being enclosed, distrustful and isolated to being connected, trustworthy and reciprocal”, which, consequently, generated new shared knowledge in the community. Despite these benefits, the committed participants were only confined to a small number of teachers, accounting for about one in nine of all the teachers. This is probably because participation in the Research Forum was completely voluntary and would not be taken into account when it came to research assessment, even though participants did have to devote extra time and effort to the Forum activities. Regardless of the



limited participation, Sophie and her colleagues have persisted in the Research Forum for seven years prior to the interview with me because she considered it as “an effective scaffolding” for teacher professional development, a bond that connects teachers together, and a professional dialogue that motivates them to share, discuss and grow.

Sophie differentiated herself from other research-inactive colleagues who were content with family life and their teaching job, or who tried to cheat in the research performance review and professional promotion applications. She adhered to a firm belief in the importance of academic life as a university teacher. Nevertheless, this firm belief was shaken when it came to the university’s research assessment policy. Just before my interview with her, Sophie experienced a painful failure in her promotion application to professor. In her recalling on this experience, the most frequent use of the expressions was “I was badly hurt”. The output-driven research assessment system by the university was entirely based on research funds one had been granted and the numbers of publications in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journal list, which is publicised and updated every two years by Nanjing University and the Institute for Chinese Social Science Research and Assessment. One journal article by Sophie was not recognised as eligible because that journal had just been deleted from the CSSCI list when it was updated that year. Despite Sophie’s great commitment to academic work and her strong protest against the unreasonableness of the university’s research assessment policy, she ultimately failed to get promoted. In contrast, other colleagues succeeded because they met the requirement related to the quantity of publications, even though their articles were outside their research field and got published by paying a high publishing fee. Consequently, Sophie felt “so helpless and desperate” when confronted with the unfavourable and discouraging institutional research environment. The impact of unreasonable research assessment, as she commented, would “quash your conviction and blow all your passion into pieces”. With the increasing set of requirements for professional promotion, Sophie saw no hope of achieving her goal of being promoted to professor. Now not so passionate and devoted as before, she engages herself in research partly to meet the requirement of the annual assessment

and to satisfy her own interests. She repeatedly stressed through all her interviews that she does need recognition from the students and the leaders. In her comments on the writing of her academic story, Sophie said:

Although I have a hard time balancing family and work, I am eager to win the recognition from my students and my leaders. The profession as a university teacher brings me a sense of dignity and I am willing to dedicate myself to win this sense of dignity. (Sophie-feedback for member check)

### **Zoe**

Zoe, in her 40s, has been working for 20 years in University B as an English teacher to non-English majors. She started teaching English with a bachelor's degree in business English and continued to pursue a part-time Master's degree in linguistics and applied linguistics while teaching at University B. In recent years, Zoe has come to realize that a PhD qualification will be a must for a university teacher. The systematic training in a PhD programme would make her research work much easier than if it was done based only on her own attempts. However, she could not afford years to do a PhD because of her unfavourable physical conditions and a heavy family burden.

In the first decade of her professional life, Zoe had spent a long period of time identifying her own research interests and struggling with limited research competence. Change began to take place when Jason became leader of the department and the Research Forum was established. As an active participant in the Research Forum as well as a frontline practitioner of the teaching reform of the EAP curriculum, Zoe underwent a remarkable transformation from being a teacher to being a teacher-researcher.

In the Research Forum, Zoe, together with her colleagues, started reading and learning to critically evaluate published studies in core journals. Zoe still had a clear memory of the uncertainty and challenges she experienced in the beginning: "I had no idea where to start when I was first asked to

evaluate a study. They must be good studies as they have been published in core journals". With the guidance and help of peers in the forum, she gradually "got a feel" for differentiating good quality studies from poor ones. Subsequently, she learned to do some systematic literature reviews on a specific topic, shared them with members in the forum, and provided suggestions for future research. Her efforts and shared knowledge were recognised and appreciated by other members, which resulted in her feeling "a great sense of achievement". She commented on the experience, saying "you know you are growing." The participation in the Research Forum could not "radically improve" her research competence, but it made her life "more meaningful" and helped breathe new life into an otherwise stagnating teaching life. She realised that she "could do something else alongside teaching" and she experienced her work "more as a calling than just a job". With developing research knowledge and skills, Zoe's motivation to be engaged in research continued to be aroused. She stressed, "I did research not simply for promotion but more importantly for intrinsic interest. It made me feel fulfilled."

Along with participation in the Research Forum, she developed a close friendship with Sophie and collaborated with her on several research projects. They worked perfectly together, as Zoe illustrated: "We are good at different things. For example, she's a person full of ideas but hates those technical issues in data analysis like using CiteSpace or SPSS. I am lack of ideas but enjoy exploring the software." The collaboration with Sophie and participation in the Research Forum inspired Zoe for her MA thesis and enabled her to complete it in a short period of time. Moreover, she was no longer a peripheral co-researcher in other's research projects but grew to be an independent principal investigator in her own research projects. She did not have much difficulty in writing up a research proposal when applying for a provincial research grant. Zoe attributed her academic growth to the continuous dedication and engagement in research activities, both individually and collaboratively after Jason took over leadership of the department. "Success comes naturally", Zoe commented, as she looked back with confidence and assurance.

While reflecting on the crucial factors in an individual's academic development, Zoe highlighted the importance of intrinsic motivation for self-development and readiness to seize the opportunity offered by the external environment, and thereby exercise personal autonomy in development. She explained, "I yearn for professional development and what I need is just scaffolding." At the same time, she recognised the essential role of peer influence in her academic advancement: "The like-minded, competent and executive fellow research mates would be essential to keep you stay on the track."

Instead of isolating herself in her own workplace, Zoe took every chance to look for connections beyond it, for example, by attending academic conferences, in-service teacher training programs, and working as a visiting scholar in one university in the US. These cross-community experience broadened her visions and encouraged her to reflect on the teaching practice in her own workplace. She was "no longer a frog in the well".

Like many other female colleagues, Zoe was simultaneously playing various other roles, such as wife, mother, and daughter. In contrast with some other female colleagues whose lives were completely overwhelmed by housework and childcare, Zoe held a distinct view about child education and the relationship between family life and professional life. The best child education, according to Zoe, was not to sacrifice one's own professional development for taking care of every tiny moment of the child but to set a good example by the continuous pursuit of a better self. She insisted that "family life should not be taken as an excuse to be exempt from research engagement." In the prospect of future academic development, Zoe is making every effort to read more literature, conduct more studies, and produce more research outcomes.

Zoe sounded quite positive about her research experiences all through our interviews except when it came to the topic of research assessment policies. She strongly believed that the prevailing output-driven policies failed to recognize and reward those who devoted themselves to teaching reforms and continuous research engagement, for example, participating in the Research Forum. Instead, the

policies left room for someone to take an unfair academic advantage over others by publishing in core journals with high publication fees or obtaining research grants through social networks rather than strong research competence (*guanxi* in Chinese). Even worse, the penalty policies for those who failed to meet the requirements for research performance were never implemented in practice. Zoe acknowledged the negative washback of these policies: “It did let me down even though I despised those who cheated.”

### **Gennya**

Gennya, a female teacher in her 40s, has been teaching English to non-English major students for 14 years at University B. She divided her academic life roughly into two stages. In the ten years of her early career, she did not engage herself much in any teaching-related research activities, except for publishing some articles in journals such as *Movie Literature* or *Writer Magazine* merely for the sake of academic promotion. She felt regretful that she “wasted so much time” when reflecting upon this stage. Gennya attributed her non-engagement in research partly to a weak research culture in the department at that time even though she acknowledged that she herself lacked intrinsic motivation and research awareness.

In the early 2010s, Gennya perceived some changes around her within and beyond the department. With the leadership of Jason and the establishment of the Research Forum, academic research began to become an important dimension for teacher professional development in the department. Gennya was one of those who benefited from this enhanced research culture in the department. “I cherish this collective learning opportunity and manage to participate in every session of Research Forum”, she said, confirming her commitment to the community. Gennya tried hard to fulfil each task she was assigned by the coordinator. Her dedication paid off finally as she increased her research knowledge and skills, such as the ability to use SPSS in her own studies. Meanwhile, this collective research activity became “an invisible force” that kept her “adhering to continuous research engagement”. Gennya repeatedly stressed in the interview, “I would have started earlier in

academic pursuit and made more achievement if the institutional research culture at my early career stage was strong and supportive as it is now.”

Apart from participating in collective research activities in the department, Gennya also eagerly sought resources from outside of the department. She displayed great enthusiasm in joining in-service teacher training programs organised by other institutions and updated herself with current research trends by frequently reading research articles published in key journals. This engagement not only helped broaden her vision and shape her beliefs about a mutually beneficial relationship between teaching and research but also demystified seemingly sophisticated research designs in those published studies. Gennya came to realize that those empirical studies were in fact “rooted in everyday teaching practice”, and she consequently developed the capacity to conduct some replication studies. She also self-learned research skills by reading academic books, mimicking research methods in other studies, and applying them in her own research projects. Alongside her teaching practice, she observed her own classroom through a research lens, reflecting on prevailing problems rising from her colleagues’ and her own teaching and trying to solve those problems by engaging herself in some action research.

Instead of confining herself to the department and the University where she worked, Gennya remained attentive to ongoing developments outside her working context, including a growing emphasis on research productivity by teachers in higher education sectors, higher demands for PhD qualifications as a threshold in recruitment, and the increasing job-insecurity of university English language teachers due to the prevailing social doubts about educational outcomes of English language teaching in university classrooms. Gennya indicated that the external social circumstances became uncertain even though the immediate environment in the department and the university seemed to be “still safe here and now”. Research competence and research productivity become an increasingly important indicator in university teachers’ performance evaluations. Rather than

“remaining still”, Genny was driven by a keen sense of crisis and took action to engage herself more in doing research as a response to this increasingly challenging environment.

Apart from the external pressure, Genny’s self-identity as a university teacher drives her to do research. She differentiated herself from secondary school teachers: “As a university teacher, I can’t just teach as secondary teachers do.” Though she was not confident when talking about her research output and felt hesitant to be labelled as a researcher, Genny, with an innate interest in research, never stopped updating herself with current studies in the discipline, identifying problems in her teaching practice, thinking about the solutions and collecting data to provide evidence for the effectiveness of the solutions. She reflected, “No one has forced me to do that, but I know I should do it.” Engagement in research made her “feel fulfilled” and publications would be “an acknowledgement and a reward” for all her effort.

Despite her persistent engagement in teaching inquiry, Genny constantly felt lost in her research focus and the future prospects of her research, as she reflected in her reflective journals. Most of the research projects were indeed done by herself alone. Even though she had co-researchers, these were in name only since there were no genuine discussions and collaborations in the research process. Genny confessed that it would be beneficial to have real collaboration with others. Yet, it was not easy for her to find some like-minded researchers in the department.

Like other university language teachers, she was overwhelmed by the heavy teaching load as well as family life and therefore was always challenged by managing her research progress. “Seeking for a balance between teaching, family, and research” was a theme consistently raised by Genny in my interviews with her.

### **Lucy**

Lucy, a female in her late 20s, is the youngest teacher among the eight teacher participants. She was in her third year at University B when I held my first interview with her and she had just finished a

period of maternity leave. She obtained her MA degree from a high-ranking university in China and her research in her MA was in the area of English literature, where her real interest lay. Lucy's MA experience was just "a threshold" in her research life though she was still very proud that her thesis won the prize of Excellent Thesis that year in the university.

Lucy recalled her first two years' teaching experience in University B. Without any pre-service training in English language teaching, she said, "it was like crossing a river by groping the stones along the way and even worse, you had no idea where the stones were." Despite this, Lucy soon grew up to be a qualified English teacher and became popular among the students. However, she admitted that at the early stage of her career she "had never thought about any pedagogical theories" behind her practice or "why lessons should be designed in this way" as she thought the primary focus of a university English teacher, particularly for non-English majors, was teaching rather than doing any academic research. In our first interview, Lucy also expressed her concern about PhD study, particularly whether to stick to her intrinsic interest in English literature, though it had almost no connection to her teaching practice, or shift the focus to applied linguistics, particularly English language teaching and learning, which was embedded in her own teaching practice.

Not long after Lucy accommodated herself as a new teacher, she was selected to participate in the teaching reform of English for Academic Purposes initiated by Jason and some related research projects hosted by other colleagues. At the same time, she was "ordered" by Jason to participate in the Research Forum organised by a group of teachers in the department, which aimed to increase peer teachers' research knowledge and skills and embed research in the department by meeting regularly to share literature and discuss research designs. Though being enlightened by other colleagues about designing empirical research in the classroom context and the ways of collecting data, Lucy did not directly engage herself in educational research until she came back to work from maternity leave and was invited to join a research project led by Jason four months before our first interview. "I made an absolutely right decision and it was a crucial turning point for



my research life”, Lucy commented excitedly when reflecting on her learning experience in the research project. She used to think that “teaching was the primary role a university English teacher was expected to assume” and all she needed to do was to achieve quality teaching in her professional life. She had never thought about attending or even presenting in academic conferences before, since for her “they looked too high to be achieved”.

The changes took place after Lucy was invited by Jason to join in a research project. She was grateful to Jason for providing this learning opportunity and accepted without any hesitation as she aspired for collaboration with colleagues and to receive expert guidance. As a peripheral member, she was offered various learning opportunities as well as challenges in engaging herself in every collective discussion. Being part of the team, Lucy always felt obliged to make her own contribution by reading related literature and fulfilling the assigned tasks because she did not want to “hold the team back”. She still remembered how tough it was for her when she was asked to write up a literature review on a specific topic that she was unfamiliar with and to share it with other members of the team. Though she felt very anxious and was not sure about the homework she had done, the constructive comments and words of encouragement from peer members comforted her and motivated her to continue with further academic pursuits.

In her monthly reflective journals after the first interview, Lucy couldn’t wait to share with me her experience of presenting at a national academic conference, where she was “strongly encouraged” by Jason to present the achievements in their EAP teaching reform. The immediate help and generous support from other members in preparing the presentation, as well as the positive feedback and recognition by other researchers and practitioners from other universities around China, all had a significant impression on Lucy. “It was no longer that high or far to arrive at,” she commented after presenting at the conference. The experience of simply sitting with other teachers and researchers, talking and listening to others’ feedback and suggestions changed Lucy’s perception of academic conferences. “It could be down-to-earth, really easy to do and so enjoyable. You would

never know unless you did it yourself," she recalled. This was the first time that Lucy "gave serious consideration" to what the whole team had been doing and the practical significance of the research they were doing. Meanwhile, it was also the first time that she felt, "totally from within, great passion for academics".

Through engaging herself in the teaching reform and related research projects, Lucy came to realize that effective teaching practice must be informed by and designed based on existing theories, and "educational research was rooted in the classroom and in turn, produced empirical evidence to support and enlighten teaching practice". At the same time, she developed "strong research awareness", which she thought was "a pre-condition for any inquiry into teaching practice and it directed you to real research questions."

Apart from changed perceptions of the scholarship of teaching as well as an increased research awareness, Lucy had gradually developed her research knowledge and skills through participating in all the research activities in the research project as a team member. Being inspired by the shared knowledge from the research team, she independently wrote up her own research proposal to conduct further exploration on the topic of English for Academic Purposes and, as the main researcher, succeeded in applying for research grants from the university. Though having grown up to be an independent teacher-researcher, Lucy still longed for the real and effective collaboration just as she and some colleagues did in the previous research project led by Jason: "After Jason left, no one would care about us young teachers."

When talking about motivation for continuous engagement in research, Lucy admitted that she did research not entirely because of intrinsic motivation but partly because she "had to" for job security. In the third interview one year later, she told me that she had made a decision about her research field for PhD study – educational research: "It is really tough. But you will be greatly rewarded if you stick to it. It deserves your dedication."

## Summary

This chapter introduced the two departments as workplace contexts, two leaders, and eight teachers as participants in the present study. The introduction of the two departments was mainly based on public documents, official websites, interview transcripts of the participants, and field observation and fieldnotes of my visits to the two departments. The ten participants' academic life stories were extracted from their narrative frames, interview transcripts, and reflective journals, as well as cross-references by other participants in the study. I have told the ten stories in a way that represents the interplay among various dimensions of the teachers' research life, including motivations, decisions, actions, and emotions. The systematic analysis and presentation of the ten stories within the two departments reveal an understanding of the complex interpersonal relations in these specific contexts as well as the uniqueness of each teacher as an individual. In the following findings chapters, the inherent connectedness and coherence in these life experiences within the context of the institutional research community are uncovered and introduced through a thematic analysis of the data. The next chapter will examine the four tensions that teachers experience concerning their research life, particularly in the two institutional contexts.

## CHAPTER 5: TENSIONS

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on four central tensions perceived by all the participants, as well as what contributed to these tensions. Freeman (1993) describes tensions in teaching practice as “divergences among different forces or elements in the teacher’s understanding of the school context, the subject matter, or the students” (p. 488). Alternatively, they are expressed as feelings of “discomforts or confusions” (p. 488) which may hamper teachers in aligning their practice with their beliefs or intentions in the classroom. Difficult situations and consequent emotions of stress and confusion are evident in teacher research experiences, where conflicting needs and interests arise from different directions, such as the university context, the academic community, students, and the teachers’ personal lives. The following tensions are salient in my analysis of data from both perspectives of content and context:

- (a) Isolated working patterns vs. desire for collaboration;
- (b) Controlled research motivation vs. autonomous research motivation;
- (c) Weak research competence and low research-efficacy vs. high demand for research productivity;
- (d) Researcher identity vs. other professional and personal identities.

These four tensions are described by participants either as difficult situations or tensions that generate feelings of discomfort and stress. I now present the four tensions one by one.

### **Isolated Working Patterns vs. Desire for Collaboration**

This section first introduces the situation of isolation and alienation in relation to the teachers’ research life in the two departments. Then, possible reasons are explored from intrapersonal, interpersonal and departmental perspectives. Finally, the desire for collaboration is illustrated in extracts of the participants’ narratives.

### ***Isolated Working Patterns***

Isolation and alienation perceived by teachers is not uncommon in their professional life and has become a major concern in the field of education (Dodor et al., 2010). The following findings show how teachers perceive this situation and what contributes to it in their research experience within the two institutional contexts.

The reported research activities that participants are generally involved in include reading literature, collecting and analysing data, writing up research papers, applying for research grants, applying to host research projects or to participate in other's research projects as a team member, attending and presenting at academic conferences, learning and updating research skills by participating in teacher learning groups inside or outside the department, and working in other institutions as a visiting academic scholar. Chances for collaboration among colleagues potentially exist in many of these activities, including joint work in research projects and co-authorship of publications.

However, individualism and exclusiveness are perceived as the most common research patterns by the participants. The feeling of loneliness as expressed in the words "always fight alone" or "feel lonely" is evident in the narratives of the participants, particularly in Department B (Gennya-I-2, Sophie- I-1, Zoe-R-March, Lucy-I-1).

An ethos of exclusiveness exists not only in the research process but in the dissemination of research outputs in Department B.

You will not know what studies your colleagues are doing until the end of the year when they list their research outputs for annual evaluation. ... We don't have a tradition to share our studies with each other. You'll never have a chance to read others' research proposals as they are kept as 'top secret'. You'll probably know the topics of others' study once it is enlisted in research grants and publicised on the university website. There's no access to further details. (Sophie-I-1)

Sharing of knowledge, skills, and insights achieved through teacher's independent inquiry helps create "greater potential for the knowledge ... to have influence beyond the contexts in which this knowledge is generated" (Borg 2010, p. 394). The failure of sharing research findings may mean missing the opportunities in which "different perspectives are aired, and understanding is shared" (Shaw and Perkins 1992, p. 178) and hence eliminate the possibility of making the achievements of individual learning more influential and sustainable for the wellbeing of the organization. In Department B, the long tradition of professional isolation poses a barrier to the potential of collaboration and dialogue among teachers.

While there might be little chance for genuine collaboration and sharing, pseudo-collaborative practice is common among teachers. For example, grant-funded projects are common channels for teacher collaboration in research and the research grants providers encourage teacher collaboration by specifying relevant prescriptions. However, superficial collaborations prevail in school-based research projects and collaborations are in name only. The common practice of collaboration in research projects can be summed up as follows: "You include me as a co-researcher in your project and as a return, I include you in my project" (*ni dai wo, wo dai ni* in Chinese). Gennya explains in the interview the way she collaborated with some of her colleagues.

We do have some collaboration in applying research projects. But that's just because some colleagues included me in their application for research grants. As a pay-back, I provide a chance to add their names to my application. Sometimes I may recruit the students in my colleagues' class to do a questionnaire for my study and in return, they will recruit my students to collect data for their study. That's all. We used to fight alone. Now we are nominally together and fight alone. (Gennya-I-3)

There are almost no discussions or reviews, no offering of suggestions, and no regular meetings in these contrived circumstances of collaboration. Teachers are interconnected in one research project not because of shared research interests but because of interpersonal relationships. The

collaboration is only confined to the act of applying for research grants but not in any discussion of the studies themselves. This kind of pseudo-collaborative practice may potentially produce a negative impact on teachers' willingness to collaborate with other colleagues. In the interview, Lucas recalled an unpleasant experience of his first collaboration in a research project, in which one of his colleagues played a leading role. The research project investigated an exploratory innovation of classroom teaching practice and its effectiveness in improving language teaching. Lucas had "a high expectation" of the collaboration, taking it seriously as "an opportunity to learn" from peers. However, the colleague failed to fulfil the duties and responsibilities of the role of a project coordinator. No meetings were organised. No plans, decisions, or follow-ups were communicated among the members. Finally, Lucas chose to quit the research project.

The potential reasons for professional isolation and alienation range from the intrapersonal level, to the interpersonal level, and the departmental level. At the intrapersonal level, weak research competence of teachers in general and lack of confidence in peer learning discourage and hinder open communication and collegial collaboration. Both Jason and Jerry, as team leaders, attribute the inactive research environment in the department to the limited number of teachers who have strong research competence. Sophie, in Department B, once published a book based on the joint practice of building up a research community within Department B involving herself and several colleagues. The book adopted a sociocultural perspective to explore their collaborative practice of learning to review literature, learning qualitative and quantitative methods, and sharing research designs. Evidence provided by her systematic qualitative study demonstrated the impact of this community on teacher culture, teachers' research competence, and motivation. Though the book was rooted in their learning community of practice and the findings had practical implications for enhancing collegial collaboration in their department, Sophie never attempted to share the findings of the book with her colleagues: "I don't think they would read it. And I never showed it to them. I was afraid that they would mock me as I was clear how shallow my study is" (Sophie-I-2).

Apart from weak research competence, limited research awareness among teachers is also evident at the intrapersonal level. Everyday topics for conversations among colleagues are “all around child education, house prices, teaching practice but research” (Jerry-I-1). This suggests that research has not “become a part of teachers’ life”. For example, Gennyra observed a problem of students’ mobile learning in her class. To find solutions, she developed an exploratory study on students’ investment in mobile learning and its relationship to achievement in language learning. Though this problem is common in her colleagues’ class, she did not discuss the research ideas with her colleagues. Gennyra gave an example in the interview:

If I happen to meet my colleagues over lunchtime on the campus, we sometimes discuss some common problems or phenomena in the classroom, such as students spending too much time surfing on the internet or playing computer games rather than using resources in mobile devices to learn English. But that’s it. We never think about working together to explore this problem as a research topic. ... In daily catch-ups, no one will initiate talk about their recent studies, including me. When we happen to meet my colleagues somewhere, we will talk about anything but our recent studies. (Gennyra-I-2)

Gennyra finds it awkward to discuss research ideas with her colleagues as it is not a routine or common practice. However, what is noteworthy is that although they often talk about common concerns related to teaching practice, the dialogues between Gennyra and her colleagues just remain at the experiential level. In fact, these informal discussions about classroom issues could have led to collaborative action research topics, and thus to the reasons behind as well as potential solutions to the teaching issues (Burns, 1999).

At the interpersonal level, the commonly recognised low research competence of colleagues results in a lack of confidence in peer learning. For instance, Gennyra has the habit of regularly searching for and reading recent publications of studies on the topic related to her research interest. However, she has “never” searched for or paid attention to any studies conducted by her colleagues: “I don’t



see any point to search and read studies of my colleagues. I only read studies by those leading experts. Why bother reading my colleagues' (Gennya-I-2)? Gennya does not see any value in learning from her peers' published research since she has great doubts about the quality and academic contribution of their studies. The lack of trust in their research competence prevents any opportunities for Gennya and her colleagues to discuss and share research insights.

Diverse research interests and different levels of commitment to academic advancement among the staff may also create a barrier to collegial collaboration, which usually requires reciprocal commitment. Though teaching is what every teacher does every day, not all are interested in or do pedagogy-related research. Jerry once organised a research activity, which involved guiding and mentoring teachers to read and evaluate some studies on a pedagogical topic. No more than 20 teachers joined in the activity: "Though we have more than 80 staff, not everyone is interested in pedagogical research. However, as associate dean for undergraduate and graduate studies, I have the responsibility to promote teaching research" (Jerry-I-1).

Jerry also tried to build up a research team in the field of neurocognitive linguistics, which is on the cutting-edge of trends nationwide. Even though it is one of the priority disciplines for development in the Department, there are only three teachers with doctoral degrees in this research field. In the interview, Jerry expressed his hope for more teachers with advanced research competence and similar research interests.

There are numerous in-depth and productive discussions among our three because we share the same research interest and research background. How I hope there will be more who share the same interest and ready to become one of our team. But so far none. (Jerry-I-1)

Even for those staff who have substantial research competence, collaboration among them may not necessarily occur due to the specific research area they are involved in. Maisie is one of the few teachers who study cognitive semantics in the Department. She cannot find colleagues with the

same shared research interest. Therefore, she chose to collaborate with her fellow PhD students in some publications. Maisie explained the reasons for her choice:

Every teacher who has PhD degree will have their own distinct research topics, which are usually quite diverse. ... If you are not doing the same topic, it will be hard to provide any valuable suggestions for others' study. (Maisie-I-1)

Teachers who have the same ideals and beliefs are always perceived to be appropriate for collegial collaboration. The word "like-minded" ("*zhitong, daohe*" in Chinese) is repeatedly emphasised in the narratives of the participants (Ella-I-2, Jerry-I-1, Gennya-I-3, Lucas-I-1, Sophie-I-3, Zoe-R-May, Maisie-I-1). In the interview, Gennya explained the difficulty in communicating and collaborating with her colleagues because she finds it hard to have like-minded colleagues in the institution.

The collaboration is something that requires commitment on both sides. It can never go in-depth unless the people involved in the collaboration are like-minded. ... I am willing to share my study and ideas with my colleagues. But what if they are not like-minded and even have no intention to listen? I think this is the exact current situation. (Gennya-I-1)

As a further example of interpersonal relationships among colleagues influencing the effectiveness of collegial communication and collaboration, Mia shared an experience of participating in a research seminar organised by the Department. In the seminar, one of her colleagues introduced a pedagogical theory. After her presentation, the dean first expressed his positive comments, and then following these encouraging comments other attendants complimented the presenter and talked about what they had learned from her presentation. Mia was disappointed by the outcome of the seminar and the fact that colleagues merely complimented each other rather than provided critical feedback and constructive suggestions. In the first interview, she explained:

It is just encouragement from a leader to his staff rather than a purely academic discussion.

The leader might be afraid of hurting that teacher. Chinese people always tend to mingle the

issues and people involved. ... They [the staff] are not critical at all. I thought the theory the presenter introduced was a bit out of date. Indeed, I thought I learned nothing from the presentation as well as the discussion that followed. (Mia-I-1)

Realising that explicitly expressing different ideas might lead to conflict among colleagues, the teachers tend to withhold their true thoughts as a strategy to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships in the institution. Consequently, further in-depth understanding and reflection through different perspectives is not achieved.

In addition to intrapersonal and interpersonal reasons for professional isolation and alienation, some aspects of departmental environment may result in professional isolation, poor communication, and collaboration among staff. "Egg-crate" physical spaces in the school have been found to be detrimental for teachers to engage in collaborative activities (Flinders, 1988). As I observed in both departments, most teachers have to travel a long distance every day from home to the campus, which is located far away from the city centre. After class, they have to catch the university shuttle bus back to the city centre. They come to the campus only if they have a class to teach or are asked by the administration to attend meetings. They have a common room to take a rest at lunchtime but a fixed workstation is unavailable for most of the teachers. Jerry depicts a picture of the work routine of Department A:

EFL teachers rarely see each other at the campus. They hurry to catch the shuttle bus back home immediately after they finish the class. Even when they happen to meet each other on the shuttle bus, they won't talk about any academic issues because that sounds quite absurd in that environment. (Jerry-I-1)

Moreover, a busy teaching schedule also makes it hard for teachers to spare time for any regular academic meetings. Jerry explains:

We have tried many ways to find a fixed timeslot for academic seminars among the colleagues but all failed. Teachers are fully scheduled for teaching almost every day and it is impossible to find a timeslot when everyone is available. (Jerry-I-1)

The physical conditions of time and space are unfavourable for teachers to get together for regular collective research activities, opportunities which have the potential to give rise to shared understanding and collaboration among colleagues.

Policies that induce competition among teachers at the department level are also influential in shaping either a competitive or collaborative relationship among the staff. Lucy provides one example to illustrate the exclusiveness resulting from the competition among the staff.

You have no way to know about the topics others are working on and they don't know about yours, either. Everyone applies for the research grant by themselves. It once happened that research questions in two of the three research proposals that teachers submitted were almost the same. (Lucy-I-1)

The overlapping of research proposals illustrates both the shared research interest among teachers and lack of transparency of their individual research practice. On the one hand, having a shared research interest may provide a basis for research collaboration. Yet, on the other hand, the lack of transparency of individual research practice may diminish the opportunity for collaboration among teachers, even those with shared research interests. This may also be explained by policies that provide scarce research funding, and "limited status quota" for academic promotion – policies that encourage competition among teachers.

Leadership at the departmental level is important for cultivating a learning environment for open communication and encouraging collaboration (Hargreaves, 2019). In Department A, a mismatch is found between open, equal academic communication and an "authoritarian orientation", a particular characteristic of leadership in the Chinese cultural context. Mia explicitly highlights the

negative impact of dominant leadership on transparent communication in an authoritarian-oriented context:

The precondition for communication is I am willing to voice my concern and you are ready to listen. The biggest problem in our department is all the staff is not willing to make any voice. Once in a meeting about staff relocation in the department, one old professor was trying to express her views gently. After only a few words, the dean interrupted her and said, 'You don't need to say that. We have already thought about it.' So in this situation, who else will voice their opinions? As a result, all the staff keeps silent. This is his [the dean] style. (Mia-I-1)

Willingness to communicate is an essential condition for open and effective communication. The assertive leadership of the dean does not put the staff in the centre of decision making, which destroys the willingness of the staff to contribute their opinions, even when they are actually at the centre of the issue. The communication can turn out to be ineffective when everyone involved tends to be muted.

### ***Desire for Collaboration***

In contrast to oppressive isolation and alienation in the workplace, participants (Genyya-I-3, Lucas-I-1, Lucy-I-1) at different stages of their career life all expressed their strong desire for open communication and collegial collaboration in the department. Lucy shared her happiness while being invited by Jason to join his research team.

When Jason called to invite me to join his research project, I was truly happy and without hesitation, I accept it. Deep in my heart, I always aspire for the opportunity to join in a team, collaborating with other colleagues and being mentored by senior experts. (Lucy-I-1)

In this section, the tension between professional isolation and alienation in the workplace and the desire for collaboration is illustrated with examples. Then the reasons for this tension are uncovered

from three perspectives: intrapersonal, interpersonal and institutional. Strong desire for teacher collaboration in their research practice is expressed because the relatedness through collaborative research opportunities constitutes a teacher' intrinsic motivation for research engagement (Durksen et al., 2017). The next section will focus on the second central theme of tensions that were found through thematic analysis: research motivation represented in "passive engagement" and "active engagement" in research.

### **Controlled Research Motivation vs. Autonomous Research Motivation**

This section focuses on the tension deriving from divergent motivational forces that drive teachers in research engagement. Deci and Ryan (2000) categorise diverse types of motivations along a continuum based on levels of autonomy and these motivations are then divided into two groups: controlled motivation and autonomous motivation. Informed by this categorisation, the divergent motivational forces identified in teacher research experiences from the thematic analysis are accordingly grouped into *controlled research motivation* and *autonomous research motivation*. This section demonstrates how teachers' choices and actions in their research engagement are shaped when tensions arise between these two perceived motivations in the two institutional departments.

#### ***Controlled Research Motivation***

Controlled motivation comprises two types of motivation: external motivation and introjected motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While external motivation exerts the most controlling power over individuals' behaviours by social contingencies, such as tangible rewards and threatened punishment, introjected motivation encompasses the process in which individuals unconsciously take in these external regulations and evaluate their behaviours to determine their alignment with them. Individuals may experience negative feelings, such as guilt or shame if they are unable to align themselves with the external requirements and thus do not achieve increased income or social

recognition (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Peng & Gao, 2019). These two types of motivation are closely associated with each other as demonstrated in this study.

Within the context of this study, the widely adopted research performance-based evaluation system generates a tight link between teacher's research productivity and their professional progression and well-being, including academic promotion and salary (Peng & Gao, 2019). Some teachers are engaged in research in order to meet the requirements set out in research policies and survive the annual review and research evaluations. They have taken in these external regulations and attempt to reach alignment with them.

"To achieve academic promotion" is identified by participants as a primary external regulation for teachers to be engaged in research. Maisie speaks out without any hesitation about her primary motivation to do research: "The primary motivation for me to do research is for academic promotion. This is the most direct reason. We all live in this material world. Therefore, we must follow the rules" (Maisie-I-1). Lucy also states: "Research is indispensable. To be more realistic, if you want an academic promotion, then you need to do research" (Lucy-I-1). Acknowledging their membership in "this material world", both Maisie and Lucy are pressured to join the "game" and show compliance to the rules and regulations of the game. It has become a matter of survival (Healey & Davies, 2019).

The policies and regulations that affect the teachers' professional life in these two departments include recruitment and evaluation policies, as well as rewarding and punishment policies. The employment policies generally prescribe the terms and period of an employment contract with teachers, the range of different academic rankings and conditions for academic promotion, as well as the expectations of research outputs to be produced by teachers in terms of their scope, level, and quantity. The policies also prescribe that publishing in top international journals or winning national-level awards will be rewarded with bonus payments, whereas failure to do so within the contract period review or annual review will be punished in different ways. This implies that

teachers' research experience might become one of "having to do well" rather than "choosing to perform well" (Deci & Ryan, 2010, p. 1). Teachers, in fact, are pressured to be engaged in research, and research outputs are just an instrument for achieving an academic promotion or avoiding punishment (Deci & Ryan, 2010). These social contingencies tend to produce control over teachers' research behaviours; for example, their rate of publication and research grant applications.

In order to win research grants at national or provincial levels, teachers tend to choose research topics that are prescribed or preferred by research funding agencies at all levels, including national levels, like the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, and provincial level. Sophie applied for a research grant from the provincial government Department of Philosophy and Social Science some years ago. She explained how her research project was shaped by the external regulations of the research funding agencies:

The topics that have the potential to win the grants must be related to the discipline of education or linguistics. You must approach it with a macro view and broader implication although it might not be directly related to your teaching practice. ... Those topics like EAP classroom teaching will never have a chance to win as they are not aligned with guidelines for research grants of the provincial government department of Philosophy and Social Science. ... For academic promotion, you must do some research that is not related to your teaching. (Sophie-I-1)

Sophie had selected "given" topics by research funding providers rather than develop her own research agenda relevant to the issues arising from her day-to-day experiences (McDonough & McDonough, 1990). For the application, she chose to forgo the topics of EAP classroom teaching, even though she has been deeply involved in EAP teaching reforms and could possibly generate further useful insights for her own teaching practice. Instead, Sophie carefully studied the guidelines and orientation of the research funding agent. She then chose to work on a topic most likely



favoured by the funding agent so as to increase her chances of being successful: EFL teacher professional development in China and abroad in the past two decades, which is a much broader topic and one with the potential for making generalisations. However, Sophie personally prefers doing qualitative studies, which she thinks will provide a deeper understanding by inquiring into individual life experiences. In the interviews, she contrasted the research traditions in China with those of other countries:

Maybe you can do it in foreign countries as a researcher in humanities or teacher education. That's their concern. But in China, it [individual life] does not receive the respect it deserves. You know, an individual teacher's voice is not easy to be heard. However, the most valuable thing about conducting research on teacher development is to get their voices to be heard, isn't it? (Sophie-I-3)

The narrowly defined and quantitative indicators of research performance, such as publications, research grants, and awards at different levels, may not only constrain teachers' autonomy to choose their research topics but may also lead to unethical conduct and opportunistic behaviours among the staff (Huang & Xu, 2020). Ella, for example, relates a story of lectures being presented by some experts who were more interested in sharing their successful experiences and strategies in applying for state-level research funding than in reporting on the details of studies they were doing:

The department leader is impatient now. Whenever it comes to the time to apply for national research grants, the school will call the attention of the teachers and push everyone to apply for them. You know, the application is not simply writing up a grant proposal. It's not wheeling and dealing. But the invited lectures all focus on those strategies to take advantage of applying for research grants. For example, you need to make sure the title of your grant proposal includes the word 'corpus', which is a hot topic now and therefore eye-catching to reviewers. ... I think it is totally meaningless. It is opposite to the spirit of research. (Ella-I-2)

To enhance the success of research grant applications and publications, the university and the institutions provide staff with opportunities to learn more about the process, such as organizing seminars on topics like ‘how to succeed in research fund applications’ or ‘how to publish in top journals’. But these opportunities are perceived to be “opposite to the spirit of research” (Ella-I-2) and, for Ella, arouse great resentment, who even uses the word “academic campaign” to describe the increasing emphasis on research productivity in the university and even across the country (Bai, 2018). As she elaborated:

I feel the whole nation is advocating utilitarianism. The hard index of research outputs is the only focus when the Minister of Education evaluates the university. Then it is the same when the university evaluates the departments and subsequently when the departments evaluate the individual staff. They are not concerned about the effects and the true value of the things we are doing but the numerical results. ... They are only used to fill in the forms of evaluation. (Ella-I-3)

The output-oriented policies are issued to motivate teachers to do research and more importantly, to produce as many research outputs as possible. However, these motivational strategies, both rewards for publication or research funding and a threat for failing to fulfil research requirements, undermine teachers’ autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Huang & Xu, 2020) and even invite unethical conduct and opportunistic behaviours, which may eventually negatively affect the long-term development of an academic community (Huang & Xu, 2020). Sophie also expressed her disdain against what she perceived to be morally wrong practice:

Only articles and grant projects count when it comes to academic promotion. Some people may take advantage of their social networks, “*guanxi*”, to win the grants. ... Some people may choose to publish in those core journals which is easy to get published even though it has no relevance to our research field. (Sophie-I-1)

As externally regulated behaviours are dependent on social contingencies, they show a tendency to decrease once those contingencies are withdrawn (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The first interview with Gennya occurred one year after she was promoted to associate professor. She recalled her research effort in preparation for her application for academic promotion:

Where to start? Because last year I was just promoted to associate professor. So, I would have a lot more to talk about if you interviewed me before last year ... because in those years I could concentrate on research. If you asked me what I did during summer vacation, I would do nothing but writing papers. ... I was still young and energetic at that time.

(Gennya-I-1)

Since being promoted, Gennya has not pushed herself too much in writing up papers or applying for research grants but has instead slowed down the pace and follows her own interest. In the interview, she said she felt at ease and displayed more control of her own research activities.

Now I have not much time and no more energy. I slow my pace as I also need to undertake my family responsibilities. I sometimes feel lost now and I need to find a balanced way out. ... Now no one forces me to engage in research. I do it as I like. (Gennya-I-1)

As the Department leader, Jerry also observed rise and fall of research performance in the Department in recent years. He explained as follows:

It is a noticeable tendency. The number of research outputs a few years ago was much higher than that of recent years. A few years ago, a large number of lecturers strived for the academic promotion of associate professors. Once they were entitled to associate professors, they no longer engaged themselves in research. Why? Because the title of associate professor can secure their teaching positions until they retire. After teaching, they only take care of their children. They account for the majority. In the Department, there is a

limited number of teachers with titles of associate professor or professor who are still engaged in research activities. (Jerry-I-1)

The contrast in the number of research outputs before and after academic promotion indicates that output-oriented research evaluation policies, as ruling orders, still play a vital role in driving teachers to be engaged in research activities, particularly in applying for research grants and writing journal articles. Once the pressure of academic promotion is relieved, teachers tend to withdraw from the prescribed research activities.

Meanwhile, even teachers are compelled to engage in research and unconsciously introject and partially internalise the external evaluations into the self, they do not necessarily accept the research responsibilities as part of their own professional life (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Lucas recalled an occasion when he felt ashamed and guilty because he failed to meet the research requirement in the annual review:

When it comes to the end of the year, everyone will have to display their research outputs in the annual department meeting. That moment is so ... [smiles awkwardly]. Everyone showcases those things. Then the big contrast will “hit” you. I was holding back the team.

Then I, I need to do something. (Lucas-I-1)

Not being able to produce enough publications or win enough research grants becomes a sign of failure in this specific context of an annual department meeting. Consequently, the negative emotions of shame and guilt resulting from not being able to reach the external standard externally drive Lucas in further research engagement.

In terms of controlled motivation in research engagement, there exist some differences in research assessment policies between the two departments. For example, in Department B, only young academic staff are required to have a PhD degree to be eligible for academic promotion. Research outputs are taken into account when teachers are evaluated for professional promotion, such as

from lecturer to associate professor. However, the ratio of research performance to teaching and administrative services in the annual review index is quite low and became even lower after Jason left the Department. There is no penalty for those who have low research outputs as the new manager thinks the priority of teachers' responsibility is teaching rather than research. Therefore, language teachers in Department B labelled as teachers of foundation courses rather than academic staff, are exempt from external evaluation unless they have aspirations for professional promotion, such as Sophie, Gennya, and Zoe. Compared with Department B, teachers in Department A are more prone to be constrained by external contingencies. Policies such as fixed-term working contracts with measurable indicators for research load, an annual review system, academic promotion procedures and standards, and even the punishment policies for not meeting research standards all give rise to external contingencies that pressure teachers to be engaged in research and to produce tangible research outputs (Huang & Xu, 2020).

### ***Autonomous Research Motivation***

Autonomous motivation involves volition in self-directed actions (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Individuals freely engage in and voluntarily commit themselves to activities that they find valuable, worthwhile and interesting. In this sense, research engagement is no longer a choice of compliance but a choice of proactive alignment with the teachers' beliefs, sense of self, and interest. When people recognise the underlying value or importance of an activity, they act autonomously as a response. This kind of motivation is defined as identified regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teachers may be engaged in research activity as they identify and recognize the value of research, for example, that research would better inform their teaching practice (Peng & Gao, 2019). This belief would probably have been shaped by their past educational experience, their everyday teaching and research practice as well as their interactions with other colleagues and academics.

In the case of Genny, the aim to improve her teaching practice through doing empirical research impels her to be constantly engaged in research, despite being overwhelmed by a heavy teaching workload:

The teaching workload is overwhelming. However, I firmly believe that teaching and research are mutually beneficial to each other. ... My research may not produce immediate or tangible research outputs, such as publication or research grants. However, I hope it can bring about some positive changes in my teaching and students' learning though it might not be so significant. (Genny-I-2)

Genny believes that research is not solely for theory-building but can be closely connected to teaching practice. She regularly thinks about ways to improve her teaching. She intentionally collects data from her teaching during one term, and then analyses them to generate findings that guide and improve her practice the next term. It is in this inquiry process that Genny finds the value of her research practice to help her solve problems in her teaching, which in turn motivates her to engage in research with more dedication and autonomy rather than doing research for the purpose only of publication.

Echoing Genny, who emphasises the close link between research and practice, Mia stresses her belief that research is an activity that not only requires a systematic process to understanding real life but should also have a transformative impact:

Research should provide implications for practice. But the research process should be scientific and convincing. If you just talk about your experience and reflections, they cannot be called research. You need to raise a question and testify it in the practice. I read a lot of action research articles these years because action research fits well with my way. (Mia-I-1)

Mia spent time reading research literature on action research because the legitimacy of and value in action research (Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019) accord with her beliefs about research. She did

not produce many research outputs in the form of journal articles and she did not win many research grants in her research engagement. However, in her teaching practice, she maintains a good habit of “reflecting on teaching practice” every time she finishes her class: “It’s based on my teaching in the classroom. I keep documenting the effects of teaching by collecting and analysing students’ responses to the class they just had. Accordingly, I reflect on their responses and improve my teaching” (Mia-I-2). Her continuous reflections gradually contribute to her developing expertise in teaching. In my interview with Ella, she mentioned that Mia has been collecting a large amount of data from her everyday teaching, which is mainly used to enhance her teaching rather than for the purposes of publication. In the past few years, she joined initiatives to introduce blended learning and flipped classroom teaching in the department. She integrated new models and approaches of project-based learning, blended learning and flipped classroom into her own class. This inquiry-oriented teaching and learning proved to be a great success as a teaching innovation. Mia constantly reflects on her teaching. For example, she began to shift her concern about various teaching methods and skills to those that never seem to change in education. And she became more interested in fundamental issues of teaching and learning, such as teacher-student relationship. She also read some studies and books in psychology and tried to apply some psychological strategies to develop and maintain an appropriate teacher-student relationship:

You know, this is not very much related to the content of your teaching. However, it helps to improve the interpersonal relationship between you and your students or your attitude towards your student once you respect your students as an adult, a collaborator. You’ll obtain some unexpected outcome, such as more effective learning. ... I became more understanding of the students, particularly those less competent students. ... I gave them more encouragement rather than contempt. They are moved and perform better by investing in more efforts. What motivates them to invest and commit is the emotional connection between you and your students, who aspire for recognition by their teacher.

(Mia-I-2)

Mia's continued reflective practice is acknowledged as one form of teacher research (Dikilitaş, 2015), though she may not even be aware that she is engaging in research. Yet, she firmly believes that reading literature and continuous reflection will empower her to make decisions about her own teaching practice. Therefore, she habitually works through a systematic process of inquiry, reflecting on her teaching, reading literature, observing her class, and collecting and analysing her observational data and the students' feedback. To some extent, therefore, she has incorporated the practice of reading research and continuous reflection as part of her professional practice, which she does automatically every day.

When an activity is perceived by individuals to be an inherent and indispensable part of their social duty or how they are recognised as a specific social role, they align their behaviours with their beliefs by engaging in this activity (Bai, 2018; Xu, 2014). Teachers may be engaged in research because they think that research, equally important to teaching, is part of their professional life and that their research may contribute to the advancement of the discipline (Peng & Gao, 2019). In the interview, Gennyah distinguished herself as a university teacher from teachers in high schools:

You are different from teachers in primary or high schools, who are struggling with graduation exams. You don't have such pressure, but you can't just finish your teaching hours. You have to be responsible for your students as well as your profession. (Gennyah-I-1)

Gennyah thinks doing research is an integral part of her professional life. This integrated motivation is also obvious in Maisie's statements about the reason behind her research engagement:

I think as long as you are a university teacher, you will not have the confidence to teach if you are not engaged in research. If you just tell the facts to the student, what's the difference between you and those primary and high school teachers? How do you differentiate yourself from them? It depends on your research. ... You are at least making inquiry. This aligns with the spirit of higher education. (Maisie-I-1)



Sophie also accepts academic pursuits as part of her identity as a university teacher: “I have a sense of self-actualization. ... I am now a university teacher and I should have to undertake some duties that are associated with this role” (Sophie-I-1). The self-perceived identity of teacher-researcher calls for participants’ action in research engagement. Gennya, Sophie and Maisie all distinguish themselves from high school teachers and therefore, distinguishable from the role of teacher-only practitioners. They are ready to take on the attached duties and responsibilities in academia as university academic staff. In this sense, their research engagement is more autonomous, though it is extrinsically motivated because it is still instrumental, for example, being beneficial to their teaching practice as well as aligning themselves with external expectations of the role of a university teacher.

When people invest effort in an activity because of enjoyment and interest, they are intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teachers may be engaged in research because of their curiosity about new knowledge and a sense of achievement acquired in the process of inquiry or publication (Xu, 2014). Gennya, for example, attributes her research engagement and sustained effort in research to her personal interest since she is not confronted with external pressure to be research-active:

I am working in this environment and this university. ... Why do I make these efforts and invest so much time and energy in research? ... I cannot influence others but I can decide where I want to go. I enjoy it and I’m willing to do, then just do it ... I do this simply because I’m interested in it. (Gennya-I-3)

Compared to other research-intensive faculties and universities, Gennya thinks that her colleagues are relatively research inactive and external pressure for research productivity is low in Department B. Despite this, she does not follow the majority but instead keeps updating her research skills by regularly attending online training courses: “I feel I need to keep learning not because I might be kicked out of my job, but I feel it’s really interesting” (Gennya-R-March).

Situated in the same research inactive department and university, Sophie also did not experience much external pressure to do research in the early stage of her career. She recalled her initial motivation for research engagement:

I felt so uneasy when I heard lots of new terms and ideas, such as teachers should not be a knowledge transmitter, but a facilitator. But how could I become a facilitator? I didn't want to be bewildered and experience the horror brought by ignorance. ... After I read books by Krashen, I felt relieved. It was just because you have broadened your visions and never stop looking outside. Gradually, a sense of confidence and assurance was achieved. This is the initial motivation for my research engagement. (Sophie-I-1)

Sophie initiated her research engagement out of anxiety about her ignorance and a natural curiosity for knowledge. She has been well informed through reading literature, thereby transcending the limitations of her mind, which in turn, sustains her commitment to research practice as part of her professional life. Both Sophie and Gennya demonstrate a full sense of willingness and they respond to the unfavourable research environment in their faculty with a real sense of choice (Deci & Ryan, 2010).

Autonomous motivation is associated with higher commitment and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It also helps to generate courage and resilience to overcome barriers to research engagement, such as lack of time, which has been reported in many studies as one of the major barriers that impede teacher research engagement (Borg & Liu, 2013; Peng & Gao, 2019; Xu, 2014;). Mia, however, believes that a heavy teaching load and no specific time for research engagement are merely excuses for research inactivity:

It's not just research engagement. It's everything in our life. Provided that you don't have much intrinsic motivation, you'll never have time. It's your choice of priority. You'll always find time for those issues that are important to you or what you enjoy. (Mia-I-2)

Mia's explanation of people's choice of priority indicates that intrinsic motivation is key in teachers' choices and can empower their actions in their life when they are constantly being confronted with constraints of time, conflicting interests and social identities.

So far, the perceived motivations that drive the participants into research engagement are represented linearly, falling into the two categories of controlled motivation (external motivation and introjected motivation) and autonomous motivation (identified motivation, integrated motivation, and intrinsic motivation). The organismic-dialectical perspective of self-determination theory suggests an active and natural internalisation process in which individuals tend to transform the external regulations into their own inner values once they identify with the significance of these social sanctioned requests (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, this internalisation process could be forestalled when the contextual conditions are more controlling than supportive, and consequently, tension arises between controlled motivation and autonomous motivation. The imbalance of research and teaching in universities, quantity-based and output-oriented research reward and punishment policies, department leaders' beliefs and devaluing of teacher research as well as controlling leadership, deny the opportunity for teachers to freely make decisions about their research engagement and to take actions that align with their beliefs and values of teacher research.

### **Weak Research Competence and Perceived Low Research Self-Efficacy vs. Lack of Scaffolding and Sources of Research Self-Efficacy**

The third salient tension emerging from the narratives of participants lies in their perceived low research self-efficacy vs. lack of sources of self-efficacy. On the one hand, most of the teacher participants reported a weak sense of confidence in their capabilities to carry out research-related tasks, such as designing and managing research, and to produce desired outcomes through action, such as writing and publishing journal articles (Hemmings & Kay, 2010). On the other hand, there is a lack of sources of research self-efficacy available as suggested by Bandura (1994): mastery

experiences, vicarious experiences by social models, verbal persuasion, favourable emotional states (also see discussion in Chapter 3 Literature review, p. 45).

### ***Weak Research Competence and Perceived Low Research Self-Efficacy***

Studies have shown that weak research competence among teachers is one of the critical barriers to teacher research engagement (Borg & Liu 2013, Xu, 2014). Demographic information regarding the educational qualifications of teachers in both of the departments shows that the majority of them do not have PhD qualifications and few of them have long-term systematic training in doing research. Except for the two leader participants, only one of the teacher participants has a doctoral qualification in a top-ranking university. Public documents of teachers' publications and research projects show that even in Department A, which is in a 985 project university, no more than one-quarter of the staff has had experience in publishing a journal article in core journals as required by the university. In the case of Department B, in 2017 only two research grants at the provincial level were awarded and only one article by Jason was published in a CSSCI journal. In every annual report to the university from 2015 to 2017, Jason highlighted the low qualifications of teachers and the urgent need to improve teachers' research knowledge and skills. Although research productivity in the form of journal articles and research grants may not exactly reflect teachers' research competence and actual research efficacy, it does to some extent indicate that teachers may not possess the research knowledge and skills required for achieving the desired standard. Ella identified that teachers lack knowledge and skills since they had not received any systematic academic training, such as doctoral study.

They even had no idea what research is. They feel quite lost. I know some teachers have collected a big amount of data, for example, students' assignments. They may feel they are worthy of an inquiry, but they just don't know how. (Ella-I-1)

What is evident here is not only participants' perceived low research self-efficacy but also low research efficacy of their colleagues, which signifies low collective efficacy of their departments. The

perceived low research efficacy may result in two possible actions: negative and positive. The negative one is admitting one's inability and tending to give up because they do not believe they can reach the goals set by the department, such as publishing in top-tier journals or winning national-level research grants (Wood & Bandura, 1989). In the interview, Ella shared her observation about how teachers' perceived low research self-efficacy leads to their choice of avoidance and non-participation in research practice.

Some teachers say that only publications in CSSCI journals are recognised in the evaluation system. ... It's like jumping for a peach on a tree. If it is achievable by only jumping, I will definitely try. But if it is too far to reach, like publishing in core journals, I will just give up because I do not have any experience of publishing. (Ella-I-3)

When teachers doubt their capabilities of publishing in top-tier journals, they tend to dwell on their personal deficiencies, slacken their effort and give up research activity of publishing (Bandura, 1994).

Ella also describes a potentially conflicting scene in a meeting in the department:

Every end of the year, we would have a meeting to share our teaching experiences. Every teacher shows great enthusiasm. There's no break during the three-hour meeting. Everyone is eager to share their brilliant teaching designs with other colleagues, which is often followed by a heated discussion amongst us. However, all things cool down when it comes to teaching-oriented research. The traditional interpretation of research is writing up journal articles and publications in high-ranking journals, which is by no means an easy task. Teachers would rather commit more time to teaching design than doing research and writing up papers. (Ella-I-3)

Evidently, for these teachers, teaching is a much easier and manageable task, over which they are able to exercise greater control and autonomy. Therefore, they more readily involve themselves in teaching and are confident while communicating with their colleagues about tackling challenges in their teaching practice. However, when the interpretation of research is associated with publishing

in top-tier journals and winning national-level research grants, it becomes a more complex and arduous process, which they believe is far beyond their capability and their control (Bailey, 1999). Since they are not sure whether their efforts will eventually prove to be worthwhile, their perceived high teaching self-efficacy and low research self-efficacy direct their choice of teaching over research. Another negative effect of low collective efficacy is a lack of trust in among colleagues in the department, which may hinder the willingness for collaborating with their colleagues in research activities. This lack of collaboration among colleagues has been illustrated in the first tension of isolated working patterns vs. desire for collaboration in the previous section.

The positive action stemming from perceived low research self-efficacy is realising one's limitations and taking it as a stimulus to make an effort to improve relevant knowledge and skills (Hiver, 2013; Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016). As Genny reflects in the interview, "I felt a great distance between myself and those expert researchers. Yet, this incites me to move ahead." Being aware of that limitation, Genny taught herself research skills and tools, such as SPSS, carefully studied the articles in those top-tier journals, and followed their practice. Realising that they do not possess the research knowledge and skills required for doing research and publishing, both Jerry and Jason, at an early stage of their careers, chose to attend the doctoral training programme, which set the foundation for their future academic development.

Researcher self-efficacy is not a fixed trait but a fluid state that changes over time and through experience (Bandura, 1994). For example, Mia recalled her research experience during her Master's programme when she enjoyed reading literature with great intrinsic motivation for research. Her successful experiences of publishing in top journals and positive feedback from her peer schoolmates form and strengthen her research self-efficacy:

When I was studying in the MA programme, I thought I was an excellent researcher. I once had great confidence. ... Whenever my classmates met any difficulty in research, they would

come to me for help. I once had a great sense of achievement and confidence in my research competence. (Mia-I-1)

However, in the interview, Mia expressed little confidence in her research competence as she has not been research active for ten years and she was unsure about her future as a researcher.

After I came to University A, I changed. ... I don't have any confidence as I haven't done any studies in the past ten years. How could I do research and produce an article? Maybe, at the age of 40, it is an opportunity to restart. Maybe, I don't know. (Mia-I-1)

Mia contrasts her situation as an "excellent teacher, struggling researcher", which reflects two conflicting and competing selves.

Most teacher participants reported that a perceived low research self-efficacy had a positive effect on them by motivating them to improve relevant research knowledge and skills when being invited to evaluate themselves as a researcher in narrative frames. Yet, most of them admit that compared to themselves as a qualified teacher, they are "far from being called a researcher" and that there is still a significant gap between their actual self and ideal self as a researcher. Even Sophie, who has been research active for more than ten years, depicts herself as a "beginner" researcher. As mentioned in previous sections, though she did a study on teachers' professional development and published the work, she is not confident to share it with her colleagues.

One exception is the case of Maisie, who is the only teacher with a doctorate. Compared with the other teachers, Maisie is the most research active and productive. She documented in her narrative frame that in recent years, she presented in seven academic conferences and forums, held four research grants, and published six articles in top-tier journals in China and one in an international journal. In all her interviews and reflective journals, she never reported any difficulty in relation to research knowledge and skills or lack of confidence in her research competence. She attributed her

failure in meeting the research requirements by the department not to her low capability but to lack of time.

### ***Lack of Scaffolding and Sources of Research Self-Efficacy***

Despite the urgent need to improve teachers' research competence, some teacher participants felt they struggled to get mentoring or guidance from inside the department, a problem identified by many other studies in Chinese higher education contexts (Zhou & Zhang, 2016; Zuo & Yang, 2019). Ella thinks it is the responsibility of the department to help teachers grow: "You can't leave them [teachers with low research competence] behind. And you can't fire them. In fact, these teachers themselves are willing and able to make self-development through research engagement" (Ella-I-2). She made an analogy between gardening and cultivating a nurturing institutional environment for teacher professional development: "You can't just sit and wait till the time of harvest. You have to sow the seeds, water the plants, and feed the plants." This responds to the analogy in SDT, whereby the process of supporting these three psychosocial needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, is likened to the growing a plant with satisfaction of its biological needs, sun, soil and water as nutrients (Sheldon & Ryan, 2011, p. 41).

Though it was evident in narrative frames that one-shot lectures or seminars could help teachers stay current with research or broaden their vision, in the interview, they are often considered to be no more than a mere transmission of knowledge, which might not be relevant or applicable to the contexts where teachers work. As coordinator of teacher development in the department, Ella, based on her observation and her own research experience, stresses that the kind of guidance teachers need badly is the step-by-step and context-embedded guidance throughout their research projects. This expectation is mirrored in Lucas' experience. He spent many years in discovering his real research interest before he was nominated by the department to be in charge of a school-based English language assessment project. He is filled with passion for this project and sticks to language assessment as his research interest. However, he is confronted with difficulties when it comes to the



stage of data analysis and wishes for guidance from someone who has expertise in this area. Lucas stresses the importance of step-by-step support in the initial stage of teacher research engagement:

This is not only a matter of funding. The more we need is guidance that helps the teacher step-by-step in their research from the start. This works in accordance with the law of physics. You have to provide them with an initial driving force so that they can gradually accelerate later on. This is a kind of scaffolding. (Lucas-I-1)

The biggest challenge that Lucas has met in his research project on university-based assessment is the methods of data analysis. In the department, there is no expert in this field. Teachers have to “learn and explore on their own”, which is a task he finds “very time-consuming and exhausting”. Again, in the interview, Lucas emphasises the importance of project-oriented scaffolding from expert researchers.

Our biggest challenge is not a lack of book knowledge but practical guidance. ... If no one guides you at the beginning, you will probably walk in the wrong direction and your data will have a flaw. This will lead to more difficulties in the future. (Lucas-I-1)

Parallel with the need to improve teachers’ research competence is the essential of heightening teachers’ research self-efficacy beliefs, which are “the most important determinants of the behaviours people choose to engage in and how much they persevere in their efforts in the face of obstacles and challenges” (Maddux, 2005, p. 277). Despite the importance of teachers’ research self-efficacy in directing their actions and staying resilient in the face of challenges, there seem to be limited sources of research self-efficacy available to support teachers to develop their self-efficacy beliefs, as suggested by Bandura (1994): mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, positive emotional states.

First, teachers lack of previous successful experiences in their research engagement, which are labelled as direct mastery experiences. Some teacher participants have shared their experiences of

achieving the goals they have set for themselves, such as mastering research software. These experiences of success made them feel more competent. For instance, Zoe taught herself the CiteSpace software of despite challenges. She experienced a great sense of satisfaction, which directed her commitment to do more studies making use of CiteSpace. However, except for Maisie and Ella, as shown in their research records, few of the teacher participants have mastery experiences of publishing in top-tier journals or winning national-level research grants, which are imposed standards and goals set by the department. This might be helpful to explain how teachers tend to underestimate themselves as researchers when asked in the interviews.

Vicarious experiences, the second source of self-efficacy as suggested by Bandura (1994), rise from the observation of colleagues or other teachers, who once were weak in research competence and similarly constrained by the context but succeeded by using their perseverance and effort to break through the barriers. The observation of other teachers' research experiences of resilience and success may help project their own possible self and lead to beliefs that they too can learn research knowledge and skills, conduct successful studies and publish. However, the source of self-efficacy is rare. Most of the colleagues in their local community are weak in research competence, have low research engagement, and seldomly engage in research. Gennya remembered the days of her early career stage and said: "You found that few teachers were engaged in research. ... The working life was just too easy and comfortable." While most of teachers in the department do not engage in research, "they tend to mirror others to see themselves as acceptable and normal to not be engaged in research" (Zhou & Zhang, 2016). Therefore, Gennya always felt she was perceived as a deviant person regarding her engagement in research. This is also verified in Zoe's description of this situation in her reflective journal:

Fewer and fewer teachers would commit to research engagement. Even though some senior teachers did not have any high-quality research outputs, they were promoted to be professors and associate professors because of the historically low threshold requirements

for academic promotion. This group of teachers is no longer engaged in research now and they just idle time away, waiting for retirement. Another group of teachers, who are recently promoted to be professors and associate professors, most made it through “*renmai*” or “*guanxi*” [social networking resources]. Their research outputs [low quality but published in core journals] for academic promotion say it by themselves. Though the university is calling out to apply for a doctoral programme to increase the research reputation, I don’t see any ambition [ and real effort] among both the leaders and average teachers. (Zoe-R-May)

Thirdly, there was a lack of verbal persuasion, or encouragement from the community and particularly leaders. Verbal persuasion, such as positive feedback from others on their capability to conduct research, can help increase teachers research self-efficacy. Having leaders or people who encourage teachers and let them know that they believe in their abilities to do research would promote teachers’ intrinsic motivation, which might result in teachers’ sustaining effort in research engagement. However, in Department A, the dean has a different belief about research and its relationship with teaching from that held by teachers in his department. As reported by the participants, the dean does not recognise the legitimacy of educational research, and he conveys these beliefs and values in public, as represented by Ella:

He [the dean] sticks to the traditions of research in the field of foreign languages and literature, which focuses on English literature, theoretical linguistics, philosophy, and culture. For him, these should be the core of the research agenda while teaching-based research cannot even be labelled as academic research. ... Now the atmosphere is whenever it comes to research, they only talk about literature and philosophy. Teaching-based research is not counted as research at all. Then in this case, who will invest their time in teaching-based research? (Ella-I-2)

Meanwhile, the dean belittles the value of practitioner research and even undermines teachers' competence and commitment in doing teaching-based research and evidence-based teaching. Mia expressed her complaints about the leader's denial of the scholarship of teaching:

He always criticises us for not producing enough outputs and fulfilling research tasks. ... He says that everyone can do a good job in teaching, but not in research. He devalues those who devote themselves to teaching. He does not recognize the great effort teachers have put in teaching. He does not understand what the relationship between teaching and research is. (Mia-I-1)

By expressing negative comments on teacher research, the dean is persuading teachers that they lack capabilities to conduct real research in his perception. The dean's rejecting verbal feedback has exerted an impact on teachers' judgements of their research self-efficacy in that some teachers give up research activities which could otherwise cultivate the potentialities.

The discouraging feedback does not only always be in verbal forms. It is conveyed in the research policies which discriminate against teaching-based research as compared to research in other disciplines. Although the two universities claim in their policies and public documents that teaching and research are both of great importance to their development, Ella elaborates how teaching-based research is devalued in the research policies of University A:

According to university policy, teaching-based research is different from academic research and therefore the two are evaluated independently. It is prescribed that teaching-based research needs to be published in key journals as listed by the Office of Educational Administration [lower requirement]. But for academic research in science, you have to publish in journals of SCI Q1. They are different from our discipline. In applied linguistics or education, teaching-based research is part of academic research. However, at the university level, the perception of teaching-based research and academic research are different and

the two are independent. This perception, in turn, has a great impact on our department. ...

Teaching-based research is not taken as part of academic research. (Ella-I-1)

For example, Lucas applied for a university-level grant which is funded by the Office of Educational Administration. He failed and attributed it to the mismatch between his research focus and the criteria of this particular research grant application. He documented as follows his application experience in his reflective journal right after it happened:

The criterion is based on how the curriculum is designed and what innovation represented in the teaching methodology and assessment. ... My research focuses on the washback effect of assessment on teaching. In other words, my research project is more suitable to apply for social science and humanity research grants funded by the Office of Academic Research.

(Lucas-R-June)

The research funding from different sources is based on conventional beliefs that go against the integration of teaching and research (Brew, 2010). Similar to Department A, in Department B separate considerations of teaching and research are evident in the research evaluation system and promotion procedures. Lucy expressed her confusion about the separation of teaching and research:

In annual appraisal, teaching-based research and academic research are separated, which I think is unreasonable. ... My research so far is mainly categorised as teaching-based research. According to the policy, I don't have any outcome of academic research. ... Academic research, for example, theory or model building or phenomenon study, is pure research and is supposed to be not necessarily related to teaching practice. But what I'm doing is all teaching-based empirical research. I think the ultimate goal of research should be to provide implications for teaching practice. There's no way to separate teaching and research. But now, the evaluation system separates the two. (Lucy-I-2)

Despite the widely recognised benefits of teaching-based inquiry for improving teachers' effectiveness in the classrooms, empowering teachers as knowledge generators, and even contributors to the discipline knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990), the negative feedback from the leaders and discrimination against teaching-based research by research policies converge to project a peripheral legitimacy of teaching-based research, and tend to result in teachers having low research self-efficacy.

Lastly, teachers' self-efficacy is also influenced by their emotional states. Positive emotions related to teachers' research engagement, such as joy, interest, gratitude, and inspiration, boost their intrinsic motivation and confidence in their abilities (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). On the contrary, negative emotions, such as depression, stress, or tension, decrease their confidence and willingness to involve themselves (Tran et al., 2017). In teachers' research engagement, particularly when they are driven by external pressure, it is common that teachers experience negative emotions more than positive ones. This is explicitly voiced by Sophie. She started her research life primarily out of a natural curiosity for knowledge and a sense of satisfaction and was promoted to associate professor within ten years, which was quite rare at that time. In recent years, she has worked hard aiming for the title of professor. She shared with me her experience in applying for the title of professor. She expressed her vulnerability and desperation in the face of research requirements and policies, which do not recognise her effort.

So, evaluation. Its washback overwhelms anything else. It will quash your conviction and blow all your passion into pieces. ... You will gain nothing, neither fame nor money, even though you have invested too much effort. Why not just teach and live my own life? Why do I have to engage myself in this? You know, there's only 0.5 mm between ideal and reality. You are always waving in between. Today, you do research as your ideal. Tomorrow, you come back to reality. ... So now I will only finish the project I'm engaged in and wait for the retirement. (Sophie-I-2)

For Sophie, intrinsic motivation seems not to be enough for sustaining research engagement. The failure to win recognition by the university as a researcher dampens her research self-efficacy and leads to negative emotions of disappointment and anger. Meanwhile, the output-oriented research policies of the university, which emphasise the number of publications in top-tier journals, induce academic misconduct among some teachers, such as buying articles or paying for publication. The sense of desperation and frustration were also frequently present in Zoe's interviews and reflective journals:

The environment is full of negative energy. Sometimes, I feel so lonely in research engagement. I can't see any benefits. In fact, those teachers who take advantage and become popular are always those who are not seriously committing themselves in research.  
(Zoe-R-May)

In Department A, the implementation of research policies also aroused negative emotions among teachers. One critical incident happened two months right before I came to the department and started my first round of interviews. All teacher participants in the department talked with me about the incident. It happened during the employment review, which is done every four years. Those teachers who did not meet the research output requirement were deprived of an annual bonus at the end of the year. For instance, one teacher received the penalty because she had not produced three peer-reviewed journal articles as prescribed in the contract, even though she managed to publish one article, one translation, and one monograph. In total, more than half of the teachers were affected by this policy. This output-oriented punishment brings great harm to the research culture, as well as to the teachers' enthusiasm for doing research. They respond either with tacit compliance or withdrawal from research engagement altogether. Mia explained:

I feel so depressed in this environment. ... I reflect on myself and found I am just as rebellious as my son in his puberty. ... I don't want to be controlled by others. ... Every day he [the leader] repeatedly says that you must do research. But why should we? The

department treats staff the way parents do to their children. ... The more you try to control and impose on him, the less likely he will do as you like. You must give him enough room to develop his interest. I could finish reading one book of more than ten thousand pages just within two days. I wouldn't feel it hard because I have intrinsic motivation. I have great empathy about the book and even cried while reading. This is what learning should be like. If you could identify such an intrinsic motivation, you will never feel it hard or painful. (Mia-I-1)

Mia describes her perceived institutional atmosphere after this incident like "horrible silence in winter" as no one argued against this publicly. Ella, as a coordinator and model teacher in the department, also perceived the negative response in teachers' engagement in collective research activities organised by the department. Before the incident, teachers were active in attending online research training courses on research methods or participating in collective reflection after they finished online teaching training courses that were closely related to their teaching practice. Initially, they did not produce many research outputs because "they don't know how to do research". But after the incident, "they just don't want to do research" (Ella-I-1). The punishment policy does not help enhance teacher research engagement as it is expected to do. Instead, it dampens teachers' enthusiasm for research and thwarts teachers' self-directed research behaviours.

To sum up, the perceived tension of low research self-efficacy vs. lack of sources of self-efficacy is penetrating in the narratives of participants. Having no systematic research training in pre-service education programmes, as well as the absence of mentoring and scaffolding during their research practice, constrains teachers' autonomy in research and impedes their actions in their research practice. The resulting low research self-efficacy could either restrain them from taking challenges or inspire them to improve their research knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, the tension is intensified when there is a lack of sources to boost teachers' research self-efficacy.



## **Researcher Identity vs. Other Professional and Personal Identities**

Apart from teacher isolation, low intrinsic motivation, and weak research competence, conflicting social duties also put teachers in a stressful situation. Duties competing for time and energy constitute a fourth tension emerging from the analysis of the participants' narratives. This section will firstly show how participants perceive themselves as researchers. Then it will illustrate how tensions arise and how they respond to them when their research duties and their family duties and other professional duties, such as being teachers and teacher leaders, collide in multiple social contexts where they live and work.

### ***Researcher Identity***

The identity of teacher as a researcher is essential to teacher professional development in that it is not only necessary for teachers to be reflective practitioners but legitimatises teacher research as a valuable activity for ongoing professional identity development (Banegas & Cad, 2019; Borg, 2016b; Yuan & Burns, 2017). Although there is not a clear-cut definition of teacher-researcher identity, it is largely agreed that developing a teacher-researcher identity is a dynamic, relational and complex process in which individual's beliefs and notions of themselves constantly interact with other people over different educational and career stages and at various levels of social contexts, such as academic learning contexts (e.g., MA and doctoral programmes), institutional contexts, and broader sociocultural and ideological contexts (Barkhuizen, 2017a; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Huang & Guo, 2019; Xu, 2014). Teacher professional identity is also a process which comprises a dynamic interaction between individual agency and structure, with both shaping and being shaped by the other (Beijaard et al., 2004). The dynamic and relational nature of identity development is evident and prevailing in the participants' experiences of identity development as a teacher-researcher, though their experiences themselves are unique.

Academic learning contexts have had a great impact on the initial formation of some of the participants' teacher-researcher identity (Zuo & Yang, 2019). These academic learning contexts can

be formal, like qualification programmes, or informal, such as a short-term teacher education programme. Jason, Jerry, and Maisie, who are the only three participants with a doctorate, all attribute their research skills and self-efficacy, which are pivotal components of researcher identity, to the systematic academic training experiences during their PhD programmes. The academic network they have developed from these experiences provides them with a strong sense of belonging to the academic community. However, these formal educational experiences did not necessarily shape their identity as a teacher-researcher as their research interest in PhD projects, such as cognitive linguistics and neurolinguistics, are not directly related to teaching practice. As Jason said:

I once thought teaching and research are independent. Upon my graduation from PhD programme, I was not interested in teaching. ... Though I was doing research in the field of applied linguistics, I never thought about how I could relate teaching to my research. (Jason-I-1)

It is not until they started teaching in the workplace that they realised the close connection between teaching and research and embraced teacher-researcher as a new component of their professional identity. However, the participants' experiences as reflected in their narratives show that their institutional contexts could be both conducive to and unsupportive of the formation and development of their teacher-researcher identities, particularly for those teachers with MA qualifications (Huang & Guo, 2019). In the early stage of her career, when there was not much emphasis on research at the university, Sophie started teaching-oriented research initially out of autonomous motivation. She did this with the intention of improving her teaching practice and her critical reflection on the knowledge base imposed on her. Her strong sense of herself as a teacher-researcher impelled her to initiate a research learning community in the department, where she improved her research knowledge and skills and became connected with her colleagues who were also embracing researcher as part of their professional identity. Nevertheless, her intrinsic research

motivation and her identity as a teacher-researcher were not strong enough to resist the adverse effects of the stringent research policies of the university, which she discovered when she tried to align her ideal self with the self imposed by her workplace. A similar negative impact was evident in Mia's early research experiences. In her MA programme, Mia had a high sense of research self-efficacy and she was one of few participants who published in a core journal as a Master student. Nevertheless, she turned up to be research-inactive after she joined Department A as an English teacher. She explained this change as a response to the pressing and output-oriented research environment. However, the impact of increasing emphasis on research at the university and the department is not always negative. The pressure impels some teachers to begin to rethink their professional life as a teacher, particularly those novice teachers, like Lucy and Maisie. With the increasing threshold for recruitment of university teachers and academic promotion, they see teacher-researcher as a "trendy and even a must for university obligation". When they began to set small goals and attained them through their effort, the success in specific tasks would gradually increase their self-efficacy and encourage them to engage more in research. This is how institutional context plays a conducive role in shaping their research engagement (Huang & Guo, 2019).

Teachers, as social actors, are not just doing research in their professional world. They are also undertaking teaching as an essential part of their professional life and playing different roles and making identity choices along a foreground-background continuum over different life phases (Barkhuizen, 2017b). Therefore, it is inappropriate to examine the issue of teachers' researcher identity without reference to other identities they simultaneously negotiate such as "teacher" in institutional contexts as well as other broader sociocultural contexts, such as families.

### ***Other Professional and Personal Identities***

Tension arises when teachers' research engagement, whether on their own accord or as a required duty, competes for time and energy with their family duties and other professional duties (Healey,

2000). All the participants report that heavy teaching workloads occupy a lot of time and were detrimental to their efforts to devote time to research activities. The average teaching hours in University A is 12 hours per week while in University B it is 25 hours per week, and this does not include time teachers spend preparing lessons and marking assignments. In the third interview, Sophie said that in the previous semester, she had taught four completely different courses. This means she had to spend much more time preparing lessons than those teachers who prepared and taught one course, repeating the teaching content to different groups of students. She was so tired in the semester that she made little progress with her research project.

In addition, participants like Jason, Jerry, Ella, Maisie, Lucas, Ella, and Zoe, are occupied with administrative and service duties, such as writing up various public documents and reports, coordinating teaching arrangements, developing new curriculums and course designs of new programmes, and so on. In response to the question “What are the difficulties in the research you are doing?”, Ella documented four consecutive monthly reflective journals.

In March, she wrote:

No time. Doing research, careful thinking, and synthesizing all require an uninterrupted period of time. This is the beginning of the new semester and I have to deal with all trivials concerning teaching and administration. I don't have a peace of mind to think about my research design. How I miss the past winter break! (Ella-R-March)

In April, again she wrote:

Well, again no time. (Ella-R-April)

In May, still, there is little time available for her and her colleagues to discuss their research projects:

The only available time for discussion every week is when we had lunch together after class. We might have to wait until this summer break so that we can focus on that. (Ella-R-May)

In July, she was busy preparing for the teaching work for the next semester:

Time and energy involvement is a big challenge. This June and July, I spent a lot of time coordinating all the resources concerning teaching for the next semester. (Ella-R-July)

Ella's reflective journal documents how teaching and administrative work constrain her research activity. In the interview with Ella half a year later, she still did not make any progress with her research project. Although Ella has a great passion for the project personally, she had been fettered by other administrative responsibilities that she was consistently forced to prioritize over her research.

I have a deep feeling that your will is so powerless and negligible when confronted with collective force. Though I strived for finishing this article, I had to put it aside when I have been anticipated and harassed by staff involved in different programmes at different levels. (Ella-I-3)

Though Ella firmly believes in the complementary nature of teaching and research, in practice these two activities are different, requiring different cognitive processes and thinking styles.

Teaching is never-ending because your students always push you forward by giving you feedback and stimulus. In contrast, research is by nature a lonely journey. Even though you get feedback from your colleagues or team members, the writing-up process is lonely, and you need to be left alone to finish this task. ... In fact, I'm working in two different states while teaching and doing research. (Ella-I-1)

The shift between these two states is difficult for Ella during the teaching semesters. The time possibly available for her to focus on research is during the summer or winter break. However, she points out another major challenge for female teachers: "In the summer break, you don't need to teach. However, you are confronted with more petty housework and caregiving" (Ella-I-1). Ella's concern is mirrored in Maisie's reflective journal during the summer break:

In the break, I spent most of the time taking care of the child, accompanying him for all tutoring lessons, swimming, badminton, and English. I almost had no time of my own. It might be better when the new semester starts. (Maisie-R-June)

During the semesters, teachers are occupied by a heavy teaching workload and look forward to the summer break and winter break in order to concentrate on their research. However, during the break, they find themselves swamped by household duties. Family duties, such as child care and household chores, in sum, are identified by all the male and female participants as another force distracting them from their research engagement.

Jason, Jerry, and Lucas are three male participants. They do not report much interference from their own family life. However, they all point out the prevailing hard situation for female teachers, who account for the majority of the staff. For example, Jason attributes some teachers' poor research awareness and unsatisfactory research engagement partially to the gender roles of female teachers, reflecting social norms (Healey & Davies, 2019). He elaborated on how female teachers are constrained by the family duties in the interview:

This is related to gender roles. A social division of labour between males and females does exist. Consequently, the socioculturally dominant ideas about female's primary roles to take care of family and child restrain their time and efforts devoted to research engagement. ...

This retarding force created by the family burdens is so strong and irresistible. It seems to be an unconquerable obstacle. You can't leave your little child behind. (Jason-I-1)

Maisie is the only teacher participant who has a PhD degree and has achieved a good record of publication. She compares her research achievement with her male classmates in her PhD programme and attributes the difference to their different family responsibilities.

Those male classmates make bigger achievements. They don't need to take care of the housework and child. I won more scholarships than them while doing PhD study. But now he far outnumbers me in publication. (Maisie-I-1)

Maisie highlights that the fast-paced economic growth in China demands that female teachers shoulder the dual responsibilities of family life and work.

In the past five years, there has been a big change in China's family planning policy, which allows couples to have two children. The policy, which intends to bring benefit to family wellbeing and social structure, however, might "make the situation of female teachers at maternal age even harder" (Ella-I-1).

The only two female participants in their 30s are Lucy and Maisie. During the period of my study, while Lucy was grappling with the idea of having a second child, Maisie shared with me the good news that she was going to give birth to a second child. She wrote down in her reflective journal: "I got pregnant for a second child. ... It might delay my academic development. But I am still very happy" (Maisie-R-May). Maisie predicts the potential negative impact on her research life with the coming of the second child. Yet, her joy in the change of family circumstances surpasses her worries about her research life.

In the case of Lucy, she is at an early stage of her career and she feels great external pressure to pursue a higher qualification. Nevertheless, in the interview, she expressed her deep concerns about the conflicting plans in her working and personal life:

We are all aware of the importance of academic development for our professional life. Apparently, more and more young teachers begin to do PhD study. I was planning to do it, too. Yet, my son is still so young. ... An alternative realistic concern is whether to have a second child. This will conflict with my plan of doing PhD study. I have grappled with the decision for a long time. (Lucy-I-3)

Obviously, the three main strings, teaching, research, and family, are inevitably intertwined in an individual teacher's life. However, in competition for "scarce commodities" (Flinders 1988, p. 24) such as time and energy, research has always been put in a position of disadvantage and turns out to be "a luxury". Sophie illustrates how teachers make decisions about the placement of these three strings.

In general, teacher life is composed of three basic elements: teaching, family, and research. When you have to prioritise your time and energy, you can't afford to fail to finish your teaching load as it is your daily practice. You cannot afford to neglect child development as it might destroy their whole life. You'll never have a second chance to compensate for being absent from their growth. ... You put family and teaching ahead, then research is placed in the last and ... is the only thing you can make a compromise on. (Sophie-I-3)

Maisie also indicates that the social conditions, including the low salary of teaching professionals and increasing living expenses, decide that a trade-off has to be made.

Teachers do have a passion for research ... but they have to bend before reality. If you only teach two hours per week, you'll be paid only 3,000RMB. Can you survive? Of course not. You'll definitely be paid once you teach. However, for research, it is not paid back immediately. Maybe two or three years. But what if it bears no fruit at all after two or three years? Who can guarantee? ... Teachers have to make a living by teaching. Therefore, doing research is sometimes a luxury. (Maisie-I-2)

Teaching not only meets the basic needs of family life but provides a sense of security. The great pressure for economic needs threatens teachers' commitment to research, particularly when it is arduous, time-consuming, and the rewards are uncertain (Zhou & Zhang, 2016). By using the word "luxury", Maisie, on the one hand, confirms her passion and desire to commit to research, while on the other hand demonstrates the reality that it is hard to do so at her will.



Underlying the tension in time and energy is the conflict and negotiation among multiple identities that teachers have constructed, are expected to construct, and would ideally like to construct in different living and working spaces. The multiple social identities coexist in an individual teacher, including, but not limited to wife, mom, teacher, and researcher at different stages of their personal and professional life. Each social identity prescribes practices and commitments to the social group that defines the identity. When an individual teacher is confronted with many prescribed commitments, conflicts may occur if the teacher does not manage to fulfil them all at one time (Yuan et al., 2019). To settle the conflicts, individual teachers might have to retreat from some commitments of less importance at that stage. While preparing for the coming of the second child, for example, Maisie predicts potential financial punishment as a result of her retreat from research commitments prescribed by the institution:

We are simultaneously attached to multiple identities ... which spread ourselves too thin. It depends on where your priority is. I would make a full commitment to research as long as I make a good arrangement for my family affairs. Otherwise, I have to make a choice. (Maisie, I-1)

Maisie has to make the decision to commit to either family or academic development, though she does not want to. Priorities of life are always changing along with identity construction and the development through different phases of one's personal and professional life. Tension seems to be inevitable as long as teachers consider all these multiple identities as important and the prescribed behaviours attached to them incompatible with each other.

However, the tension may not arise at all if teachers do not consider research to be part of their professional life or do not put too much weight on their own professional development. Sophie shows her disdain towards those colleagues who devote all their time and effort to family affairs and neglect their professional development:

The lack of motivation for professional development needs to be perceived from a broader social setting where teachers live. Some teachers, as I told you, have wealthy husbands, and do not have any financial concerns. ... They obtain a sense of self-fulfilment from their commitment to family affairs. They do not long for any achievement in professional life.

(Sophie-I-1)

Sophie, though being engaged in family affairs, actively pursues her professional development since she wants to be responsible in her duties as a university teacher. Therefore, she disapproves of some of her colleagues' inaction in their professional development as it betrays their responsibilities as a university teacher and fails to enhance their identity as a university teacher.

Besides the constraints in different life phases, teachers' choice of identity to foreground or background is also shaped by institutional structures, such as regulations and policies. For example, Mia chooses to withdraw from research commitment as a response to the discordance between output-oriented research requirements as an external controlling force and her own teaching-oriented beliefs about research.

The ideal relationship between teaching and research is mutually beneficial. My research questions arise from my teaching practice, and I do research to address the questions or solve the problem, and, in this way, I improve my teaching practice. ... If the research is defined and evaluated only by research outputs, such as papers or research grants, then I think teaching is primary and research is secondary. If the research is referred to as the process in which you do an inquiry to solve the problems you meet in teaching practice, then teaching and research are equally important. (Mia-I-1)

For Mia, there are two conflicting conceptualizations of teacher research: research for the sake of teaching improvement and research for the sake of objective performance indicators, such as journal publications and citations. Clearly, Mia takes teaching as the primary part of her identity as a university teacher. She contends that teacher inquiry is important only when it serves to enhance

the scholarship of teaching and inform her teaching practice. When research is prescribed as a must-do activity, Mia experiences it less like an intrinsically interesting activity. As a result, she refuses to embrace an imposed researcher identity as part of her professional identity.

In sum, the participant teachers are not assuming a single social role in one social context. Instead, they are forced to negotiate among multiple identities in multiple social contexts which constitute their life space (Xu & Connelly, 2009). Tensions emerge when teachers attempt to fulfil all their associated responsibilities but are only confronted with an either-or choice.

### **Summary**

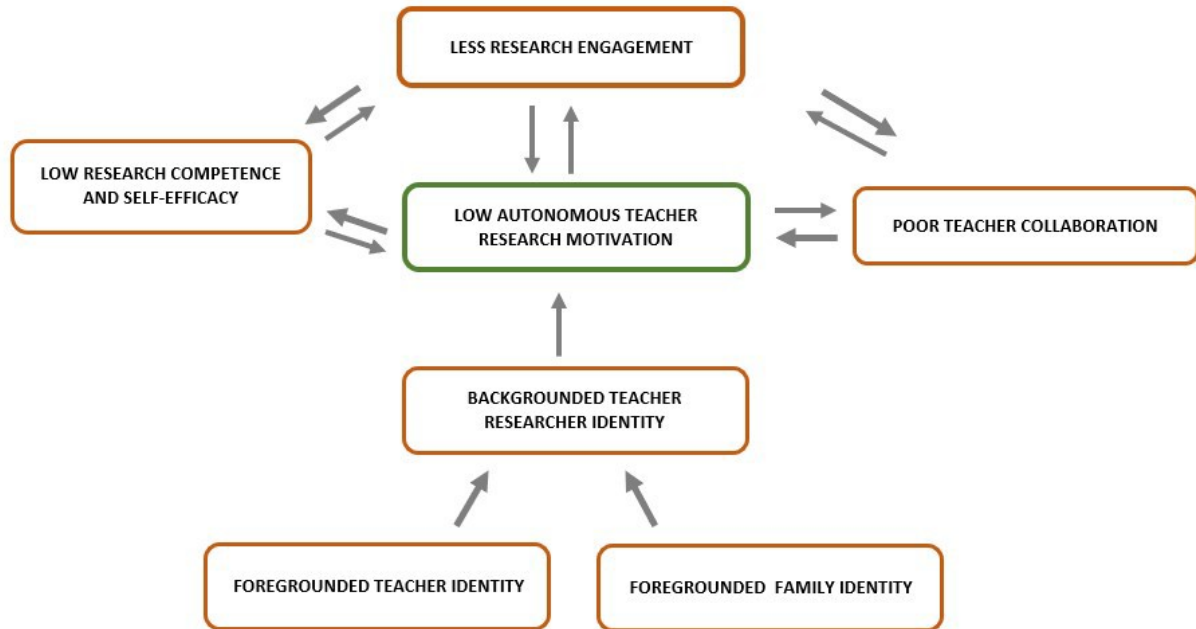
In this chapter, I reported on participants' experiences of tensions in their research engagement. I addressed four particular subthemes: (a) desire for collaboration vs. isolated working patterns; (b) controlled research motivation vs. autonomous research motivation; (c) weak research competence and perceived low research self-efficacy vs. lack of scaffolding and source of research self-efficacy; and (d) researcher identity vs. teacher identity and family identity.

While all participants are confronted with these tensions in one way or another, each of them, due to their research education backgrounds, professional phase, and stage of life, may be in need of collaborating with others (particularly the experiences of Lucy and Zoe), maintaining intrinsic motivation in research engagement (the experiences of Sophie and Mia), enhancing research competence and self-efficacy (the experiences of Lucas and Genny), and balancing among various social identities (the experiences of Maisie).

The foregoing analysis shows that these four tensions are not standalone but interwoven together in teachers' research experiences, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:**

*Interconnected Tensions in Teachers' Research Experiences*



Poor research knowledge and skills could lead to low self-efficacy and less intrinsic motivation, which might result in few chances for teacher collaboration. As some of the participants indicate in their interviews, most of the teachers in the two departments have not received systematic academic training, such as PhD qualifications, and are therefore disadvantaged by their poor competence in identifying a good research question, designing appropriate research studies, collecting and analysing data, and writing up and disseminating their findings. However, at the same time, they experience high demand for research outputs, both in quantity and quality, by the university and at departmental level. When research outputs are targeted at top journals and research grants at national levels, it is perceived as a mission impossible for the majority of teachers because of their poor research knowledge and skills. This, in turn, results in less motivation to engage in research activities aiming for these research outputs. The perceived low research self-efficacy as well as poor motivation prompt some teachers to segregate themselves and avoid participating in collective

research practices. Some, however, do realise the value of teacher collaboration in enhancing their research competence as well as fostering and sustaining their motivation for research engagement.

Some teachers demonstrate high autonomous motivation for research engagement. However, they could be demotivated, as in the cases of Mia, Ella, and Sophie, when the external contingencies conflict with their inner beliefs and values regarding research. Self-discrepancies occur when their ideal self as a teacher possessing profound scholarly knowledge of teaching are not in alignment with the self imposed by the university and departments, that is, a teacher primarily dedicated to publishing and applying for research grants (Huang & Guo, 2019; Huang & Xu, 2020). In addition, when researcher identity is not perceived by teachers to be as prominent as teacher identity and family identity, particularly female teachers, they choose to withdraw from research duties on their own will and give preference to their teaching and family duties. When diverse social and professional identities come into conflict and teachers choose to put their researcher identity in a secondary position, their autonomous motivation for research engagement is weakened and their research commitment reduced. This leads to fewer opportunities for teachers to be connected in collective research practice, which could otherwise be a breeding ground for teachers to develop their research competence, sustaining their research engagement with increasing motivation.

These tensions converge to create a vicious circle in which backgrounded researcher identity, low intrinsic motivation, weak research competence and research self-efficacy, lack of collaboration, and poor research engagement and research quality, negatively affect each other, leading inevitably to an even worse situation. The next chapter displays how this vicious circle could be possibly broken by promoting teacher research in the two department-embedded professional learning communities.

## **CHAPTER 6: INITIATIVES IN THE DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT**

### **Introduction**

This chapter addresses the second research question: What collective initiatives are undertaken in the two departments to relieve the tensions and enhance teacher research practice and what are their impacts on teachers regarding their research life? I will be discussing the initiatives in the two departments together because they share similarities to a large extent, but I will make distinctions when they are relevant. As a result of thematic analysis, the initiatives undertaken in the two departments are generally classified into two categories: top-down research initiatives and self-initiated bottom-up collaborations among colleagues. The findings to be presented show what these initiatives are, how they work or do not work, and how they impact the teachers' research-related life by relieving the tensions to some extent. Interwoven in these initiatives are teachers' research collaborations, their conceptions and beliefs about research, their research motivation, their research competence and research self-efficacy, and their identity as teacher-researchers. Finally, a summary will be provided, explaining what underlines the departments' support and what makes the support effective.

### **Top-down Research-Promoting Initiatives**

In both of the departments, many attempts have been made through a top-down approach to engage teachers in research and enhance their research knowledge and skills. These attempts contribute to the formation of an intangible research learning community in the two departments.

### ***In-house Publication***

The dissemination of teachers' inquiry has widely been argued for since teacher research, as a form of knowledge building, "is a fundamentally social and constructive activity" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 24). In-house publication is one of the ways by which the outcome of teacher research is

shared among colleagues. However, the findings of the study only see this initiative applicable in Department A.

To encourage research outputs, the Dean of Department A, called for papers from the teachers to be published in a collection of papers one year before I did the interviews in the department. Instead of letting teachers make decisions about their own research topics, the dean prescribed the scope of topics, for example, in cognitive linguistics and language education. Realising that this topic might be too abstract and inaccessible for most teachers, Jerry suggested that teachers focus on contextualised educational research because teaching is their routine work and therefore they are at an advantage to do systematic inquiry, collecting and analysing data from their classrooms. The notice was sent at the beginning of the academic year. However, the teachers responded with little interest. By the end of the year, only four articles were included in the final collection of papers, which were predominantly educational research on language teaching. The publication was counted as research outputs but ranked as the lowest level based on the criterion of research evaluation in the department. There was no collective discussion during the writing process except when Jerry occasionally provided specific guidance to some individual teachers. Neither was there any opportunity to share the research findings among the teachers. The publication finally turned out to be a tangible book and received credit in the annual research evaluation. Lucas' observations about diverse research interests in the department and desire for the autonomy of choice provide some insights into why the in-house publication initiative did not work as the leaders expected:

Our dean has a traditional view of primary research fields in our discipline. He sticks to the priority of research in the areas of English literature, translation, and linguistic philosophy. I don't quite agree with him. ... I think quite a number of teachers in the department don't agree with him, too. ... In a department, as an ecosystem, not every teacher is outstanding and is being granted sufficient resources. However, as a manager, you should try to wake up everyone's potential and play to their strengths. (Lucas-I-3)

The in-house publication initiative intended to extend the dissemination channel and encourage teachers to write up their research. However, this initiative is still output-oriented since it does not provide the process-oriented scaffolding which teachers are in desperate need of. Moreover, the dean, whose research interests are English literature and linguistic philosophy, put constraints on teachers' choice of research topics and neglected teachers' research interests, which to some extent thwarted their autonomy and decreased their motivation to become involved in research (Gao & Zheng, 2020).

### ***Teacher Training Modules and Conference Trips***

In both departments, funds and opportunities are provided for teachers to take conference trips and participate in on-site or online teacher-training modules as external learning resources. Some modules focus on improving teachers' research literacy, such as literature reading and evaluation, quantitative and qualitative research methods, academic journal writing and publication, R programming application in corpus linguistics, and so on, while other modules focus on theory and practice in language teaching and curriculum design; for instance, second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, English language teacher assessment literacy, blended instructional approaches in English language teaching, and so on. Teachers are expected to study the courses by themselves and share their reflections with other colleagues in collective meetings if time allows. All participants, including the two leaders, reported their learning experiences in these teacher training modules outside the departments. These training modules not only transmit knowledge and skills to the participants but also provide them opportunities for communications with EFL teachers in other universities across China and stimulate their enthusiasm to engage in research. For instance, Genny stresses that she has always been motivated whenever she participates in these modules and sees that other EFL teachers work hard to pursue their professional development even though they are working in the universities ranked as low as University B.



Academic conference trips are funded in both departments. In the interviews, participants shared their experiences of the academic conferences that impressed them most. In the four monthly reflective journals, most of the participants documented their recent academic conference trips in China and abroad. For instance, after a trip to a national conference on college English teaching reforms, Ella reflects that despite increasing concern about technology in language education, most of the presentations in the conference were theoretical talks without empirical evidence. Instead, Ella sees that there is a great potential for teachers in Department A to produce outputs based on empirical research embedded in their MOOCs-based teaching practice. Ella also attended the TESOL Convention in the US and was inspired by research topics in teaching material development, open education resources for EAP teaching, as well as mobile learning in English education. In her reflective journal, she said she planned to share her experiences with other colleagues in the department. However, she couldn't find any opportunity for a collective meeting during that semester as everyone was busy with their teaching. Ultimately, she only discussed her reflections informally with individual colleagues in person. Similarly, Zoe noted her reflections in her journal after attending an academic conference in recent months:

We cannot shut ourselves up in our own department, doing research alone. We need to go beyond it and get to know more about the frontier studies. I was inspired by the expert who introduced the idea of 'assessment as learning'. It reminds me of assessment practice in our course of Intercultural Communication. In most cases, we are doing 'assessment for learning' instead of 'assessment as learning'. Next, we have to rethink about it and try to integrate learning and assessment in our teaching practice. (Zoe-R-March)

Zoe displays a high level of awareness to connect academic studies in assessment with teaching practice in her own classroom. The conference trips by both Ella and Zoe provide them with opportunities for engagement with research, which in turn stimulates their reflections on the practice in their institutional contexts and even potentially improves their own practice. Through

funded teacher training modules and conference trips, the act of learning takes place at the boundaries between their own immediate communities and other communities and thereafter triggers potential changes in their own immediate communities (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

### ***Reading Literature and Writing up Research Proposals***

In Department A, to help teachers identify their research interests and to provide support in their research activity, teachers were encouraged to read literature during the winter break (just before my interviews began) and to produce a research proposal to fill a potential research gap in their area of interest. The attempts were initially welcomed by some teachers, as Lucas said, “it implies that the department begins to pay attention to the research process instead of solely to research outputs as before. It provides scaffolding and autonomy for teachers and attends to the individual needs of the teachers.” However, detailed information about steps of implementation, such as who would provide feedback on these proposals and when the feedback would be provided, was not explicitly communicated to the teachers. Both Lucas and Mia express their doubts about the effectiveness of this initiative since similar initiatives had been advocated many times before, which started with great enthusiasm but ended with a whimper because there was no one and no mechanism available to ensure proper implementation. The leader of the department, Jerry, in the interview, acknowledged this problem and told me he would note it down in his “to-do-list”.

In Department B, there are also initiatives in place for reading literature and writing up research proposals, which are part of the collective research activities done in the research forum.

### ***Research Forum***

Unlike Department A, where there are no regular and structured collective research activities, Department B has witnessed establishment and development of the “Research Forum”, a space

where teachers talk, share, discuss, reflect and build new knowledge with respect to research. In Department B, there had been no tradition of research engagement and any regular shared research practice until Jason, the leader participant, took the position of the dean. Jason publicly emphasised that teacher research is both an indispensable dimension of teacher professional development and an important vehicle to transform from being a teaching practitioner to a teacher-researcher. He was aware of the challenges confronting the teachers in their professional development, including limited pedagogical knowledge and research skills, isolated working patterns, and a heavy teaching load. The idea of collaborative research activity was initiated by Sophie, who desired more teacher collaboration in the department. With strong support from Jason, a regular collective research practice, the Research Forum as it is called, was set up in 2011 with the aim of enhancing teachers' research knowledge and skills and promoting an open and collaborative research culture in the department. By May 2017, 125 Research Forum seminars had been organised. The forum, which focuses on the research field of applied linguistics, takes a phased approach to promoting teacher research. It is composed of four thematic series as designed by Jason and Sophie, including research literature reading and review, research methods in applied linguistics, book reviews of classical works, and research designs in applied linguistics. All teachers in the department are welcome to participate on a voluntary basis. Some novice teachers are strongly encouraged by Jason to participate in the forum. There is one seminar every two or three weeks and participants are divided into groups consisting of two to three members. Each group presents as a team their reflections on the literature they have read and other participants provide their feedback and raise questions based on their reading. Guideline questions are provided by Jason as scaffolding to the participants to learn how to evaluate the literature.

As participants analysed and evaluated others' research, they began to learn research methods to use in their own research projects. Each participant self-learned a research method and then became tutors for other members with respect to that method. In the learning process, self-learning and peer learning became dominant ways of learning. Based on their developing research literacy,

participants begin to design their own research plans, share their research proposals with other participants, and receive feedback and suggestions from each other. Sophie, Zoe, Gennya, and Lucy all shared their learning experience in the Research Forum, though they have played different roles within it. For instance, Gennya describes herself as an active participant who would never miss one seminar:

I definitely persevere in attending all seminars. ... We are allocated with a different task to show others how to use various functions in SPSS software. In this way, you have a comprehensive understanding of the software. I think this is quite rewarding no matter whether you are presenters or audience. That's why I always say that new teachers are lucky because now the research environment has been changed to be conducive for their growth.  
(Gennya-I-1)

Jason and Sophie attribute the enhanced research culture as well as the emerging learning community in the department to three factors: (a) teachers' desire to participate and assertive and participative leadership; (b) shared research interest, values, and visions for professional development; and (c) scaffolding of the activities for cognitive development of the participants.

As a result of scaffolding, Zoe reported her enhanced research competence and self-efficacy during her engagement in the Research Forum as well as her collaboration with peer colleagues. She recalled her first engagement in the reading and reviewing literature research activity. She was assigned by Sophie to read and evaluate a research paper published in a peer-reviewed journal:

At the very beginning, I totally had no idea. I'd never done this activity before. I even had difficulty understanding it, needless to say, to evaluate it. How can we recognise the limitations of the study since it was published in such an authoritative journal? Sophie was obviously unsatisfied with my performance. (Zoe-I-1)

She learned to read and make a judgement about the quality paper through discussions with her colleagues in the forum:

Later, I read research on classroom activity and shared my comments with my colleagues. I identified some strengths and values of that research as well as some weaknesses. Then I gave some suggestions on the revision of the research design and future studies that we might do. You know, Sophie told me even many years later that she was amazed by my performance. This is the first time that I felt a great sense of achievement. You know, you are growing. (Zoe-I-1)

After learning how to evaluate others' studies, Zoe began to learn about some research methods, such as SPSS, together with her colleagues in the forum. Everyone chose to learn by themselves one function of SPSS and then shared it with other colleagues. Zoe recalled:

I chose ANOVA. I used to be a student in the Arts and Humanities. Therefore, I was totally clueless about this. But then, I searched for any learning materials, books, videos on SPSS. In the end, when I presented it to my colleagues, they all felt my presentation was crystal clear and comprehensible. Yes, from then on, I feel I grow step by step until it comes to a tipping point. (Zoe-I-1)

In addition to the increased research knowledge, the positive feedback by other members in the team boosts Zoe's confidence and assures her self-perceived identity as a valued member of the community. Zoe also documented outcomes of her recent research engagement in her monthly reflective journals, which provided further evidence of her growth and development in research. In one of her journal entries, she wrote that she was informed that she finally won a provincial government-grant for a research project on teaching reforms. Although she had only limited time to write up the research proposal, the enhanced research competence as a result of long-term research engagement enabled her to end up with a quality research proposal, which ultimately resulted in her being awarded a grant. Zoe reflected, "it again stimulated my enthusiasm to research engagement

and more importantly, I have more confidence to overcome all potential difficulties on the way.”

Meanwhile, she was also collaborating with Sophie in a research project, making use of the literature analysis tool, CiteSpace, to do a literature review. The self-learning process, which was filled with impediments and growth, proved to be a rewarding experience for Zoe:

The collaborative research project with Sophie proved to go well. Despite the fact that both of us are burdened with teaching and family affairs, we make full use of Monday afternoon and Friday afternoon when we are both available to assure the progress of the project. The most valuable rewards of collaborating with Sophie is the increase of my self-confidence. It's not only about the learning of a new skill, but more importantly, we have more confidence and motivation to move on. (Zoe-R-May)

The mastery experiences of winning research grants, new research skills, enjoyment of learning new things, and a sense of achievement all resulted in Zoe's increased confidence in her research competence, and research self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994).

The Research Forum serves as a mentoring space where scaffolding and mediation are essential features (Edwards, 2019; Shabani, 2016). Scaffolding has been provided by more capable and experienced teachers, such as Jason and Sophie, through the mutual engagement of research learning activities with less experienced teachers, such as Zoe, Gennya, and Lucy. It is not a process of knowledge transfer from expert researchers to novice researchers, but a learning process of mental development and “internalization in which skills and knowledge are transformed from the social into the cognitive plane” (Walqui, 2006, p. 160). The knowledge is constructed and transformed through mediation tools such as journal articles for reviewing, research methods and software, research conventions, and so on. Every teacher is continually learning research methods and skills and responsible for teaching other members in the community. When teachers are learning from each other, the roles of expert and novice in the forum are in a state of flux, as Jason said in the interview, “I thought I learned a lot from other teachers. That's why I insistently

participated in it". This is echoed by the idea proposed by Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995): "individuals, none of whom qualifies as an expert, can often come together in a collaborative posture and jointly construct a ZPD in which each person contributes something to, and takes something away from, the interaction" (p. 116). The Research Forum plays an important role in scaffolding teachers in research engagement. More importantly, it is an open and safe space where participants have a reflective dialogue with other members, which could potentially generate new insights and collaboration. As one of the initiators of the Research Forum, Sophie has perceived the desired changes in collegial relationships and collaborations. Her primary intention of initiating the forum was to build connectedness:

Unlike before, we are open to each other now. We tend to share our own research proposals with and expect feedback from other members, which had never happened before. To set an example, Jason and I would show our own research proposals and expose our own weaknesses to other members. We invited and valued feedback from others. Gradually, other members become psychologically desensitised and then transcend the psychological barrier. (Sophie-I-1)

Sophie contrasts the current situation with her past unpleasant experiences when she wished for advice and mentoring from other seniors. She expressed her feelings at this change: "when I see the members sharing in public their own research proposals rather than keeping it to themselves, I felt greatly touched." Sophie considers this open and trustful relationship among colleagues as invaluable. Knowledge sharing through interaction among members is encouraged in the department, which constitutes an essential aspect of organizational culture (Hislop et al., 2018).

The Research Form also serves an important role to invite and pressure teachers to commit themselves and to stay on the same page with other members in the community. Genny attributes her sustained engagement in research to the enhanced research culture and increasing connectedness developed among peers in the department. The support Genny gains from

engagement in the Research Forum may not always be immediately obvious, such as publishing research outputs in journals or obtaining research grants, but “it’s an invisible force that pushes you to persevere through all barriers.” The sense of belonging and connectedness with the other members in the forum gave Genny a “a sense of safety” and made her feel that she was not left behind. It also constantly reminds her of her identity as a teacher-researcher.

This “invisible force” is also perceived by Lucy, who has been “ordered” to participate in the Research Forum by Jason once she entered Department B as an English teacher and invited to work as co-researcher in Jason’s research project. Lucy commented, “you always feel such peer pressure from other members in the project, who have already been excellent in research yet still so earnest and committed.” The engagement in the research project has always pushed Lucy to move ahead in research activities, such as reading literature, having related discussions with other members, and writing up journal articles. Her motivation to engage in research and her eagerness to develop her research competence are ignited by the opportunity to collaborate with expert colleagues. The engagement itself provides her with an opportunity and competence to integrate research into her own professional life, which results in her confidence and willingness to start her own projects. In the case of Zoe, collaboration has become a crucial external motivation for sustained research engagement:

I feel it more and more crucial to have some like-minded research collaborators, who are competent and have a strong will to engage. The journey of research is by no means easy. Along the way, there’re stumbling blocks and excuses that stop you from moving on. At this time, you need someone who can still move ahead with you. (Zoe-R-March)

Over the years, teachers have joined in and quit the forum at their own will. Yet, the regular participants account for no more than 20 percent of all the teachers. Low intrinsic research motivation and diverse research interests may account for disengagement of some teachers, as Genny observes: “For example, the Research Forum, which focuses on applied linguistics, might not



be helpful for those teachers whose research interests are translation or English literature.” This corresponds with two anonymous responses in the initial narrative frames. One teacher, whose research field is translation, explained the reasons for his disengagement in the Research Forum: “The allocated work in the Research Forum is burdensome and I have not been allowed to choose the topic I am interested.” Another teacher expressed his/her expectation for the Research Forum to be more inclusive regarding research interests.

The Research Forum was suspended after Jason left the department. As the initiator and coordinator of the forum, Sophie acknowledges the importance of administrative power for the maintenance of the Research Forum:

I’m just an ordinary teacher. The establishment of the Research Forum would not be possible without the support of Jason at the beginning. And the maintenance also relies on top-down support to some extent. (Sophie-I-3)

The mission to enhance teachers’ research knowledge and skills has been fulfilled, since the participants’ research literacy has greatly improved. However, Sophie confirms the forum has an essential role in the long-term as a form of scaffolding and a channel for collegial dialogue:

This scaffolding is always important for different stages of teachers’ professional development. ... In the beginning, we are quite clear about our aims and what we should do to achieve these aims. ... Now, with the increasing research literacy of participants, the questions need to be addressed: how we should make this scaffolding and who are capable of making it so that it can achieve higher goals. Ideally, the forum will always be valuable since the communication among peer colleagues are always encouraged. We all need the opportunity to sit together and have these professional dialogues which are always beneficial to our professional development. (Sophie-I-3)

### ***Invited Lectures and Consultancy by External Experts***

Acknowledging the lack of expert researchers in the departments, both Jason and Jerry, through their own academic networks, try to introduce external experts to give academic lectures on varied topics based on the research interests of the experts, including linguistics, English literature, translation, language assessment, college English curriculum design, language teaching theories and practice, and so on. Some topics are particularly welcomed, such as advice on writing and managing a successful research grant application. These invited lectures are randomly arranged depending on the availability of the experts. The flyers for invited lectures are circulated and reach every teacher, whose participation is generally voluntary. In the months of May and June during my study, Ella documents three invited lectures in the department with the following topics: language and cognition, the scholarship of teaching, and EAP curriculum design. Around 20 percent of the teachers attended these lectures. Whereas the lectures help teachers to broaden their vision and update their knowledge in relevant fields, the practical impact is fairly limited. Zoe explained one of the reasons for this: “There’s almost no discussion but lectures. Questions are encouraged but only in the last few minutes. In most cases, we just sit there and listen.” Comparing her learning experience in these invited lectures and the Research Forum, Sophie identified the differences:

In these invited lectures, the experts are talking about their research, which is their research interests but may not be yours. I don’t even have the intention to take notes. Yet in the research seminar, all is tailored to our learning needs. I have the autonomy to decide what we are going to learn in the seminar. For example, my research skills in using SPSS were taught by my colleagues in the Research Forum. The scaffolding is always adapting to our progress. (Sophie-I-3)

These invited lectures as external teacher development are not normally ongoing, contextualised, and interactive. In the lectures, teachers are treated more as a passive audience who do not have much choice in the process (Borg, 2015). In contrast, tailored and phased scaffolding and

opportunities of professional dialogues with peer colleagues provide teachers with a sense of freedom and attend to their specific, individual needs. Therefore, it is considered to be more effective in motivating teachers and supporting their research engagement.

### ***Research Projects Rooted in Teaching Curriculum Reform***

The nexus between teaching and research has been recognised and advocated by a wealth of studies in the field of foreign language teaching, particularly since the ‘teacher as researcher’ movement in the 1980s (McKinley, 2019). In both departments, the importance of the nexus is revealed in initiatives of research projects, which is rooted in teaching curriculum reform and aims for improvement of teaching. These ongoing and collaborative initiatives of research projects are the most important of the top-down research promoting initiatives with respect to both enhancement of teacher research and sustainability of teacher research engagement.

In the past five years, with the leadership of Jerry, Department A has been implementing college English teaching curriculum reforms, which comprise objective-setting, content selection, course organization, and effectiveness evaluation. A “tri-modular” design of the College English course system has been constructed, including English for General Purpose (EGP), English for General Education (EGE), and English for Specific Purpose (ESP). Based on this curriculum reform, a MOOCs-based College English flipped classroom teaching model and objective-guided course assessment have been proposed and trialed. These teaching innovations are informed by research in various fields and in turn provide opportunities for inquiry for some of the teachers who are involved in the curriculum reform. The participants in this study, Jerry, Ella, Mia, and Lucas, are all core members of this curriculum reform initiative and they either host teaching-oriented research projects or participate in research projects as core members. Their research topics range from EGP curriculum design, MOOCs-based College English flipped classroom to the integrated evaluation system. Both Jerry and Ella have published their research based on this teaching reform project in some core

journals. Mia has been deeply involved in the innovations of flipped classroom instructional models, and has produced teaching materials and presented at some academic conferences. Lucas has hosted a university-based assessment research project, which is an integral part of the teaching curriculum reform. To better inform the ongoing reforms, Jerry invites external experts to join the discussion and offer their advice and insights to the teachers.

The curriculum reforms of MOOCs-based College English flipped classroom have had impact on various aspects of the teachers' research engagement. For example, Lucas revealed in his recent reflective journal a high level of self-efficacy in his ability to make progress and to gain achievement in his research life. This self-efficacy, in turn, plays a crucial role in how he orients his actions for future research and how he approaches challenges on his way to achieve bigger goals (Bandura, 1982). One of the sources of self-efficacy is recognition and external acknowledgement. When prompted to talk about any joys in the research process, Lucas addressed the importance of leaders' support and acknowledgement of his work, which is an integral and essential part of teaching curriculum reform. As Lucas says, "what makes me delighted is the department attaches a high value to my work. This is the greatest support that I get. It seems that I'm playing an unreplaceable role in the department" (Lucas-I-3). The high expectation and recognition by the department have been converted into positive emotions, such as pride and confidence in his ability, which subsequently motivates more commitment and engagement in the research project. Lucas realised that there is still a lot to explore in the research area of school-based assessment. He listed in his reflective journal a series of questions that he was going to explore:

For example, what is the relationship between teaching and assessment? How should we approach the washback of assessment on teaching? What levels and scales of English language ability should school-based assessment focus on concerning the recently released China's Standards of English Language Ability? How does school-based assessment serve the talent cultivation target of the university? (Lucas-R-June)

All these questions stem from Lucas' teaching practice and he became aware that they all need to be addressed by seeking evidence from research. At the same time, the experience of hosting the university-based assessment project means he has established his research interest, which he will stick to for the rest of his academic life:

I feel reassured about my research life after I host and engage in this research project. In the past, when I finished a study, I had no idea what I should do next for research. But now I feel I can always find something that is worth further exploring. I think it will keep me busy until I retire. (Lucas-I-1)

The College English teaching reforms have made great strides to improve teaching quality and have even won a national teaching achievement award. This external recognition strengthens teachers' self-worth and confidence in their collective endeavours and visions for the future, as Lucas says, "the prize recognises our work over the years and predicts a promising future for the department" (Lucas-I-3). Teachers are proud to be a member of this team, as Maisie elaborates:

Jerry is excellent [in initiating curriculum reform of MOOCs-based College English Flipped Classroom]. ... Our reform is widely recognised in our area, and even nationwide. Last term, we opened our classroom to all teachers across China to come to learn from us [proudly]. (Maisie-I-1)

Mia also shared her teaching principles and practice with teachers from other universities. She enjoyed the process of constructive communication with other teachers, which at the same time strengthens her identity as a member of this innovative and excellent team.

In Department B, Jason, as innovative as Jerry, initiated reforms of College English education curriculum design and pioneered EAP courses as early as 2013 when most of the universities at the same rank as University B were still teaching general English as the predominant English course. Adhering to the principle that "it is teaching practice that raises questions, research practice that

addresses questions and the two benefit each other”, the Research Forum becomes the place where teachers discuss EAP curriculum design and share their reflections and insights with others. Jason illustrated how this was done in the forum: “Many decisions, teaching goals, teaching principles, implementations, and assessment of EAP curriculum reform, have all been informed by the evidence that teachers have read in the literature and discussed in the forum” (Jason-I-1). Jason initiated research projects based on the EAP curriculum and he shared literature and proposal drafts with other members of the team. In the ongoing discussions and interaction, all members were involved, contributing their ideas and fulfilling their roles in the project. This project serves well as a breeding ground for developing the competence of individual members, who later all started their own research projects. Moreover, the research-informed EAP curriculum reforms not only brought positive changes to English education in the university but also won recognition by experts in the research field and at other universities. The team shared their research outputs and teaching practice on EAP curriculum reforms with other academics and teachers at academic conferences. The positive feedback and constructive advice from external experts and academics, in turn, provide stimulation for teachers to put further effort into the teaching reforms. The four participants, Zoe, Sophie, Lucy, and Gennya, are all core members of the teaching reform team. Their engagement in the teaching reform project provides opportunities for them to initiate their research in the EAP area. For example, Lucy, a novice teacher without any pedagogical background, teaches EAP writing and she purposefully collects data, such as students’ writing assignments, reflective journals, and so on. Lucy explained, “I feel this EAP writing teaching model is quite innovative and applicable. So I intend to convert my teaching practice into a research output” (Lucy-I-3).

The open and trustful relationship is also evident in Lucy’s narratives of her experience in both the Research Forum and EAP teaching reforms. The positive and close relationships in the team make Lucy feel quite comfortable. She gave examples to illustrate: “Sophie is rather frank and critical, which I appreciate. She is always to the point. And so is Zoe. Particularly she is always ready to help

you whenever I ask her. She's like my sister." In her reflective journal, she documented her failure when applying for a research grant and how the team members comforted and encouraged her:

She [the other member of the team] had failed so many times in applying for this research grant. Yet, she never stopped trying. She shared her experiences with me, which comforted me a lot and cheered me up to continue my work. I am so lucky to be a member of this team, which shows great warmth, support, and encouragement. (Lucy-R-May)

The EAP curriculum reform serves as a form of mediation to reinforce the connection between teaching and research. In the early stage of Sophie's teaching career, she utilised research findings in others' studies to "seek better solutions" for the problems that she observed in the classroom:

You'll always have some problems with your teaching that you cannot deal with appropriately by yourself. For example, you'll find students always make the same mistakes and wonder why this happens. You'll also wonder how you can teach a word in a better way so that students can learn it more effectively. These are trivial questions in your everyday teaching. If not for research, you could only rely on your personal experience, which might be either reliable or unreliable. You would never know whether it is reliable unless you seek evidence from others' studies. The isolation of teaching from research would be risky. ... Research provides you with one more pair of eyes and an outsider lens, through which you stand back from your teaching context, observe your classroom with a more rational and reflective mind. (Sophie-I-3)

Later, Sophie engaged in EAP teaching reforms, which aim to enable students to become critical thinkers. Since Sophie's related research has engendered in her a meticulous eye and a logical mind, in the classroom setting she is able to transfer and display these capacities by asking appropriate and challenging questions, and judging an argument or any conclusions:

My students also benefit from my research engagement and the ability I acquired from it. How can you assert that you are cultivating students' critical thinking if you yourself are illogical or unreasonable in making arguments or conclusions? Doing research helps you develop thorough thinking, logical and concise articulation. (Sophie-I-3)

Similar to Sophie, Gennya's conception of the nexus of teaching and research is also reshaped and strengthened by her participation in the EAP curriculum reforms. After Gennya engaged in the research project of school-based assessment, she recognised the learning opportunity her teaching practice in EAP curriculum reform had provided for her research:

I always believe that teaching and research complement each other. If you are not teaching, you won't get access to students in a large variety. For example, in our university, students are grouped into different classes based on their English proficiency level. I have the chance to teach students at different levels. This informs me a lot in my research project of school-based assessment which needs to take into account the different levels of language proficiency. The teaching load is heavy. However, it is worthwhile. (Gennya-I-3)

Gennya's research informs her teaching practice and her teaching serves as an important source and site of inquiry for her research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). In the same vein, Lucy talked about the change of her belief about teaching and research because of her engagement in the EAP teaching reforms:

In the beginning, I thought teaching was just teaching. I never realised the impact of research on teaching. What impressed me is how we collaboratively designed the course. As a new member of the team, I didn't quite understand why other teachers, particularly Sophie, designed the course in that way though I thought it was innovative. Later, I began to read some studies on evaluation in the flipped classroom and knew a formative assessment. Then I turned back and reflected on our design. I realised why they made it in that way. Sophie had read and accumulated a lot of relevant studies, which informed and guided her



to make such a design based on our local contexts. This is the impact of research. Then I understand it. There's much more than just teaching in teaching practice. (Lucy-I-1)

At the early stage of Lucy's career life, her identity as a university teacher is confined to teaching. With her engagement in the EAP teaching reforms and interactions with peer colleagues like Sophie, who demonstrates the way her research engagement nurtures her teaching practice, Lucy's identity as a university teacher was extended and she began to integrate teacher-researcher as an essential part of her professional identity.

Lucy, as a novice teacher, also attributes her improvement in research knowledge and skills to her engagement in the research projects based on EAP curriculum reform. Her research background was English literature studies before she came to work in Department B. She had never done teaching-oriented research before. Since being invited to join Jason's EAP project, she highlighted increased research knowledge and skills as one of the outcomes of her research engagement:

I get to know some research methods as well as elementary steps in a research project. For example, how to select a research topic, how to do a literature review, how to write up a research proposal. This is my first try. Since then, I started to keep an eye on the trends and current studies in this field. (Lucy-I-2)

In the first reflective journal, she recorded her research activities in recent months:

Based on their research interests, every member of the research project chose one aspect of the topic, searched and read relevant theories and studies. I chose the theoretical framework of the project and then I started to read and make notes on relevant theories, including 'learning-centred', learning the community of practice, and output-oriented theories. (Lucy-R-March)

In the second interview, Lucy told me that she applied for her first university-funded research grant based on her engagement in Jason's research project and succeeded. In the third interview, she said

she would have a try applying for a higher-level research grant, a provincial government-funded project. She became more confident in writing up a research proposal:

Now I know the rules because of my previous engagement. It becomes easier for me to develop clear research ideas and fill in the prescribed application form. I know what to fill and how to fill them. These are all precious experiences. (Lucy-I-3)

Lucy's research self-efficacy developed steadily in her interactions with her colleagues and researchers in other communities. First, she felt "very pleased" to be invited by Jason to join his research project as "it was recognition as well as confidence in my capability." Then she was assigned some challenging tasks, such as doing a literature review, which she found "extremely hard and tough". In spite of numerous moments of frustration, she dedicated herself to the task and finally completed it successfully. The encouragement and positive feedback from Jason and other colleagues gave her "great confidence" and she knew she could move on in her research. Later, she represented the team and shared their research with other researchers at a national academic conference. The affirmative comments given by other researchers again reassured Lucy of the value and significance of their study, which "ignited her enthusiasm" to continue her research. In Lucy's case, her experiences in successfully applying for university-level research grants and presenting at academic conferences, as well as positive feedback, converge to become the source of Lucy's increased research self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). The recognition of the nexus of teaching and research, as well as her increased research self-efficacy, reinforce Lucy's teacher-researcher identity, which in turn contributes to her sense of independent professionalism and harnesses her attempts to seek more research opportunities (Edwards & Burns, 2016).

Overall, all these top-down initiatives function as mediation provided by the institutional contexts where the teachers work. Learning becomes a process where they are situated in the ongoing interaction between the environment and their sociocognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. However, the contexts themselves are not external to and independent of teachers'

professional learning and development. Rather, the individual and the context are interrelated, and alongside the changes on the part of individual teachers, the context itself can also be reshaped by individuals and undergo change (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This is evident in the self-initiated bottom-up collaborations among colleagues in the two departments.

### **Self-Initiated Bottom-up Collaborations Among Colleagues**

As an outcome of top-down research-promoting initiatives, teachers' research competence is improved, research self-efficacy is increased, and their teacher-researcher identity is internalised and reinforced in their interactions with their working contexts. All of these inspire their visions of a future-self and clarify who they want to be, which, subsequently, enact teacher agency. Teacher agency allows teachers to take action towards meeting their professional development goals and to concomitantly shape their working contexts (Edwards, 2019). In the two departments, where lack of collaboration has been identified as one of the tensions constraining teacher research engagement (see Chapter 6), some teachers take initiatives to collaborate with their colleagues who share the same research interest or are like-minded. For instance, Sophie invites Zoe and another colleague to participate as co-researchers in her project on foreign language professional development. Each of them has different background knowledge and so they complement each other in the research process. Both researchers documented their collaborative experiences in this project in their reflective journals. While Sophie has strong theoretical and background knowledge of the research area and therefore plays an essential role in deciding the research scope and framing the research design, Zoe commits herself to the project by learning the key software, CiteSpace, and analyzing the data. Zoe recorded her experiences in her journal:

Every member of the team is positive and shares the same vision. We never shift responsibilities to other members in the face of difficulty but undertake the challenge and try every way to solve it. Everyone plays a role and makes contributions. It is proved that

collaboration is truly efficient. So this always reminds me that working with like-minded colleagues is important to succeed in doing research. (Zoe-R-April)

Similarly, in Department A, Ella invites Mia, who had collaborated with her before in MOOCs-based teaching reforms, to participate in her research project on mobile learning. Both Ella and Mia shared with me their collaboration experiences in their reflective journals and interviews. This is the first time that Ella and Mia have done qualitative research. Both of them attended the qualitative research methods online modules and tried the various methods in their study. They did a pilot interview with each other. They worked together to do the literature review, refined the interview questions, reflected on interview techniques, conducted interviews with other colleagues, and transcribed the data. Ella reported their initial findings and expressed their concerns in the study at a conference, receiving lots of feedback from other academics, which provided different perspectives and helped them improve their study. Although Mia accepted Ella's invitation, she admitted that she did not have much interest in this particular topic at the beginning. However, in the interview with the participants in their study, she began to discover some interesting information about the inconsistency between teachers' reported beliefs about mobile learning and their reported teaching behaviours. As the study progressed, she began to realise that observation of classroom teaching would be essential as a data-collection method, and that students' perspectives collected via interviews could also be alternative sources of data in the study. These reflections during their research activity contributed to the enhancement of Mia's research competence despite never having done qualitative research before. Meanwhile, the interviews with other colleagues and Ella's interview with her both provided opportunities for her to reflect on her own teaching practice. She acknowledged, "I never realise the changes in my teaching practice in mobile learning until Ella did that interview with me."

The collaboration with Mia in this study also encouraged Ella to take every opportunity to learn to use new research methods. Ella used to do quantitative oriented research for many years since her

research experience in the Master programme. She started to consider doing qualitative research when she collaborated with Mia in a writing course. Ella noticed that Mia had collected a large set of narrative data but had no idea how to deal with it. She explained:

We want to do studies on students' development in the long run. We cannot make it by doing some experiments or surveys. It needs a longitudinal study and discourse analysis. We lack knowledge and skills of qualitative methods. (Ella-I-1)

Thereafter, Ella organised a teaching and research seminar, inviting one PhD graduate from the United States to introduce qualitative research to her colleagues. But they learned almost nothing from it. Until recently, Ella attended one qualitative research online course and she felt she "was enlightened and began to understand it". While she continued to read studies published in journals that used qualitative research approaches, Ella participated in one researcher's qualitative study as a participant (as retold in her academic life story in Chapter 5). She was attentive to what the researchers did in data collection, such as interviews. The observation as a participant in other people's research inspired her, and it seemed that it was not as difficult as she had thought. Ella reflected on her learning experience and identified the importance of learning by doing in building up research competence. It was like "tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." Sometimes teachers engage in research not because they are already competent in research knowledge and skills, but because they desire to acquire new research knowledge and skills and to update those they already have.

With Jerry's mentoring, Ella published her first article in a core journal. This inspired her to collaborate further with other colleagues. After building a team of six members to apply for a research grant, Ella shared the draft proposal with all the team members and invited their comments and feedback. She explained: "Research grant is not my primary concern. Based on my learning and publication experience, I intend to take this opportunity to build up a learning community and demonstrate that teacher research is achievable." Ella's action offers process-based

scaffolding and creates more collaborative opportunities for other teachers, who are no longer just learning research knowledge and skills from a textbook or online course but learning through mutual engagement, reflection, and interactions with other colleagues.

By increasing collaboration opportunities in the departments, though still rare, both Ella and Sophie, as “self-reflective intentional agent[s]”, are “inherently part of and shaping” their own immediate contexts for their academic development (Ushioda, 2009, p. 218). The endorsed teacher-researcher identity gave them more agency to take actions when being confronted with institutional constraints (Edwards & Burns, 2016).

## **Summary**

This chapter provides a picture of research initiatives both within the two departments and across boundaries with other communities, from the top-down and the bottom-up perspectives. Whereas some of the initiatives are not working effectively for every teacher or may not be sustainable, they have eased the tensions to some extent, particularly concerning research collaboration, research competence, research motivation, and teacher-researcher identity conflicts. Beneficial changes in participants’ research experiences, fall into four main themes: (a) enhanced sense of connectedness and more collaboration among colleagues; (b) deepened understanding of the relationship between teaching and research; extended identity as a teacher-researcher; (c) improved research knowledge and skills and positive self-efficacy; and (d) higher intrinsic research motivation and sustained engagement. Underlying these dynamic, non-linear, and interconnected patterns is the accomplishment of the three basic needs of the teachers: relatedness (a sense of belonging), competence (a sense of confidence), and autonomy (a sense of control) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these needs are facilitated through these initiatives, the internalisation of extrinsic motivation into more autonomous motivation and an increased degree of self-control over the teachers’ own research lives are achieved, which, in turn, constitute and shape the research environment of the departments.

As illustrated in the initiating, implementing, and sustaining of these initiatives, the element of leadership, such as in the cases of Jason and Jerry, is evident as playing an essential role. The next chapter will highlight the insights into what leadership means for cultivating a conducive research culture and what challenges the leaders concurrently confront in their particular working contexts.

## CHAPTER 7: ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP: ROLES AND CHALLENGES

### Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the following theme that emerged from the thematic analysis: roles and challenges of the administrative leadership. The thematic analysis was conducted on data sources such as public documents, interviews, and the teacher participants' journals in which they reflected on their interactions with the leaders and their leadership in the two departments. The findings are organised into five sub-themes; specifically those concerning the roles of administrative leadership proposed by Bass and Riggio (2006), and which were discussed in Chapter 2: (a) modelling with commitment and enthusiasm (idealised influence); (b) encouraging innovation and cultivating professional learning communities (intellectual stimulation); (c) scaffolding and mentoring (individualised consideration); (d) inspiring and appealing to the ideals and high goals of teachers (inspirational motivation); and (e) setting rules and regulating (contingency rewards). I then report on the challenges for the administrative leaders at the department level, which are more context-specific than the leadership roles common to both departments. They include university and sociocultural constraints, and interpersonal conflicts. Finally, I provide a summary which highlights the roles of the department leaders identified in the findings. It also covers challenges to the enactment of positive leadership regarding university context and culture-specific issues and organisational culture of the department.

Five administrative leaders are referred to in the current study. Their background information is shown in Table 11. Only Jerry and Jason participated in interviews. The other three leaders are occasionally referred to in the teacher participants' narratives.



**Table 11***Background Information of Leaders*

Leaders		Position	Qualification	Research interests
Department A	X	Dean in charge of English major department	PhD	English literature; translation
	Jerry	Associate Dean, in charge of college English department	PhD	English language teaching and learning; neurolinguistics
Department B	Y	Former Dean (before 2012)	MA	Not known
	Jason	Dean (2012-2018)	PhD	Second language acquisition; English language teaching and learning
	Z	New Dean (2019-)	PhD	Translation

**Roles of Administrative Leaders***Modelling with Commitment and Enthusiasm*

Both Jason and Jerry are labelled by the teacher participants as positive role models for their commitment and enthusiasm for teacher research, which is categorised as *idealised influence*, one of the four core components of transformational leadership (Bass, 1999). Idealised influence is embodied both in their self-reported actions and in the teacher participants' perceptions of them.

With strong research awareness and motivation, both Jason and Jerry pursued PhD degrees after teaching for a few years in their universities. Despite a heavy administrative and teaching load, both of them commit to continued research engagement and keep producing high-quality research outputs every year. Jerry shared with me in the interview how he squeezed in time for research and writing up articles:

My first SSCI article was an outcome of great dedication. It was a 7-day public holiday. I dedicated myself to it and closed myself in the office, writing up my research. ... From Friday night till next Monday morning, I even didn't sleep in order to meet the deadline. (Jason-I-2)

While Jerry transformed from a novice teacher to an excellent and committed teacher-researcher and administrative leader, he overcame some personal constraints, such as weak research competence, by pursuing a PhD qualification and participating in research-training programmes outside the department. He is not only challenged by a heavy teaching load like many other teachers but he also has to fulfil an administrative load, which consumes a lot of time. Despite this, he manages to commit himself to “teaching-oriented research and research-informed teaching”. He is an excellent role model of professional growth. This is echoed in the narratives of Maisie, Lucas, and Ella, who depict Jerry as an enthusiastic and respectable leader:

Jerry is a good model as a leader. He is the one who “walks his talk”. ... I see him working overnight almost every day. That's why he can be so productive. And when he comes to your classroom and discusses with you about any teaching issue, he always produces an acute judgement immediately and talks to the point. (Ella-I-2)

Jerry is the same age as our young teachers. He is an extraordinary role model for us. Did you know, he published articles in the field of neurolinguistics in world-leading SCI journals? That' amazing [with rising tone for admiration]. And he also engaged in teaching-oriented research as he is Associate Dean of Department A [and responsible for improving teaching quality]. He also published educational research in top-tier CSSCI journals, all of them are

first-rank journals. ... And he often shares with us his experiences and academic resources. He's amiable and warm-hearted. He is such an exceptional young teacher and sets an inspiring example for his fellow young teachers. (Maisie-I-1)

Jerry's expertise and achievement in both teaching and research provide vicarious experiences for teachers and becomes a source of self-efficacy for them (Bandura, 1994). Meanwhile, the moral virtue of Jerry as an "open and generous" leader wins his colleagues' trust and respect, which are crucial to establish a close bond between the leader and the teachers and to shape an open and trustful learning community in the department.

The role model effect of Jason is also evident in Department B. Jason is one of the few teachers with a PhD qualification and high-quality research outputs. His research competence makes him authoritative among colleagues. Meanwhile, he stressed the importance of possessing a research orientation as a leader and he himself demonstrates great commitment to teacher research in order to set an example for teachers:

Firstly, research awareness ... is quite important. Every leader will probably say this. But it can't just stay as a talk. You have to walk your talk. Secondly, participation and engagement by yourself. You can't just command your soldiers to fight. As a leader, you have to be the first one to charge [at the enemy]. You have to model for your team. I think I have made it. And the last one is to inspire and wake up teachers' awareness. (Jason-I-2)

His commitment and expertise in research are highly regarded by teachers, which is one of the important leadership characteristics that facilitate research productivity in the department (Bland et al., 2005). Genny recalled Jason's contribution to the Research Forum by setting an example of a critical and inquiring mind:

At the end of each seminar, Jason would make a summary, which is impressive. He has a critical mind. ... What impresses me most is he always evaluates the literature critically and

systematically. This has influenced me a lot. I would like to accept this kind of critical evaluation rather than hollow praise. (Genny-I-1)

Lucy also perceives Jason as a role model and an excellent leader for his commitment to research, research expertise, and remarkable breadth of vision. She stresses the moral virtue that Jason demonstrates.

Jason always sets a good example for us. He is a straight-A student. He always sends his comments at midnight in our online discussion groups. I think this is a full commitment and genuine passion for research. I feel ashamed. [Even though Jason is an excellent researcher], he still works so hard. I should read more. ... I admire him as he always demonstrates a broad view and great vision. He leads you to the frontline research and inspires you with future research agenda. ... He is a leader with integrity and positive influence. He sets the goals and heads towards his goals in a straightforward manner. I can't find a word to describe him, but he embodies a unique virtue of his generation. (Lucy-I-2)

Jason's presence also serves as an intangible force that impels Lucy to move ahead in her research engagement: "I always feel afraid of being asked by him about the literature I recently read." What also impressed Lucy is Jason's perseverance and resilience in the face of obstacles. In her reflective journal, she documented a recent experience of the research project that Jason hosted:

As soon as being informed of the failure in our attempt to win the national research grants, Jason immediately consulted some external experts for their comments and advice. I respect his positive attitude. Once he has a problem, he will reexamine it, diagnose the reasons, and resolve it straight away. If I were him, I would put it aside for a while. A week right after we were informed about the failure, Jason and other members of the research project visited an expert for her advice. That expert pinpointed every weakness of the research proposal and it was enlightening. We know where to restart now. And the most encouraging thing is that the expert confirmed the significance of our study. (Lucy-J-May)

Evidently, as a teacher-researcher, both Jason and Jerry recognise the legitimacy of the nexus of teaching and research and demonstrate a high level of academic expertise and commitment. As administrative leaders, both of them are aware of their role as model of commitment and enthusiasm for teacher research. In contrast, the other two leaders in Department B, leaders Y and Z, are frequently perceived as incompetent and lacking in research engagement by the teacher participants, which are leadership attributes identified as barriers to teacher research by Borg (2010). Zoe explained:

Our former dean before Jason, was at the end phase of her career life. She did not want to try anything new or challenging but just waited for her retirement. She had no publications at all. She was promoted to professor only with a handbook of vocabulary for college English test as her research output. At that time, the promotion routine prioritised those who have higher status or seniority [rather than achievement and competence]. (Zoe-I-2)

Sophie complained about the incompetence of the new leader, Z, who was designated as Dean of Department B after Jason left.

Leader is not an academic concept. Instead, he or she is only human of flesh and blood. Therefore, there can be as many types of leaders as followers. ... Z, as a leader, is completely different from Jason. ... He knew nothing about our teaching and research. ... He gave some advice but that just sounded [nonsense] ... He even asked me to write down some comments in place of his for my report and then what he needed to do is just copy them into space where his comments were expected to be given. (Sophie-I-3)

Both Y and Z fail to win the trust and respect from teachers due to their limited research competence and limited commitment to research, which weakens the effectiveness of their leadership. They are inactive in research engagement and they tend to avoid any innovation, instead maintaining the status quo. Their non-leadership has had a negative influence on the research ethos in Department B. Both Zoe and Genny have worked in Department B for almost twenty years and in

the interview they both compared the situations before and after Jason took the position of the dean. Zoe added, “this is my 20th year of working in this department. I can see the dramatic changes in the recent ten years. That’s why I always say that leader’s guidance is particularly important” (Zoe-I-1). In their perception, the institutional environment, as significantly influenced by the leaders, is crucial to their research engagement because it is immediately relevant to them.

### ***Encouraging Innovation and Cultivating Professional Learning Communities***

Both Jason and Jerry are perceived by the teacher participants as leaders who are enthusiastic about innovation and helping teachers to become more innovative and creative, which is categorised as *intellectual stimulation*, a second core component of transformational leadership (Bass, 1999). They urge teachers to question traditional teaching practices in college English education and encourage teaching innovations in the curriculum reform of MOOCs-based College English Flipped Classroom and EAP teaching. Their intellectual stimulation actions are fully illustrated in research projects rooted in teaching curriculum reforms presented as part of institutional research-promoting initiatives (see Chapter 7). The actions of both of them show that transformational leaders tend to challenge teachers towards higher levels of performance. In the interview, Sophie ‘complained’ about Jason, “He is a man of enterprise and initiative. He is full of new ideas. He once pushes me to the point when I was irritated by him since he is so critical and demanding.” She contrasted Jason’s dedication with the laissez-faire leadership approach of leader Z, who could do nothing but give some trivial comments on the formatting of documents. Again in Lucy’s academic story, she was assigned by Jason to fulfil some tasks that seemed beyond her capability, such as doing a literature review for the research project and presenting their research at a national conference. The overcoming of these challenges turned out to be opportunities for her growth and ultimately inspired her motivation and increase her self-efficacy for future research.

Apart from challenging teachers to transcend their limitations, Jason also stresses team building by establishing and developing department-based professional learning communities. Along with the

development of the Research Forum and EAP curriculum reform, Jason exerted his administrative power to promote professional learning communities in the department. After Jason left, Genny found she did not have any opportunity like in the Research Forum to share her research with her colleagues any more. She highlighted the crucial role of top-down support for the sustaining of professional learning communities:

Leaders play an important role in promoting a positive research culture. ... There may be several groups of communities but all of them are unitedly striving for the same vision. ... There could be collaboration and encouragement or even questioning and dispute. But it is vital to have such a community with top-down support, either in-person or virtual. If it is totally from bottom-up, it could work for a while but it is hard to sustain over time. (Genny-I-3)

In one of her interviews, Zoe also attributes her academic development and professional growth to her active participation in the professional learning communities initiated by Jason:

Environment matters because I never thought about my professional development in the environment as before [Jason was promoted to the dean]. I need scaffolding as constructivism proposes. Right at that time, I participated in the Research Forum and EAP curriculum reform as initiated by Jason. This provides me with an opportunity. ... By catching this opportunity, I realize that I can do something rather than idle my life away. ... Participating in this endeavour makes my life meaningful and my job becomes a calling. (Zoe-I-2)

Jason's encouragement for innovation and professional development sparks Zoe's intrinsic motivation to develop professionally and to fulfil her potential as a teacher-researcher. Zoe identifies the alignment of her self-interest with the organizational goals and has a sense of being on a spiritual mission.

Similar to Jason, Jerry also impels teachers to reflect on their traditional teaching practice. He provides attainable challenges as opportunities for growth, and remains open for teachers' choice and decision. In the term I did the study in Department A, two important tasks were fulfilled. One was the initiation of college English education curriculum reform, including strategic plans in both teaching mode and assessment. Teachers engaged in professional discussion on school-based assessment as well as its washback on teaching content and methods. The teaching and research project aroused teachers' thoughts and stimulated their ability to identify and solve problems, as Jerry elaborated:

This teaching and research project has ignited a heated debate and exerted a significant impact on the teachers. It has never happened before that in a staff meeting, different voices have been heard, even severe criticism. However, I feel it is a good phenomenon. First, it indicates that we are right in initiating this endeavour because it draws teachers' great concern. Second, it indicates that there is still lots of room to improve. ... The improvement of teaching quality relies on the alignment of goals of individual teachers and the organization. (Jerry-I-2)

Jerry is open to disagreement and remains tolerant and optimistic about the conflicts rising through all the trials. This helps stimulate professional inquiry and reflective dialogue among teachers, which is often "a central feature of effective communities" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The intent of the professional inquiry and reflective dialogue lies in the shared vision of curriculum reforms and collective commitment to the success of student learning (Louis, 2008). Meanwhile, through the inquiries and dialogue teachers' voices are valued, and they are given increased choice and control over the curriculum, which consequently empowers teachers with a sense of professionalism and self-efficacy (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

The second task is for teachers to build collaborative groups via engaging in different projects and write up a project proposal based on college English education curriculum reform. Each group is



expected to focus on one aspect of the curriculum reform and is led by one teacher coordinator who initiates that research project. Teachers, who are not confident to initiate a research project by themselves, may choose to join groups which align with their own interest. One outcome of this curriculum reform is expected to be journal publications or research reports. Jerry intends to take teaching practice as a site of inquiry and also to take this data-based reform as an opportunity to spur teachers into integrating teaching and research and thereby theorizing their practical knowledge. He explained, "I require the teacher coordinators to write up a project proposal, including objectives, means, and outcomes. Only by writing them out will you have a clearer picture of what you are doing." Reflecting on his own research experience, Jerry realises that teachers need this stimulation to move forward in their research engagement and to realize their potential, though it is teachers who ultimately exercise their agency to convert this external stimulation into their action.

### ***Scaffolding and Attending to Individual Needs***

In their leadership, both Jason and Jerry demonstrate genuine concern for the developmental needs of individual teachers and support them by coaching and encouraging them to develop to their full potential, which is categorised as *individualised consideration*, a third core component of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2004). While selecting and recruiting teacher participants from Department A, I asked for a staff name list from Jerry. He pointed to the names on the list and introduced to me the background situation of almost every teacher. His detailed description reveals that every teacher has different expectations and desires for professional development, possesses different personalities, research competence, and self-efficacy, and expresses different needs for their professional growth. Some have strong research competence and yearn for recognition and encouragement from leaders and peers, such as Maisie, whereas others need mentoring and guidance in research skills and academic writing, such as Ella, Mia, and Lucas. His understanding of individual needs enables Jason to work continuously to offer support that

teachers specifically need. He particularly highlights his intention to push the development of Mia, who he thinks has a great passion for teaching and has always been creative although she has not yet produced sufficient research outputs. Lucas recalled that when he felt lost in establishing his research interest and continuing his professional development, Jerry provided a learning opportunity for him as a visiting scholar under the supervision of a leading expert in the field of assessment. The one-year off-service study prepared Lucas with theoretical perspectives for the university-based assessment research project he is now hosting. Lucas demonstrates great enthusiasm as the project expands his interest and pursuit in alignment with the goals and strategies of the organisation. He acknowledges this has become a turning point in his research life as shown in his academic life story.

Jerry's leadership in scaffolding individuals also helps Ella develop her leadership as Principal Professor. With enhanced research self-efficacy, particularly after her first publication experience, Ella has become attentive to the needs of her colleagues. For example, she invited one novice teacher to collaborate with her in writing an article and presented it at an academic conference. Moreover, she tried to inspire and stimulate Mia's research enthusiasm by inviting her onto a research project, since she knew Mia has great potential in research but is just not motivated to engage herself. She also initiated a research project and invited several teachers to collaborate. Ella explained, "I followed the way in which Jerry mentored me. ... I wrote the draft of the research proposal and invited their suggestions. In the process, all of us committed to reading literature, revise the research proposal. Thereafter, the research climate was formed among us" (Ella-I-2). Jerry's leadership creates more transformational leaders in Department A, which is more likely to ensure the sustainability of the effects of transformational leadership.

In Department B, Jason constantly strives to attend to the different needs of individual teachers to bring out their very best performances. To help Genny with her university-based assessment research project, they both visited a leading expert in the field and learned about developing the university-based assessment. Jason also applied for research funds to support her project. To assist

Zoe, who is weak in identifying and developing sound research questions, Jason inspires her with frontline research:

Zoe is brilliant though she lacks systematic academic training. So I always inspire her with some research topics. ... She is the coordinator for the course of intercultural communication. Therefore, I suggest her thinking about the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and academic English and share my research ideas with her. (Jason-I-1)

Sophie compares Jason to an orchardist when she describes his care for the growth of individual teachers:

I [Jason] have several peach trees in my orchard. I water them, fertilize them, get rid of worms. ... I take good care of them to make the smaller bigger, the infertile fruitful, the unproductive productive. Finally, the productivity is increased. This is what a conscientious and responsible leader does. He won't let them grow by themselves and in the end just take those that survive. (Sophie-I-3)

The comparison reveals Sophie's perception about how a transformational leader who inspires, empowers and stimulates followers in the process augments the effect of a transactional leader who focuses on the outcome and exchange with the followers (Antonakis & House, 2013). Sophie's comparison is in line with Ella's call for a breeding ground for teachers' professional growth in Department A. Other instances of scaffolding teachers in their research engagement can also be found in Chapter 5, academic life stories of each teacher participant, and in Chapter 7, research-promoting initiatives.

### ***Inspiring and Appealing to the Ideals and High Goals of Teachers***

As administrative leaders, both Jason and Jerry constantly inspire and appeal to the ideals of teacher professional development and the high goals of the departments by explicitly articulating a clear

vision and strategic plans for the departments in public staff meetings and on other occasions. This *inspirational motivation* is the fourth core component of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2004). They stimulate teachers' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation by engaging their conceptions of the expectations of the group and its collective goals. For example, in an interview, Jason stated his professional ideals, which he persistently stressed in the staff meeting:

First, we have a responsibility towards University B. In early 2013 when I initiated the EAP curriculum reform, I was fulfilling my ideal of education. Second, we have a responsibility towards the nation and society. We are cultivating talents who are valuable to society and who possess high-order thinking skills. ... Thirdly, we have a responsibility towards parents and students, who entrust the best of their life to us. Therefore, we cannot just ask them [students] to follow us to read sentences [practising pattern-drills]. We have to teach them thinking skills. Lastly, as teachers, we should achieve self-actualization for professional growth and development throughout our lives. We should live up to this profession. (Jason-I-1)

The word *ideal* is also frequently referred to by him in his annual work reports. Through verbal persuasion, Jason tries to engage individual teachers with the organisational mission and preach collective professional ethics and values which serve as a reference for teachers to relate themselves to the community. Teachers are encouraged to internalise and transfer these external values into their belief system and everyday teaching practice, which is not limited to language skills training but expands to whole-person education. In the service of social responsibility and teaching practice, individual teachers become more autonomous to achieve the full realization of their potential and self-worth.

Another source of inspirational motivation is the emotional appeal created by Jason and Jerry with the teachers (Antonakis & House, 2013). Both of them evoke positive emotions from teachers, such as trust and confidence, which may result in personal identification with the leaders and hence

action with a sense of purpose towards the expectations of the leaders as well as collective goals. Ella describes the teacher team in Department A as being united and displaying a high level of commitment and innovation for teaching despite low motivation for research engagement. Jerry confirms her description in his interview.

We have a friendly interpersonal relationship among teachers in the department. ... We trust and support each other. We all aim for better performance and effect despite divergent views. ... The collective commitment follows shared goals. This is the prerequisite. This is why those teachers are taking immediate action after I allocate the tasks for application for research grants. This harmonious collegial atmosphere is a great treasure for us. (Jerry-I-2)

The shared goals and interpersonal bond shaped by positive affect between leaders and colleagues help channel teachers' commitment to shared endeavours, such as the MOOCs-based flipped classroom teaching reform project, even at the price of personal interest.

In Department B, the emotional bond was strongly evident in the teacher participants' emotional response to the departure of Jason. As colleagues of Jason for more than ten years, Sophie and Zoe both expressed in either their interviews or reflective journals their intense feelings of loss at the news of the departure of Jason, who is perceived by both them as a like-minded intimate friend.

You know, all I have now is memories. Memories of Research Forum, memories of EAP courses. Now they all pass away. ... I was very, very depressed at the news. ... I never mind sacrifice self-interest when I worked together with him. It is like "a true man is ready to die a loyal death for those who know the worth of him". ... I appreciate all he has done for the department. The time of working together with him is the most cherished moment of my professional life. (Sophie-I-2 & 3)

For Lucy, a novice teacher, Jason's departure meant a loss of guidance and a mentor: "I feel I just started my academic research life. At this moment, my life mentor leaves me. I feel extremely sad"

(Lucy-I-3).

The effect of inspirational motivation arises from Jason's leadership for idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. The feeling of sadness experienced by teacher participants at the departure of Jason indicates the close emotional bond they had with him, which became one motive for their commitment to research and professional development as well as nutrients for the connectedness of the learning community in Department B.

### ***Setting Rules and Regulations***

Setting up evaluation policies and regulations of teacher research engagement as part of their professional obligations is an important aspect of management for administrative leaders in the two departments, particularly in the broader context of new managerialism (Huang & Guo, 2019). Expected roles and task requirements are clarified in the institutional research evaluation policies and regulations. Positive rewards will be provided, such as monetary rewards or academic promotion, when research obligations are accomplished. On the contrary, punishment will be imposed on teachers when the results of the research performance assessment fail to meet the requirement as expected. The above *contingency reward* behaviours are typical of transactional leadership, which, as Bass (1999) argued, is an essential prerequisite to effective leadership. Both Jason and Jerry display transactional leadership to certain degrees. They take up a similar stance with regard to the shaping effect of evaluation systems and policies on teachers' research engagement. Jerry confirms: "It is not feasible without the pushing force of the appraisal system and policies. Humans tend to be slack by nature" (Jerry-I-1).

Transactional leadership may be efficient in the short-term as it is goal-oriented and outcome-focused (Bass, 1999). It may effectively motivate followers to maximize productivity. In the two departments, the performance-based evaluation policies and regulations are welcomed by some participants. Genny has perceived rapid changes in university research appraisal policies in recent years. Though University B is just a province-funded and teaching-intensive university, the

requirements have begun to reflect those of top research-intensive universities. Instead of complaining about this, Gennya takes up a positive stance towards the changes:

Even though I'm not able to publish in CSSCI journals, I think it is understandable and justifiable. ... We are all aspiring to the rapid development of the university, aren't we? Only when the university is aiming higher will it achieve a significant development. Only when the university has a significant development will we as individuals achieve a better professional life. (Gennya-I-1)

Gennya associates her own professional life with the development of University B where she works and therefore chooses to accept more stringent requirements and policies. This is echoed in Maisie's perception of the evaluation system and policies in Department A and University A: "If this is a universally accepted practice both in China and abroad, it should be reasonable" (Maisie-I-1).

However, some teachers, referred to in the narratives of participants, do not think much of the contingent rewards, such as monetary awards and academic promotion, since they either have a prosperous life already or are content with their professional title as a lecturer. When teachers feel any threat to their job security, neither contingent rewards nor punishment would create an incentive for them to engage in research. Moreover, if not appropriately used, the contingency could result in negative effects. As retold in the discussion of tensions in Chapter 6, Leader X in Department A, imposed a penalty on teachers who failed to meet their obligations of publications and research projects. The relationship failure between the leader and subordinate teachers provoked intensive depression among teachers, which finally diminished their intrinsic motivation for research.

During my visit to Department A, they were in the process of initiating a research-enhancing strategic plan, which breaks down goals of institutional research productivity into individual goals for each teacher. As part of this four-year strategic plan (2018-2021), every teacher needs to sign a contract with the department indicating their research obligations and annual research productivity

goals as well as their long-term goals for the next four years. The number of research papers published in the designated journals and the number of research grant projects at various levels are the key performance indicators, which are used to measure how effectively a teacher has achieved their research goals. To help teachers fulfil their research obligations, a series of school-based, teaching-quality enhancing and research-informed projects are launched as a result of collective discussion among department leaders and some core members of the department. Each project is rooted in the curriculum reforms currently underway in the department with the underlying principle of “teaching-rooted research and research-informed teaching”. Jerry explains his ideas behind:

These projects are essentially teaching-oriented research projects. ... These projects intend to help align teachers’ professional development with organizational strategic plans. They provide opportunities for learning and collaboration for teachers in their research engagement. (Jerry-I-2)

Despite the good intention of the plan, it is not always easily implemented. Even though the four-year strategic plan had been orally announced in public half a year before I did the third interview with participants in the department, teachers had not yet received any official written documents concerning this plan. Lucas, as the main host of a research project on assessment, finds it hard to motivate individual members to engage in research activities unless the details of evaluation are publicised. Lucas explained: “Teachers are concerned about whether their investment of time and energy is worthwhile, that is, whether the outcome of the project will be counted as qualified research outputs in the final research performance evaluation system.” It is evident that teachers’ engagement in these projects is to a large extent shaped by the evaluation system and teachers care more about how they will be evaluated than the primary aim of these projects, which is to improve teaching-quality and enhance teachers’ professional development. In informal talk with Jerry two years after the initiation of the four-year strategic plan, it was revealed that the majority of the



teachers failed to fulfil research obligations prescribed in their contracts, either by hosting research projects or publishing journal articles. The leader team might have no choice but to allow more time for teachers to fulfil these obligations. Clearly, the goals of this research-promoting strategic plan have not been effectively achieved despite the leaders' good intentions.

The negative effect of contingency rewards is also evident in Department B. For instance, Jason set up regulations regarding eligibility for the honour of Excellent Teacher of the Year. Criteria for this honour include research engagement by participating in activities of the Research Forum, carrying out research projects, writing up research reports or any other research-related activities. After the departure of Jason, the regulation was voided by the new leader, who does not see much of the value of teacher research. Without the prerequisite for research engagement, a senior teacher won the honour solely for his commitment to teaching practice, which was not possible when Jason was the dean of the department. Jason expressed his concern about what negative impact the lack of regulations as an external drive will have on teacher research engagement:

It will diminish teachers' motivation for research. I heard that the senior teacher even cried tears of joy. He said he dedicated himself to teaching for so many years. Yet, he had never been recognised for his dedication and commitment just because he did not engage in research. His experiences even aroused deep empathy from some teachers. (Jason-I-2)

Evidently, the contingent award for the honour of annual excellent teacher did not effectively motivate this senior teacher to engage in research. Rather, it resulted in his rejection of research engagement and depression for not being recognised for his commitment to teaching. The empathy from some other teachers indicates that they too do not incorporate teacher-researcher as part of their identity despite this regulation as an intended incentive for becoming research active.

The transactional leadership actions in both Department A and Department B intend to promote teachers' compliance with the institutional research strategic goals through both rewards and punishments. However, the intention is not adequately achieved. Jerry reflected on the role of a

leader in pushing and pulling teachers in their research activities. He stressed that it is not a matter of effort from only one side, that of the leader, but rather a matter of joint effort. Therefore, it is crucial for waking up teachers' intrinsic motivation, which shapes their actions and effort.

It is not feasible without the pushing force of the appraisal system and policies. Humans tend to be slack by nature, including us. With the pushing force, you have to set a goal. When the goal is set, the mediating scaffolding is essential. ... However, intrinsic motivation is very, very important. ... Neither monetary rewards nor penalty will be effective for these intellectuals [who try to use their analytical thinking]. Therefore, intrinsic motivation is of primary importance for teacher research engagement. It is intrinsic motivation that impels you to seek help from others or affordances provided by the organizations. You see, in the same department, why are some teachers making exceptional progress in academic promotion whereas others are content with the rest of their professional life as a lecturer till retirement? (Jerry-I-2)

The leadership experiences of both Jason and Jerry indicate that an individual leader is likely to display a range of leadership styles, including both transformational and transactional. These two types of leadership are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they could be complementary to produce more effective leadership (Bass, 1985). In the two departments, some teachers simply do not demonstrate an intent to engage in research either because they might believe they are not capable of doing research or that doing research is not related to their teaching practice. Transactional leadership provides a push to enact teachers' obligation as a teacher-researcher by setting up rules and regulations as well as specific task requirements for individual teachers. Then transformational leadership is enacted to pull them throughout the journey in the continuous process of modelling, inspiring, stimulating, and scaffolding. Once the desired effect of a combination of transactional and transformational leadership is achieved, a conducive organisational research culture might be

gradually cultivated or enhanced, characterised by enthusiasm, trust, and openness as nutrients of a breeding ground for teachers' academic growth.

### **The Challenges Facing the Administrative Leaders**

Although in the above discussion the leadership of Jason and Jerry contributes to teacher research engagement in the two departments, they concurrently experience various challenges to enact their positive leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Their experiences of challenges are recounted in their interviews with me and are verified in the recounts of teacher participants. The findings indicate that these challenges are more context-specific; for example, Jason experiences more challenges from university and sociocultural constraints and interpersonal conflict with some teachers in the department, whereas Jerry has to deal with a hierarchical relationship with his senior leader. Therefore, I first present the challenges for Jason in Department B and then the challenges for Jerry in Department A.

#### ***University and Sociocultural Constraints for Jason***

University constraints are particularly prevalent in my interviews with Jason and four teacher participants in Department B. In Chapter 5, Jason's academic life story reveals how his enthusiasm and dedication to the EAP curriculum reform as well as his leadership were shaken by university constraints. First, there was a lack of funding for the reform from the university since College English Department is perceived as a service unit and is often placed at a disadvantage while competing with other academic departments for limited resources. Sophie explained the situation in University B:

You know, college English teaching is prevailingly a peripheral discipline in almost all universities across China. University B is no exception. It only focuses on those academic disciplines that have the potential to run Doctoral programmes and award doctoral degrees,

such as economics and finances. ... It [the university] throws Jason into a dilemma. Being situated in such difficulty, Jason has no choice but to leave. (Sophie-I-2)

Zoe also explained Jason's departure from her perspective:

I quite understand him [Jason]. ... He has dedicated himself to the reforms and innovations for many years. However, he cannot feel any support from the university. He feels so hard to lead the team. He is just around 40 and he still has a long way to go in his career life. (Zoe-I-2)

Jason had devoted much time and energy to applying for funding for EAP curriculum reform. For him and for the teachers who are involved in the reform, the funding is more than financial support. It signifies an acknowledgement by the university of their dedication and achievement. Jason compared the reform to driving a car towards the summit of a mountain: "It will consume more fuel. Without fuel, the car can only reverse back." He feels ashamed for not having been able to pay off the devotion and commitment of teachers who are involved in the reform.

Secondly, Jason's decision making regarding contingency awards is largely limited by the research policies of the university. In addition, he has no power to influence the recruitment of teachers in the department even though he is the dean of the department. Therefore, when the university sets lower research requirements for college English teachers and even loosens its standards of evaluation, Jason does not have enough legitimate power to frame external drives or motivation for teachers to engage in research. Jason points out the drawbacks of the university's research policies and provides a metaphor to illustrate to what extent the external drive could work effectively:

In the document [of the policy], only conditions of awards are explicitly written down while no penalty is mentioned. This external drive is far from enough. What if there is a tiger behind them? I believe many of them will be able to climb the tree even when they have

never done so before. But now, there is only a cat there [and therefore, no threat at all].

(Jason-I-2)

Jason also pinpoints other socio-cultural and economic influences that are beyond his control. These influences are in general dragging teachers back, particularly female teachers with family burdens:

“It is reality. She cannot afford to neglect her child and their education.”

### ***Interpersonal Conflict Between the Led and the Leading for Jason***

Apart from the above constraints, interpersonal conflicts are identified as another challenge to the leadership of Jason. These interpersonal conflicts occurring in leadership relationships are embedded in some of the dominant thoughts of evolving Chinese culture, such as hierarchy and *guanxi* (Liu, 2017). This barrier within a cultural context potentially has a negative influence on transformational leadership and may prevent its enactment (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

For Jason, the interpersonal conflict occurs between him and the subordinate teachers who are not following him in the EAP curriculum reform and participating in the Research Forum. Jason categorises the subordinate teachers into three groups along a continuum of research motivation, with the highest level of motivation on one end and zero motivation on the other. The teachers with the highest level of motivation account for no more than 15 percent of the whole staff. Near the other end of zero motivation, teachers, who demonstrate no intention to follow Jason in any innovation and even reject any research activities, account for around 10 percent. And the majority of teachers are those who are most likely to be driven by external forces to do research. Jason explains how the interpersonal conflict occurred by making an analogy:

In the past, the formal deans did not play the role of modeling and stimulating as they are quite weak in doing research. Their action of leadership is like driving a cattle cart. The drawback is it runs at a slow speed. The advantage is teachers do not feel distant from each other, whether you are sitting on the cart or walk along with the cart. ... However, under my

leadership, I give up the cattle cart but drive a car. The speed is getting faster and faster so that those who still choose to walk beside the car are left far behind. Then these teachers would complain that I only concern those teachers on my side but neglect them. (Jason-I-1)

Evidently, not all teachers in the department identify with the innovation and changes brought about by Jason, particularly those who resist the changes and do not want to step out of their comfort zones and undertake any challenging tasks. Unlike Sophie, Zoe, Genny, and Lucy, they do not embrace opportunities for their professional development. The interviews with Zoe and Sophie show that this group of teachers is often depicted as indifferent bystanders of the reform, refusing to commit themselves but looking forward to the profit. They even complain that members of the EAP reform form a clique, which indicates an unfavourable interpersonal relationship between themselves and Jason and other research-active teachers. The misunderstanding of these subordinate teachers, even though not many, caused Jason to be puzzled and frustrated. He explained:

You cannot drive a cattle cart forever. You have to speed up. You know you are doing something significant and you have to seize every minute to fulfill it. You cannot afford to wait for those who will have no intention to move unless there is an external force to push them. I haven't figured out yet why there was such blame. I am just promoting innovation and reform. (Jason-I-1)

In the interviews with the four teacher participants and Jason, it is noteworthy that a good interpersonal relationship among them is frequently referred to as an important factor to motivate their commitment to research and teaching innovation. This relationship, as Jason asserted, is developed and sustained through their mutual engagement in the Research Forum and curriculum innovation of EAP courses. The non-participation of the other group of teachers may block the potential for developing a strong personal network with Jason as well as other colleagues and hence the divide between them was shaped over time.

### ***Hierarchical Constraints for Jerry***

For Jerry, a further challenge occurs between him and his higher-ranking leader, Leader X. Even though it is not explicitly disclosed in Jerry's interview, it is often referred to in the interviews of some teacher participants in Department A. Jerry admitted that as a subordinate leader he has no decision-making power in the research evaluation policies or allocation of research funds despite being entitled to voice his viewpoints. His leadership actions tend to be constrained when they conflict with the will of the Dean of Department A. This is evident in the initiative of the in-house publication, which has been illustrated in Chapter 7. While Leader X was striving for and promoting cognitive linguistics studies among teachers, Jerry issued a call for teaching-based research which he thinks is more feasible and meaningful for teachers. Jerry's act was perceived by Leader X as misalignment with him and therefore stirred up his dissatisfaction. The constraints by higher-ranking leaders were verified by Ella in her interviews:

This is a weird culture. At the level of the university, our department has been attached great importance. However, the more support the department wins from the university, the more constraints the faculty will place on the department. (Ella-I-3)

Ella attributes this hierarchical constraint between Jerry and Leader X to Jerry's better performance than Leader X and the greater achievements of Department B as compared to the English Major Department, of which Leader X is mainly in charge.

This hierarchical constraint is also seen in Department B. When Jason was still associate dean of the department, all the decisions were made by his higher-ranking leader, the dean of the department. Jason recalled, "I just did exactly what the dean told me to do. If she didn't have the intention to do it, then I just have to zip my mouth. But after I took the position of the dean, I began to initiate the teaching innovation." (Jason-I-1)

Jason and Jerry experience challenges in relation to the broader socioeconomic environment, the university, and the interpersonal relationships in the department. This shows that positive leadership is not an individualistic heroic endeavour or top-down management. Whereas Jason and Jerry demonstrate a range of leadership types, particularly transformational leadership, which inspire, empower, and stimulate their subordinate teachers, their experiences show that the enactment and exercise of leadership is complex, culture-specific and context-specific in the interplay between the led and the leading (Davis & Jones, 2014).

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I examined the roles of the department leaders in promoting teacher research engagement as well as the challenges they face in enacting their positive leadership. To help teachers fully realise their potential, the department leaders demonstrate a full range of leadership, including: (a) modelling with commitment and enthusiasm (idealised influence); (b) encouraging innovation and cultivating professional learning communities (intellectual stimulation); (c) scaffolding and mentoring (individualised consideration); (d) inspiring and appealing to the ideals and high goals of teachers (inspirational motivation); and (e) setting rules and regulating (contingency rewards). The challenges the administrative leaders at the department level confront include university and sociocultural constraints and interpersonal conflicts with higher-ranking leaders and their subordinate teachers. As is evident, the enactment and exercise of effective leadership is a process of negotiation between individual leaders and various levels of the context where they are situated.

## **Summary for Chapters 5, 6, and 7**

So far, I presented the findings of three prominent themes of the current study:

1. Tensions experienced by teachers in their research practice within the departments: isolated working patterns vs. desire for collaboration; controlled research motivation vs.



autonomous research motivation; weak research competence vs. lack of scaffolding;  
researcher identity vs. teacher identity and family identity.

2. Institutional research-promoting initiatives: top-down competence-enhancing initiatives; research projects rooted in teaching curriculum reform; self-initiated bottom-up collaborations among colleagues. The impact on teachers' research engagement includes: an enhanced sense of connectedness and more collaborations among colleagues; a deepened understanding of the relationship between teaching and research; extended identity as a teacher-researcher; improved research knowledge and skills and positive self-efficacy; higher intrinsic research motivation and sustained engagement.
3. Roles of institutional leadership in promoting teacher engagement: modelling with commitment and enthusiasm; encouraging innovation and cultivating professional learning communities; scaffolding and mentoring; inspiring and appealing to the ideals and high goals of teachers; setting rules and regulating. The challenges facing leaders include constraints of the university and interpersonal conflicts.

These themes are interwoven throughout teachers' and leaders' motivations, identities, decisions, actions, and emotions. Meanwhile, the voices and perspectives from both teachers and leaders are embedded within each other, resonate with each other, and sometimes even conflict with each other. The following chapter will address the three research questions by making sense of the above three themes with reference to theoretical perspectives informed by professional learning communities, self-determination theory, and transformational leadership. Further interpretations will also take into account previous studies, underscoring both similarities and differences.

## CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

In this chapter, I address my three research questions with reference to theoretical lenses and previous studies. First, I briefly recap the relevant theories that inform the study. Then I discuss in some depth the three basic needs and needs support for relatedness, competence, and autonomy in terms of two aspects: (a) how teacher participants' needs manifest themselves in their research engagement, and (b) how these needs have been nurtured or thwarted in a dynamic and complex departmental organism. A summary of the chapter is presented at the end.

### Recap Theories

The findings of the study address three research questions: (a) What are perceived as central tensions by EFL teachers in their research experiences? (b) What collective initiatives are undertaken in the two departments to relieve the tensions and enhance teacher research practice and what are their impacts on teachers regarding their research life? (c) What are the roles of the department leaders and the challenges they are confronted with? Answers to these questions bring into focus the teachers' most urgent needs for their academic professional development, and how these needs are satisfied or frustrated in the interactions between the individual teachers and various levels of social conditions, particularly their professional learning community and department leaders. I make use of three theoretical frameworks to interpret the focus of the study since each of them provides an informative perspective, and they also collectively contribute to a more comprehensive interpretation and understanding of the findings. Next, I briefly recap the three theoretical frameworks: self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000), the professional learning community (PLC, Hargreaves, 2019; Hord, 1997), and the theory of transformational leadership (TL, Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Two core tenets of self-determination theory that directly inform the study are organismic integrative theory (OIT) and basic psychological needs theory (BPNT). In OIT, human beings are hypothesised to have a natural propensity to learn, actively engage, assimilate, and grow (Ryan & Deci, 2019). This spontaneous curiosity and interest in an activity are conceptualised as intrinsic motivation since the activity is done for its own sake rather than external pressure or incentives. Being social creatures and connected within a social world, human beings show active integrative tendencies to be involved in a natural process in which people tend to “transform socially sanctioned mores or requests into personally endorsed values and self-regulation” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 236). Self-determination theory argues that intrinsic motivation is crucial to active engagement, high-quality performance, growth and well-being. Developed from OIT, BPNT argues that three basic needs, namely, competence, relatedness, and autonomy, are essential nourishment for inner tendencies to grow and for the movement from external regulations to well-internalised regulations and values (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 233). The extent to which intrinsic motivation can be sustained and whether this integrative process can be achieved are inextricably related to how the three basic psychological needs are satisfied or suppressed as a result of interactions between individuals and the social conditions where they are situated.

The departments where the participant teachers work form the most proximal social conditions for supporting or forestalling their research engagement. The theoretical perspective of the professional learning community and its members’ collaborative professionalism provide insights into how the departments can be converted into a PLC, provide nutrients of need fulfilment and, in turn, nurture the well-being and professional growth of teachers. A PLC is a way of collective inquiry of knowing, improving and growing, either organised top-down or emerging from teachers’ bottom-up collaboration (Hord, 1997). This collective inquiry involves nurturing and celebrating the work of each individual staff member, supporting collective engagement, encouraging professional dialogue or discussion with trust and respect, taking joint responsibility in inquiry, building collective knowledge about teaching and learning, and ultimately improving teaching practice and professional

growth (Hargreaves, 2019; Qiao et al., 2018). The more individual's learning is supported, valued and shared in the community, the more the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence are satisfied. The more autonomous and competent the individuals feel about their learning in the community, the more nurturing and collaborative a culture is fostered for both individual and collective growth (Calvert, 2016).

One of the essential social conditions and a core feature of a PLC is supportive administrative leadership such as departmental leaders and shared leadership practices (Deci et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2010). To transform a school or a department from an institutionalised unit into a sustainable and optimal PLC, it is vital for the leader of the school or department to recognise the priority of teacher life-long learning and the need of support for their continued learning (Calvert, 2016). The theory of transformational leadership proposes a growth-oriented leadership by inspiring, encouraging, stimulating, and empowering members (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994). In the field of teacher education, the concept of transformational leadership coincides with SDT and professional learning community in that the transformational leaders not only individually support teachers' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, but also play a crucial role in shaping a culture of autonomy-support and collaborative inquiry (Deci et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 2019; Hetland et al., 2011). However, it is crucial to understand that the outcome of leadership is highly dependent on the situated interactions among leaders, members and the contexts where the PLCs are situated.

Next, I discuss the three needs in turn, explaining why each need matters, how it is supported or thwarted through the teacher participants' interactions with leaders and the PLC and what impact is produced as a result. Then the interconnection of these three needs is discussed.

## **Relatedness and Relatedness Support**

From the perspective of SDT, relatedness refers to feeling connected with others and a sense of belonging in one's community and environment. The need for relatedness reflects human beings' natural and integrative tendencies to connect with others and to aspire to be accepted and supported by others (Ryan & Deci, 2002). The findings of this study indicate that the meaning of relatedness is twofold in the teacher participants' research experiences. First, it refers to a sense of belonging as a teacher-researcher in either formal or informal communities of collective inquiry in their departments. Second, it relates to a sense of belonging as a teacher-researcher in a broader academic community beyond their departments; for example, the academic community of applied linguistics or English language literature studies. Whereas these two types of connectedness are situated in different contexts, they are closely related to each other, with the former embedded in the latter.

In the participants' narrative experiences reported in chapters 5 and 6, the desire for either formal or informal collegial collaboration is evident, which demonstrates their need for relatedness as an essential motivating force for research engagement and sustainability (Bai et al., 2013; Burns et al., 2016; Huang & Guo, 2019). This sense of belonging is not naturally inherent in teachers. Instead, it is created and enhanced by the positive emotional experiences of caring and respect through their formal and informal interactions with colleagues and leaders within the immediate professional learning community in the workplace (Ryan et al., 2019). Various studies have shown that opportunities for collaboration and dialogue create optimum conditions to energise teachers as teacher-researchers and strengthen their sense of relatedness (Borg, 2006; Edward & Burns, 2016; Dikilitaş et al., 2019). Although nearly all the participants in this study expressed their desire for collegial collaboration and a sense of relatedness, there are individual differences among them regarding the extent to which they attach importance to their need for relatedness and in the way in which they achieve it.

The findings suggest that participants with relatively limited research competence demonstrate a stronger desire for collegial collaboration. Yet, they appear to be passive in creating these opportunities by themselves through their agency. However, with a higher research awareness, they are more likely to accept the opportunities initiated and facilitated by the external environment when they are available. Through these opportunities of learning and collaboration, nutrients are generated to nurture the sense of belonging within teachers. In this study, this is apparent in the research experiences of some of the teacher participants, such as Lucy and Lucas.

Being the youngest teacher participant in the study, Lucy is aware that as a novice teacher-researcher, collaboration in research with experienced and senior colleagues is crucial to integrate herself into the professional learning community in the department and to empower her professional development. With this awareness, she took the learning opportunities as a participant in the Research Forum even though she did so somewhat passively. She also accepted the invitation as a co-researcher in the research project hosted by Jason. In professional dialogues and mutual engagement in these collective research activities, she was equally respected by her colleagues, who appreciated her contributions, and they shared feelings of their ups and downs in their experiences of publications and research grant applications. The recognition by her colleagues helped her to see her value in the community. Meanwhile, her colleagues' empathy helped her cope with painful emotions arising from unsuccessful experiences with research grant applications. The mutual encouragement and support among colleagues generated a sense of connectedness far beyond the physical relationship of a fellow worker and is more significant with regards to cognition and emotions. Besides, the verbal encouragement and trust by the leader, Jason, significantly motivated her to commit herself in these collective activities and to seek connection with other team members. The positive emotional experiences, in turn, strengthened Lucy's sense of relatedness as a member of the professional learning community and contributed to both her emotional well-being and sustained professional development. With the knowledge and experience she learned from this collegial collaboration, Lucy proactively applied for a research project as the principal researcher,

which demonstrated her growth of autonomy in academic development. Lucy's experiences mirror the positive emotional changes of the teacher participants in the study by Wen and Zhang (2020); their professional learning community effectively promoted professional development with respect to moral, research, teaching and emotional dimensions.

Similar to Lucy in Department B, Lucas in Department A benefited and gained a sense of relatedness in the top-down professional learning community, particularly when his role was recognised and his work was valued by Jerry and other colleagues. In his early career stage, Lucas spent a long time searching for his research interest. He once felt lost since he had a hard time doing original studies and producing any research outputs in cognitive linguistics, where his interest initially lay. After Jerry encouraged him to take responsibility for developing university-based assessment as part of the teaching reform of College English teaching in the department, Lucas relocated his research interest to language assessment, which aligned his personal research goals with the department strategic goals. Since assessment washback compelled teachers to step out of their traditional teaching comfort zones and to come up with innovations to adapt to environmental changes and new trends, there were always heated discussions and debates with the leaders and other colleagues. Through these professional dialogues, the value of Lucas' research in assessment was recognised, and a strong sense of relatedness with other colleagues and strategic development of the department was then fostered in Lucas. This sense of relatedness, in turn, drove him to commit himself to more research in the field of language assessment. This impact can also be found in many other studies. For example, in Edwards and Burns (2016), the participant whose role in the institution was recognised demonstrated higher self-esteem and a sense of professional identity. As a positive effect of wide recognition in the institution, the motivation of the participant also led to further engagement in research.

The findings reveal that participants with comparatively higher research competence and self-efficacy tend to create the opportunities for collaboration and professional dialogues by themselves in their departmental environment, such as in the case of Sophie and Ella.

Sophie had felt lonely when applying for academic promotion. Her individual factors, such as self-awareness, self-determination, self-goal, self-action and self-reflection, which are also identified by Wen (2020) in three experienced foreign language teachers, drove her to open up opportunities for collegial collaboration in the department. While Jason, as the leader of the department, played a decisive role in shaping learning opportunities and supporting the establishment of the Research Forum, Sophie committed herself to organising and coordinating all the collective research activities. By doing so, she not only satisfied her own need for connectedness but helped meet other teachers' sense of connectedness in the department as well. The more an individual sense of connectedness in the department is achieved, the more collaboration and trust are strengthened among colleagues, which assists the dissemination of knowledge in the professional learning communities (Kruse & Louis, 2009). The relationship of trust and respect among teachers and leaders plays a vital role in keeping teachers committed to shared activities such as the Research Forum. The experiences of participants in the present study are consistent with findings in other studies (e.g., Burns et al., 2016; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Wen & Zhang, 2019). While contextual support for creating collaborative opportunities is important, it is also crucial for individual teachers to commit to study and reflection, be proactive in their learning, and remain open to work with other and diverse perspectives.

The findings also indicate that underlying these collegial collaborations and wide recognition are both shared understanding about the value of teacher research and teacher-researcher identity as a university teacher among teachers and leaders in the community. The word "like-minded", used continuously by all the participants, means shared interest in teacher research and shared vision of innovation in college English education in the context of this study. These shared understandings



may be either pre-existing motivation that drives teacher participants in collective research activities or the outcome of ongoing internalisation due to mutual engagement in collective research activities. Unless teachers reach an agreement that research and teaching are, in fact, interconnected and complementary to each other, they will voluntarily invest more time and energy in collective research practice. This finding is in line with results of many other studies that explore language teachers' research cognition and motivation (e.g., Allison & Carey, 2007; Bai, 2018; Banegas, 2018; Borg, 2009; Chen & Wang, 2013; Kutlay, 2013; Peng & Gao 2019; Reis-Jorge, 2007; Sadeghi & Abutorabi, 2017; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013; Tao, 2019; Yuan et al., 2016; Zuo & Yang, 2019).

Equally important is the shared vision of teaching innovation and shared values of teacher research in promoting teaching innovation among the teacher participants and leaders. As Bai (2018) argues, these shared beliefs, values and attitudes about teacher research among teachers and leaders are central to the shift of institutional culture from teaching-intensive to research-nurturing. But how are these shared visions and values positively cultivated, formed and sustainably adhered to? The two departmental leaders, Jerry and Jason, attach great importance to teacher research, and they themselves set a model by engaging in teacher research. They communicate their values and beliefs through both verbal persuasion and their own actions. They also create opportunities for teacher participants to experience teacher research, and therefore through mutual engagement in evidence-based teaching innovation help teachers embrace "sanctioned requests into personally endorsed values and self-regulation" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 236). Once teacher participants take these opportunities and affordances, they are more likely to experience teacher research as relevant, valuable and feasible. While teacher participants' understanding about the value of teacher research is enhanced and their researcher identity is strengthened in the process of collective engagement, shared beliefs among leaders and teacher participants are formed. And only in this reciprocal way is leadership accomplished. However, if teacher participants miss these opportunities and affordances and shared ideas among leaders and teacher participants are not well-formed, challenges to

leadership might arise, as shown in Chapter 8. The opposite example is when the departmental leaders do not develop and convey a clear vision of teaching innovation through teacher research, motivation for teacher research may not easily be cultivated among teachers as shown in Department B. When the leader diminishes the value of teacher research, as what the Dean of Department A does, and potentially conflicts with the beliefs of the teacher participants, their autonomous motivation for research may weaken. Evidently, the alignment between leaders' research beliefs and practice, as well as the alignment between their beliefs and teachers' beliefs, is the precondition for a sense of relatedness between the teacher participants and the leaders, and thus is essential to the accomplishment of their leadership. This finding confirms the arguments of Borg (2006) and Edwards (2019). They stress the influential role of management at the institutional level in creating facilitative conditions and mediating teachers' agency and researcher identity. It is also in accord with the insights of the study by Edwards and Burns (2016), which found that "a balance of bottom-up individual teacher motivation and top-down institutional support is crucial in ensuring the sustainability" (p. 14) of teacher research over time.

Along with the desire for relatedness in the findings of the study is a desire for research competence and autonomy for research engagement. One of the expected outcomes by teacher participants in the research learning community in their departments is collaboration and professional dialogues as professional development opportunities in which their research competence needs are addressed (Ford & Ware, 2018).

### **Competence and Competence Support**

Based on the meaning of competence from an SDT perspective, research competence in the context of this study refers to more about teachers' belief about their ability to do research than talent or capability in research (Deci & Ryan, 2000). What matters is not the actual research capabilities of teachers but whether or not they believe that they have the ability to meet potential challenges and then fulfil research tasks effectively. This sense of confidence, or self-efficacy, is "the foundation of

agency” and “good predictors of motivation and action” (Bandura, 2000, p. 17). That is to say if teachers do not believe they are competent enough in research, they will more likely be less motivated and even choose not to engage in research activities. On the contrary, if teachers experience a sense of confidence in their research competence and believe they can produce desired outcomes by their actions, they are more likely to commit themselves fully to research activities. At the same time, they become more proactive to exercise their agency to take on optimal challenges in the research process and to transcend any structural constraints on their research practices (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

The findings confirm that low research self-efficacy has become a hindrance for teacher participants to engage in research activities (Borg, 2006; Lehtonen et al., 2015; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016).

However, very little was found in the literature on how teachers’ low research self-efficacy is shaped and how it could be improved with the joint effort of individual teachers and institutional contexts.

The current study shows that the teacher participants’ low research self-efficacy could be attributed to a number of factors, as indicated in Chapter 6. First, a lack of research education seems to contribute to their uncertainty about their capability to carry out teacher research and, therefore, poses a barrier for them to engage in research. Teachers need to have prerequisite research knowledge and skills to promote good quality research and to make it reliable and robust, which, in turn, will increase their self-confidence in the value and legitimacy of their research activities (Borg, 2006). In the current study, a lack of research education could be addressed through both individual teachers’ proactive efforts and institutional support. In both departments, academic resources and learning opportunities, such as online research education programmes, are available for teachers. Although most participants pointed out that lack of research education is a common barrier for teacher research engagement, the current study reveals that these participants do not emphasise a lack of research education and lack of academic resources as a barrier to their own research engagement. Instead, teachers with higher research awareness and motivation for research, such as

Jason, Jerry, Genny, Maisie, Sophie, and Ella, tend to make full use of resources available or to seek learning opportunities to improve their research competence. Alternatively, they seek help from outside of the department if the resources are not available within the department. Their research self-efficacy, as well as knowledge and skills, has been increased in their continued engagement in research activities over time. This finding is inconsistent with results of other studies, which identified a lack of research methodology knowledge and skills and inaccessibility to academic resources as major constraints on teacher ability to do research (Borg & Liu, 2013; Chen & Wang, 2013; Pham, 2006; Xu, 2014; Yuan et al., 2016).

The findings of the study also indicate that the teacher participants' research self-efficacy may be dependent on how challenging the research tasks are as perceived by them and on the expected outcomes of the research. They tend to display a sense of confidence in research activities in the classroom context, where they have more autonomy and control. With this sense of confidence they are willing to try out and inquire about the phenomena related to their everyday teaching practice in their immediate working contexts, just as when Ella and Mia explore teachers' use of technology in language teaching and when Genny studies students' mobile learning in language learning. When it comes to overdemanding research activities, such as publishing and applying for research grants, the teachers tend to appear unsure of their competence in these activities. This is probably so because the threshold and success of publishing in high-impact journals and applying for research grants are determined by others in broader sociocultural contexts. Therefore, teachers have less power in determining the outcomes of journal article submissions and research grants application.

Even though the studies by Xu (2014) and Long and Huang (2017) have shown that successful experiences in publishing could be a source of self-efficacy for teacher-researchers, teachers feel very vulnerable and anxious in doing these overdemanding activities. The tensions and challenges caused by these demands are similar to those identified by previous studies. In the study by Tran et al. (2017) in the Vietnamese context, teachers felt overwhelmed and increasingly disheartened

about their capacity to meet the requirements for publications. Also, in the study by Liu and Borg (2014) in the Chinese context, teachers experienced tensions between the requirements for publishing and their perceived weak research competence. When teachers see research as mainly publishing in high-impact journals, it shakes their research self-efficacy. What is noteworthy is that in the current study, even though the participants tend to have low self-efficacy when they are asked to evaluate themselves as a teacher-researcher, they all appear to have a growth mindset; a future-oriented belief that they could develop their research competence for the better. This kind of growth mindset has been addressed as vitally important by Wyatt (2018) to help teachers build self-efficacy. It also indicates that such efficacy-doubts do not necessarily negatively impact teachers' beliefs about their ability to fulfil various research tasks. Instead, they could "beneficially stimulate growth" (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016). Therefore, it might be helpful if leaders have long-term visions and a growth mindset, stay patient, and break down a seemingly overdemanding task into small, staged tasks. For example, instead of pursuing immediate success in research productivity and imposing on teachers overdemanding requirements for publications in core journals or winning high-level research grants, leaders may first encourage and scaffold teachers to write up a research report for an in-house publication. When the outcomes of research activities are not overstressed and research goals seem to be manageable and achievable for teachers, teachers potentially experience the most potent source of self-efficacy, named mastery experiences (Bandura, 1994). The increased research self-efficacy may further direct their sustained effort to overcome obstacles in the future. The power of experiencing small wins to enhance teachers' research self-efficacy is particularly evident in Lucy's experiences in presenting a study at an academic conference and Zoe's research experiences in learning to use the tool CiteSpace in her research. These small wins helped Lucy and Zoe to achieve bigger goals in the future, such as Lucy's success in applying for a university research grant and Zoe's endeavours in another study. This, therefore, accords with the call for feasible and realistic research targets by Borg and Liu (2013).

The findings of the study also suggest that one-off workshops or longer in-service teacher training courses are limited in enhancing the teacher participants' research knowledge and skills and maintaining their research self-efficacy. In these workshops or training courses, the teachers merely listen to lectures and play a role of knowledge consumer, receiving knowledge which they often find irrelevant or impractical but are expected to implement in their practice. This further supports Borg's idea (2015) that continuing professional development (CPD) in the form of mandated workshops delivered by external experts is "too often largely a waste of time" even though these workshops are often considered as a sign of institutional support (p. 5). Instead, the findings show that ongoing and context-specific mentoring throughout teacher participants' research careers becomes more important to them. In their own research practices, the teacher participants are no longer merely "a consumer of received knowledge", but through research engagement they are generating "new understandings from within" with external support (p. 5). This process-oriented efficacy-building support seems to be consistent with recent studies that have examined how the development of teachers' research self-efficacy beliefs can be facilitated in research tasks at every stage of the process (Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Hu & Chen, 2014; Jin, 2015; Lehtonen et al., 2015; Meng et al., 2018; Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016; Wen & Zhang, 2019; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016).

The findings reported also reveal several sources of teacher participants' research self-efficacy. The first source is their hands-on research experiences including overcoming optimal challenges and small wins as discussed above. The second source is availability of role models in the department. Role models in the workplace as the most immediate professional learning community could be another important source of self-efficacy. The findings provide insights into how the role models in the two departments might help teacher participants re-evaluate themselves. When teacher participants see that everyone else in the workplace does not engage in research and there are no teacher-researcher role models in the community, they tend to reconcile themselves merely with their teacher role. This peer influence is consistent with the situation of teachers in Zhou and

Zhang's (2016) study, in which teachers mirror themselves and their actions on those of their colleagues and feel less pressured to engage in research because everyone is research-inactive. The non-engagement in research prevailing in Department B could result in the deterioration of teachers' motivation for research and further professional development. While leaders are often expected to be role models as researchers, peer teachers, such as Ella and Sophie, set good examples for their resilience and perseverance in overcoming challenges and difficulties prevailing in the teachers' attempts at professional development. When the teachers witness the experiences of these role models and compare their circumstances with their own, they tend to re-evaluate their own abilities and see their possible self in these role models. As a result, they initiate their actions towards a potential future and success. Moreover, the findings show that the role models and mentors perceived by the teacher participants are not just leaders or teachers with more expertise. Instead, teachers themselves tend to have great potential to do research. They can grow to be role models and mentors for their colleagues as long as they are provided with opportunities and the conditions to show themselves, just as the teacher participants' in the Research Forum did in Department B.

The third source of teacher research efficacy is the interactions with other members, including leaders, in the departments and associated emotional responses. In the current study, some leaders with limited awareness of and negative attitudes towards the value of teacher research and teachers' research competence tend to give negative feedback on teachers' research performance and their research competence. As a result, the teachers may project these negative attitudes onto their own beliefs about their capacity to do research. The accompanying negative emotions, such as self-doubt, may further reduce their research self-efficacy and motivation to engage in research. On the contrary, positive feedback and words of encouragement from other members of the community, as well as the leaders, Jason and Jerry, have reassured the teachers about their capability and potential to do research, inspiring their passion and motivation to fulfil their potential.

This process of continuous encouragement is often associated with positive emotions, such as the

“warmness” Lucy felt when supported by other teachers in the community, and “a sense of pride” Zoe felt after she successfully taught other members a research method in the Research Forum. Both leaders and teachers adopt mentoring roles to varying degrees. They work together to create circumstances where teachers are made to believe in their research capability and where they are willing to engage in research activities of optimal challenges and are finally successful in unlocking and realising their potential. Their effort accords with the ideas revealed in Burns and Edwards’ study (2014): that is, only when there is both the leaders’ buy-in at the institutional level and teachers’ buy-in at the individual level will teacher research have the “capacity for a built-in ‘ripple-effect’ that energises teacher professional development” (p. 82).

The opportunities and conditions that the two departments are providing for teachers are to some extent in line with the features that Borg (2015) identified as “transformative CPD”, such as teacher collaboration, support from the school leadership, internal and/or external support for teachers through mentoring, job-embeddedness (p. 5). In addition, the findings also mirror the factors that Wyatt and Dikilitaş (2016) identified for facilitating the developmental process of teachers’ research self-efficacy, such as awareness-raising, opportunities to gain practical knowledge by conducting small-scale classroom research, and the encouragement of reflective skills. The findings also corroborate the preconditions for teacher research development that Lehtonen et al. (2015) summarised in their study, including encouragement from peers and leaders who value research, pedagogical development through research orientation, regular, low-threshold research activities, and a supportive organisational structure with the leaders who value research. Opportunities provided for teachers to present and publish their research are also considered to be important ways to support teachers with their confidence in their research competence (Borg, 2015; Long & Huang, 2017; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016; Xu, 2014). Nevertheless, the findings of the study suggest that these opportunities would not readily be taken up by teachers if they are not granted enough freedom in deciding the content and process of their research and if their research outputs are not credited officially in research evaluation policies.



The findings show that once the teacher participants have gained a sense of belonging in the community and become sufficiently optimistic about their ability to conduct research, they tend to become more autonomous in decision-making in their future research engagement. This is particularly evident in Lucy's and Zoe's research trajectory. Their participation in collaborative research with other colleagues helped them "overcome an initial lack of self-confidence" (Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016, p. 565) and subsequently sustained them in achieving various small wins until they become more confident about their ability to conduct research. They continue to further explore issues in their immediate teaching context and have started to conduct research independently since positive beliefs about their ability and increased research knowledge and skills provide them more freedom to choose the content of their research and the way they conduct it. The control of their own research engagement by teachers, or teacher research autonomy, particularly in the longer term, is therefore both a salient subtheme of the tensions in the teacher participants' research experiences and an ultimate goal of the institutional effort in supporting teacher research.

### **Autonomy and Autonomy Support**

From the perspective of SDT, autonomy is "the psychological need to experience one's behaviour as emanating from or endorsed by the self" (Reeve et al., 2004, p. 31). Hence, autonomy support revolves around supporting people by providing them freedom of choice and decisions to achieve socially valued goals. With the psychological need of autonomy being supported, people are facilitated to align social values and expectations with their existing interests, values and beliefs. Given freedom of choice and decision-making, people experience a sense of personal agency and self-determination, and further, a sense of responsibility (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Ushioda, 2011). These are all crucial to developing autonomous motivation to take self-directed actions and to achieve goals, which is the ultimate aim of autonomy support. In the field of applied linguistics, both Lamb (2007) and Benson (2017) clarify two meanings of teacher autonomy. One resonates with autonomy in SDT as a psychological need to experience one's actions as self-directed and controlled. Another is

autonomy as a capacity to take ownership of one's sustained effort towards long-term goals (Benson, 2017, p. 19). Here the capacity is composed of *willingness, ability* and *freedom* (Huang & Benson, 2013). The findings of this study provide some insights into how teacher participants experience autonomy support as well as autonomy development in their research engagement in two senses: (a) autonomy as the psychological need satisfied or overlooked in the social and institutional environment, and consequently (b) autonomy as capacity which is shaped by and reshapes individuals' proactive and reactive actions within social and institutional conditions.

The findings suggest that all participants potentially have inherent inclinations or "an inner compass", a metaphor used by Assor (2012), to do educational research. That is, they tend to strive "to develop and realise direction-giving and authentic values, goals, and interests" with regard to pedagogical inquiry, individually and collectively (Assor, 2012, p. 423). All participants in the study display positive attitudes towards teacher research and self-report beliefs regarding the value of research for improving their teaching practice. They support the legitimacy of the teaching-research nexus even though none of them explicitly express that teaching is an inherent research activity and that research is an integral part of teaching (Xu, 2017). They not only show a willingness to do teacher research but also engage in some self-directed research activities. For example, Mia and Gennya identify puzzles in their teaching practice, raise questions, observe their students, and collect and interpret data from their particular teaching contexts. With new understanding through their inquiry, they tend to invest more effort into reforming their teaching practice in order to improve learning effectiveness. Sophia also takes an "inquiry stance" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 74) in her reading of expert knowledge, questions hypotheses proposed by academic experts and verifies them in her own classroom. In this sense, they are all naturally reflexive teachers.

Additionally revealed are their positive emotions, such as a sense of achievement and enjoyment when they engage in these self-initiated research activities and succeed in improving their teaching effectiveness through their inquiry.

In addition, all participants express their desire to become a teacher-researcher and strive to embrace a researcher identity as a part of their professional identity as a university teacher. They recognise the central role of teacher research in their professional identity construction and commit themselves to improving their research competence. The process of this self-endorsed autonomous pedagogical inquiry is also a trajectory of becoming a teacher-researcher (Benson, 2017; Burns, 2017; Xu, 2017). This further supports Benson's (2017) idea: teacher autonomy is closely linked to identity in the sense that identity sets the compass for longer-term processes of autonomous behaviours that are characterised by the connotation of identity and in return, autonomy directs teachers' actions towards longer-term identity goals.

These values, goals and identity integration as an "inner compass" provide the participants with internal criteria for their choices and decisions in their research engagement and make them feel that their research practices are consistent with their values, goals and ideal self and therefore meaningful (Barkhuizen, 2020). Along with this process of alignment of teacher research with their existing values and goals, autonomy as a capacity is gradually shaped, directing teachers' future commitment to research and even empowering them to be an agent of change of the institutional conditions, such as Sophie's striving to initiate the Research Forum to satisfy the needs of relatedness and competence among teachers.

However, the development of autonomy among these participants is never a linear and constant journey. Instead, it is a "zigzag pathway" (Long, 2014) in which teacher autonomy is unevenly shaped over different stages of their life and across different contexts. The findings of this study suggest that autonomy, as the inner psychological need, could be overlooked in the external social and institutional environment and, as a consequence, autonomous motives could be constrained in the interactions with the social and institutional conditions.

While participants display an inner compass for teacher research, they are more likely to engage in teacher research as a form of professional learning (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Roth, 2014). This inner

compass is shown to be positively associated with research productivity (Peng & Gao, 2019; Snowball & Shackleton, 2018). Nevertheless, the inner compass does not ensure satisfying research engagement or expected research productivity. Even though all of the participants are aware of the value of teacher research and are willing to integrate researcher as part of their professional identity, their actual effort and actions to become a teacher-researcher are always mediated by their interactions with external conditions. Their commitment to research may vary over their personal and professional life phases as well as over the changing contexts in which they have been situated.

The findings indicate that the research policies of universities and institutions are prevailing external conditions that shape the teachers' research engagement. Some teacher participants, such as Maisie and Genny, view these policies positively as constructive and enabling. However, most of the teacher participants hold negative attitudes towards output-oriented research requirements as well as the utilitarian research culture that is created by these research policies. The teachers' level of motivation and commitment to research is primarily influenced by their desire to gain professional promotion as well as their intention to avoid punishment or feelings of shame. For example, Genny, Lucas and Maisie all specify academic advancement as the primary reason for their research engagement. Also, in Department A, a high tendency of research engagement and research productivity has been reported when a large number of teachers were seeking promotion. This phenomenon indicates that most teachers are coerced into research engagement by external or introjected motivation. These findings mirror those of previous studies that have examined research management and teacher research engagement (e.g. Borg & Liu, 2013; Meng & Chen, 2019; Peng & Gao, 2019; Pham, 2006; Tao, 2019; Vu, 2020; Xu, 2014; Zhou & Zhang, 2016).

Output-oriented research management may drive teachers to more research engagement, particularly those who do not have a clear and authentic inner compass for research. But it is only an action of today or tomorrow, when it comes to professional promotion. Jerry observed in his department that after successful promotion the majority of teachers no longer engage in research or

do so much less than before they were promoted to associate professor. Research becomes a tool of academic promotion rather a means of teacher liberation (Bai, 2018; Meng et al., 2018). Doing research is more of an obligation than an autonomous and democratic way of professional development. The high demanding research requirements make teacher research an enduring endeavour rather than an enjoyable endeavour. Output-oriented research evaluation systems tend to drive teachers to survive by managing to finish a quantified workload temporarily rather than thrive and emancipate themselves through self-endorsed continuing professional development. The former actions are often associated with emotional effects of pressure and coercion while the latter, anticipation and self-fulfilment. Whereas these externally controlling regulations may work to initiate teachers' engagement in research for the time being when they lack intention and motivation, they do not help develop teachers' autonomy in the long term. In other words, teachers just "swallow" the regulations and do not "digest" and assimilate them into their own values and interests. The potential ineffectiveness of external controlling regulations echoes the idea of Deci et al. (2017) that external regulations often bring about unexpected damage to the long-term development of autonomous motivation and well-being, "sometimes with organisational spillover effects" (p. 21). For example, Leader X in Department A deprived teachers who failed to fulfil the research load of an annual bonus as punishment. Similarly, in Department B, Jason denied teachers' eligibility for the Award of Excellent Teachers if they failed to engage in any research activities. These external regulations did not impel teachers but produced resistance among teachers, as in the case of Mia, who recognised the gap between her existing values, goal, and interests and the external research requirements and output-prioritised research culture. This undesired impact on teachers' research engagement is consistent with findings of Long's (2014) study, in which two of the participants did not display strong motivation to do research despite their positive attitudes towards research and their recognition of the reciprocal relationship between teaching and research. Interestingly, the other two participants in Long's study who showed strong motivation for research

took promoting professional titles as their future plans, which shows that they engage in research most probably for the aim of obtaining external rewards.

Negative emotions, such as frustration, are often associated with unpleasant research experiences when teacher participants feel pressured and coerced to do research. These negative emotions are evident in Sophia's experiences of her promotion journey to professor and in the experiences of teachers in Department A when they were punished for failure to meet research requirements. Even though teacher participants, such as Mia, have an "inner compass" to do research, these negative emotions turned out to influence their research engagement, well-being, and professional vitality (e.g., Assor, 2012; Wen & Zhang, 2019). In contrast, in the case of Genny, she shows a more relaxed and enjoyable state when doing research after her promotion to associate professor and does not perceive much external pressure to do research. Now she could do research completely on her own will. The change of Genny's emotional state is again in accord with other studies that indicate that when a teacher experiences autonomy, they take more responsibility and initiative in their actions, and would be more likely to engage in research as a tool of continuing professional development, thus corresponding to their values, beliefs, and interests (Tao, 2019; Zuo & Yang, 2019).

Moreover, the findings show that the teacher participants' freedom of decision-making in their research activities tend to be conditioned by research policies as well as gatekeepers, such as research grant providers and journal editors and reviewers. Teachers have to follow research conventions set by academic journals or research grant providers and cater to their preferences for research topics and methodologies so as to increase their chances of publication in academic journals or winning research grants. Hence, there emerges a misalignment between the teachers' actions shaped by the research requirements for publication and research grants and their inner compass for teacher research to improve teaching effectiveness. Their engagement in research, in these circumstances, is experienced as compelled and relatively non-autonomous due to the lack of freedom in choosing research topics and methods that align with their inner interests. This

experience of controlled motivation, if not well assimilated with teachers' own values and interests, would more likely discourage them from long-term research engagement as a tool of self-directed and sustainable professional development (Ryan & Deci, 2011). The findings again support previous studies which highlight the importance of granting teachers choice and freedom of decision-making in research activities and how this could contribute to improvements in intrinsic motivation, initiation of personal agency and development of teacher autonomy (e.g., Borg, 2006; Borg & Sanchez, 2015; Dikilitaş et al., 2019; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019; Lehtonen et al., 2015).

The findings also indicate that the output-oriented research requirements, in which research is narrowly concretised as research grants and journal articles, may provoke teachers' self-doubts about their research competence since publication in top-tier journals and winning research grants seem to be too demanding for them. These self-doubts are evident in the findings; teacher participants do not engage in research partly because they do not have confidence in publishing or winning research grants. Because ability, or teachers' research self-efficacy, is considered to be an essential component of teacher autonomy for research (Huang & Benson, 2013), the lack of support for research self-efficacy could block teachers from undertaking even optimal challenges in research engagement, such as the inquiry into their own teaching practice, which is more feasible and achievable.

Output-oriented research requirements potentially result in misinformed teachers' beliefs about research. Even though both universities stress the significance of the nexus of teaching and research, they in most cases are merely scripted either in public documents or communicated at staff meetings. In fact, teaching and research are evaluated against different criteria. In research requirements, the value of research is considered and graded against the levels of a research grant provider as well as the impact of academic journals rather than the extent to which it is beneficial to improving teaching. Driven by these output-oriented research requirements, the topics of publications as research outcome listed by Department B are mostly not directly related to teaching

practice, which again misinforms teachers that research is irrelevant to their teaching. This misguided impression further prevents teachers from embracing a *teacher-researcher* identity and instead taking *teacher* and *researcher* as two independent aspects of their professional identity. These findings corroborate the ideas of Zhou and Zhang (2016). They suggested that only by reconsidering and improving the evaluation system of teachers in higher education contexts can we possibly guide teachers to develop a commitment to research as an enjoyable, fulfilling endeavour, which will not only bring about a symbolic shift from “academic obligation” to “academic development”, but more importantly an “identity transformation from ‘double identities’ to an ‘overall development’ of university teachers” (p. 55).

Apart from output-oriented research policies at the university level, the findings suggest that what influences teacher autonomy may also include the extent to which teacher participants are involved in decisions about the content and processes of initiatives to promote teacher research at the institutional level, which is largely influenced by administrative leaders. For example, as Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 presented, most initiatives to promote teacher research are implemented in a top-down fashion, predominantly launched and supported by the two leaders, Jason and Jerry, in the two departments. Some of the initiatives with a more balanced bottom-up approach, such as the Research Forum and teaching innovation-based research projects, have facilitated teacher research by helping them gain a sense of belongings, a sense of self-efficacy, a sense of alignment with practice-oriented educational research, and a sense of identity as a teacher-researcher. With the focus and expectations framed by the two leaders, teachers are provided opportunities for learning, collaboration and professional dialogue. Their voices are heard and their perspectives are valued by peer teachers and leaders in the EAP teaching reform in Department B and the MOOCs-based blended teaching reform in Department A. The more teacher participants feel valued and trusted, the more willing they are to invest effort in it, and the more autonomous their learning becomes. In fact, this process of involvement not only endorses teachers autonomy with a sense of responsibility



and a sense of control over things they value but also emancipates them to “play a central role in the creation of new knowledge about teaching and learning” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 13).

However, the findings also show that in all these top-down initiatives, teacher participants’ involvement is limited to varying degrees regarding decision-making about what the initiatives focus on and how they might be implemented. This influences their willingness to engage and their sustainable impact of these initiatives. For example, in the initiative of in-house publication in Department A, the dean tended to prescribe the research topics to be included in the publication. These topics were not in line with the interests of most teachers and made them feel controlled for their choice in their own research. The in-house publication is a one-shot decision by the leaders rather than becoming a norm and part of long-term professional learning activities in the department. In addition, even though teachers were provided with learning opportunities to participate in teacher training programmes and external experts were invited to give lectures, the topics were often decided by leaders or experts rather than by teachers to meet their own needs. Teachers seldom have their voices heard in formal meetings. They have little chance to experience a genuine culture of collaborative inquiry where activities become pervasive and embedded, which made these initiatives less useful for some teachers (Hargreaves, 2019).

Even in the Research Forum and teaching innovation-based research projects, where the teacher participants are supported to exercise choices about the topics they plan to explore and the methodologies they wish to adopt, their involvement is still limited within the frames set up by Jason and Jerry, such as the EAP reforms or MOOCs-based blended learning. The leaders admitted their dominant role in deciding the content and process of implementation of these initiatives. Some teachers in Department B do not participate in the Research Forum because its focus on practice-oriented educational research does not align with their interests, for example, corpus linguistics or English literature and they did not see any chance to start a professional dialogue around these topics in the forum. Another result of the teachers’ lack of a central role in decision-making with

regard to the Research Forum is the suspension of its functioning after Jason left Department B. No teacher participants took action to continue the Research Forum, including Sophia, who was once a core coordinator. This finding also supports the ideas of many scholars about the importance of shared leadership and responsibilities in inspiring team creativity and sustaining professional learning community (Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006; Gu et al., 2020). Also, in Department A Jerry attributed the suspension of the initiative of reading literature and writing up proposals to his lack of time to organise and implement it. Evidently, the sustaining of research initiatives is too dependent on administrative leaders. It is important for leaders to initiate such collaborative professional learning opportunities from a top-down approach in order to spark teachers' intrinsic motivation for research at an earlier stage. More important is to gradually shift responsibility from the leaders to the teachers over time by trusting them to take authority over decisions in organising the collective research activities. It is essential to transform from leaders being agents of change to teachers being agents of change, from a designed learning community by the leaders to an emergent learning community "by teachers and for teachers" (Smith, 2015). Only in this way can the sustainability of these initiatives be achieved (Edwards & Burns, 2016). This sustainability is also crucial to develop teacher autonomy, as Benson (2017) argues, "autonomy is not so much about controlling one's actions today or tomorrow, but of directing current actions towards longer-term goals" (p. 19). Therefore, providing autonomy to teachers is a meaningful shift in the responsibilities and roles that teachers play in their learning and creating conditions for teachers to exercise their agency to take responsibilities. This finding is also in line with the argument of Borg and Sanchez (2015) that to achieve more effective and sustainable professional learning teachers need to be enabled to be "centrally involved in decisions about content and process" (p. 6). However, evident in the findings of the study as well as in other studies (e.g. Gu et al., 2020; Mansur et al., 2017) leadership is "culturally bound" (Gu et al., 2020, p. 21) and shared leadership is closely associated with two cultural dimensions, such as power distance and individualism/collectivism (Carson, 2005). In paternalist Chinese culture, leaders are typically

characterised as being hierarchically powerful decision-makers, exerting absolute control over subordinates (Chen et al., 2017; Gu et al., 2020). Although Jason and Jerry demonstrate some key behaviours in shared leadership, such as visioning, building trust, developing teachers and self-reflection (Jing, 2010), it is not easy to share power and influence in a culture of rigid hierarchy and high-power distance.

Also crucial for autonomy support at the initial stage of these initiatives is the accompanying top-down coordination and scaffolding of teachers' need for competence and relatedness. For instance, in Department A, the four-year strategic plan to increase research performance was not effectively implemented even though teachers were granted the freedom to develop their own research team and decide what to study and how. On the one hand, the rationale of this strategic plan communicated to teachers focused much more on enhancing research productivity in the forms of journal articles and research grants than improving teaching quality and empowering their professional development through self-directed pedagogical inquiry. On the other hand, routines and steps of implementations were not negotiated and shared among teachers. Teacher participants did not perceive regular personalised guidance and ongoing support through the process, and their agency was not sparked until they were facilitated to believe that they could fulfil the task and would probably achieve higher goals. It appears, therefore, that it may not be sufficient to nurture teacher autonomy simply by granting them freedom of choice. Equally important is institutional ongoing support and scaffolding to satisfy teachers' needs for competence and relatedness. The satisfaction of needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence could interweave and support each other. In Department B, it is also evident that the top-down coordination and scaffolding of teachers' needs for competence and relatedness is crucial to develop their autonomy for research engagement. The other two leaders, mentioned by teacher participants in Department B, adopted a more laissez-faire leadership (Bass, 1999). They communicated no expectations or regulations for teacher research engagement since they themselves had limited belief in the value of teacher research. Nor did they provide support for teacher research competence and collaboration to

facilitate their engagement due to their own weak research competence. This “high freedom” from regulations related to teacher research creates a permissive environment for non-participation in research activities and therefore teachers miss the opportunity to experience teacher research as feasible, achievable and valuable (Reeve et al., 2004). Although teachers may have a natural inclination to improve teaching and pursue professional development through teacher research, it does not happen naturally. Without institutional support, this natural inclination could be stifled.

In the above discussion of the three basic needs of teacher participants, it is evident that the extent to which each need is desired and evolves across different stages of their academic development may vary among individuals. The needs support is not merely a “giving-and-receiving” process, but better to be considered as a complex and dynamic organism in which all components are interdependent and mutually shape each other.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the findings and addressed three research questions with reference to the theoretical lenses that informed this study. I have also made reference to previous relevant studies. The discussion has revealed how teacher participants’ needs manifested themselves in their research engagement and how they have been nurtured or thwarted in a dynamic and complex departmental organism. In the next chapter, the Conclusion, implications and tentative suggestions will be put forward for language teachers, departments and their administrative leaders, as well as decision-makers at the university level.

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

### Introduction

In this chapter, I first review the study and its major findings. Then I summarise the study's main contributions regarding theory, methodology, and practical suggestions for language teachers, administrative leaders, and decision-makers at the university level. Next, I point out the study's limitations and provide some recommendations for future research. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on my own growth along my PhD journey regarding my academic and personal life.

### Review of the Study and Major Findings

This narrative inquiry started with my involvement in language teacher education and my curiosity about English language teachers' reported high motivation for research in short-term research training programmes and then subsequently suspending their research engagement when returning to their teaching life in their institutions.

Against the backdrop of increasing pressure to enhance the research reputation of Chinese universities and mounting external pressure on language teachers to become more research active, the significant role of workplace support for teacher research engagement is widely recognised. However, there is little evidence about how a supportive institutional research community is cultivated to facilitate teacher research and what role department leaders play in this process. This study aimed to better understand this issue from both the leaders' and teachers' perspectives. The following three research questions were generated and refined through all phases of the study, and hence shaped the present study:

- (a) What are perceived as central tensions by EFL teachers in their research experiences?
- (b) What collective initiatives are undertaken in the two departments to relieve the tensions and enhance teacher research practice and what are their impacts on teachers regarding their research

(c) What are the roles of the department leaders and the challenges they are confronted with?

Guided by the multiple theoretical lenses of self-determination theory (SDT), professional learning community (PLC), and transformational leadership (TL), this study adopted a narrative approach and employed a range of methods to collect relevant data in the contexts of two university departments in China across one year, including 22 fully completed narrative frames; two narrative semi-structured interviews with each of two leader participants and three narrative semi-structured interviews with eight teacher participants; four monthly reflective journals written by the teacher participants about their research activities across one semester; public documents; and observation field notes.

The narrative analysis of the data configured into ten stories in which the teachers' research experiences and the departmental leaders' research leadership experiences were retold.

Simultaneously, an analysis of narratives approach to analysing the data resulted in three dominant themes related to teacher research experiences within the institutional contexts: tensions, collective initiatives, and the role of leadership. The integration of narrative analysis and thematic analysis (analysis of narratives) allows for an understanding of both particularities within-case and commonalities across cases.

The first major finding of the study concerns the tensions experienced and perceived by the participants in their research engagement. They include: (a) isolated working patterns vs. desire for collaboration; (b) controlled research motivation vs. autonomous research motivation; (c) weak research competence vs. lack of scaffolding; and (d) researcher identity vs. teacher identity and family identity. These tensions reveal that teachers may have a natural propensity to inquire about problems they have in their teaching primarily for improving teaching quality. However, research does not happen naturally but is dependent on contextual influence. Additionally mirrored in these tensions are teachers' needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy to become autonomous teacher-researchers.

The second major finding relates to the institutional support to relieve these tensions and enhance teacher research. Both departments in the study take initiatives ranging from top-down competence-enhancing initiatives, research projects rooted in teaching curriculum reform to self-initiated bottom-up collaborations among colleagues. These initiatives have exerted positive impact to varying degrees on teachers' research engagement, including (a) an enhanced sense of connectedness and more collaborations among colleagues; (b) a deepened understanding of the relationship between teaching and research; (c) extended identity as a teacher-researcher; (d) improved research knowledge and skills and positive self-efficacy; and (e) higher intrinsic research motivation and sustained engagement. These initiatives and their impacts on teacher research engagement suggest that institutional context plays a crucial role in satisfying teachers' needs for a sense of relatedness, self-efficacy, and freedom to engage in research. The top-down policies as a "pushing force" and support in contrived teacher collaboration and designed professional learning communities as a "pulling force" may provide a drive for teacher research engagement. However, they cannot sustain it alone. The study has raised important questions about cultivating teacher autonomy. Only when teachers take full ownership of teacher research can it become an empowering tool for lifelong professional development. Only when teachers are granted shared leadership and have an impact on the department-embedded professional learning communities will they become core members of the communities and develop a greater commitment to the well-being of the communities. It is the increasing autonomy of individual teachers in professional development, professional dialogues among colleagues, and shared leadership in the community that smooth the transition from institutions being merely an organisational structure to being a thriving professional learning community which further nurtures the growth of its members in the long run.

The third major finding of the study is about the role and challenges of department heads as middle leaders. The findings resonate with many studies that revealed the significant role of administrative leaders in supporting teacher research by cultivating a supportive professional learning community

and thus satisfying their needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy. To be more specific, administrative leaders exercised their influence of leadership by: (a) modelling with commitment and enthusiasm; (b) encouraging innovation and cultivating learning communities for professional dialogues and collaboration; (c) scaffolding and mentoring; (d) inspiring and appealing to the ideals and high goals of teachers; and (e) setting rules and regulating. As middle leaders, the department heads in the study often find themselves constrained by both the management policies at the university level and interpersonal conflicts with higher-ranking leaders and their subordinate teachers at the departmental level. The findings of the study show that the enactment and exercise of effective leadership is a process of negotiation between individual leaders and various levels of the context where they are situated.

These main findings of the study can be summed up as follows: (a) The tensions that language teachers experience in their research engagement mirror their basic needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy in developing and sustaining their academic life; (b) with the joint effort by both top-down support and bottom-up ownership of teacher research, institutions could be transformed into sustainable and department-embedded professional learning communities which are characterised by professional dialogue and shared leadership; and (c) administrative leaders play a significant role in initiating the transformation through modelling and encouraging innovation, and sustaining the thriving of the department-embedded professional learning communities through scaffolding, caring, and negotiating rules, and nurturing teacher autonomy.

### **Contributions of the Study**

The current study makes contributions to the existing literature on teacher research in four ways: (a) extending current research on the topic of teacher research in higher education, especially for college English teachers in China; (b) providing more qualitative empirical evidence to the application of the theories of SDT, PLC and TL in research about teacher research; (c) deepening the understanding of the topic of teacher research by employing various data collection methods,



multiple data sources and complementary use of narrative and paradigmatic approaches; and (d) putting forward practical suggestions for stakeholders of teacher research based on the in-depth exploration of the study.

First, despite the increasing call for institutional support to enhance teacher research as a professional empowerment tool, there is little research about what endeavours institutions undertake to promote teacher research and how these endeavours are experienced and perceived by teachers. This study has reported and provided an in-depth investigation into two university departments' initiatives to motivate and facilitate language teachers' engagement in research. The findings of the study provide strong empirical evidence for the value of institutional support in helping teachers embrace external pressures and incorporate teacher research into their inner values and belief systems. Second, although leadership has long been proposed as crucial to cultivating a supportive research environment for teacher collaboration and teacher research, surprisingly little empirical evidence supporting this idea is available. This study has been one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine the role of administrative leaders. It demonstrates how administrative leaders facilitate individual teachers' research engagement and develop their autonomy as teacher-researchers. Concurrently, it shows how administrative leaders shape a culture of trust, initiate and nurture department-embedded professional learning communities, and further enhance teacher inquiry as part of department life. This study also highlights the association of cultural-specific dimensions of leadership. In the Chinese culture context, which is characterised by high power distance, sharing power and influence is not clearly evident in the behaviours of administrative leadership. More importantly, this study is the first report to explore the administrative leaders' role from both perspectives of administrative leaders and the teachers in the same departments. The inclusion and cross-reference of multiple perspectives proved to be particularly valuable to provide strong empirical evidence.

By integrating the theoretical lenses of SDT, PLC, and TL, the current study has provided additional qualitative evidence of the application of these theories in research about teacher research. The integrated theoretical lenses help explain the three basic language teacher needs for research engagement and support by the department-embedded professional learning communities and administrative leaders to satisfy these needs. Furthermore, the study extends our understanding of the theoretical lenses (SDT, PLC, and TL) by indicating that: (a) needs satisfaction is not a simple cause-effect linear process of giving and receiving; (b) the professional learning community is not a product designed by formulaic principles, and (c) transformational leadership is not a transforming process of leading and being led. Instead, the process of needs satisfaction, the cultivation of the professional learning community and the achievement of transformational leadership are in a dynamic, interconnected, interactive organism of nurturing and growing. In this organism, teachers are trusted to have innate growth tendencies and treated as individuals with particular needs at different stages throughout their career life. A fertile ground with nutrients, such as trust, caring, encouragement, inspiration, scaffolding, and optimal challenges, make this tendency more likely and more robust (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A department-embedded professional learning community (PLC), whether it is designed for top-down initiatives or whether it emerges from bottom-up initiatives, or both, could be a fertile ground characterised by open and trustful interpersonal relationships and collective professional dialogues. It plays an essential role in nurturing teachers' needs for sustainable research engagement, particularly for relatedness and competence.

Behind the department-embedded professional learning community is the administrative leader clearly communicating the rationale and expectations, granting teachers freedom and choice to assimilate external expectations with their own inner values and beliefs, and eventually shifting the responsibility of managing and sustaining the community to teachers. Administrative leaders exert considerable influence in initiating an enabling professional learning community and nurturing teachers' needs for autonomy. With the satisfaction of autonomy, relatedness and competence, teachers tend to become more autonomous in research engagement. In turn, their professional

development through research engagement empowers them to become agents of change for the achievement of leadership and the thriving and well-being of departments as a professional learning community. Figure 2 illustrates a micro-organism within a department that could contribute to our understanding of needs and needs support in teachers' research experiences based on the findings of the current study.

**Figure 2**

*A Desirable Micro-organism Within a Department*



Furthermore, one of the strengths of this study is its use of various data collection methods, multiple data sources and complementary use of narrative and paradigmatic approaches. One-year engagement with the two departments and ten participants made it possible for me to gain a longitudinal observation of the dynamics and development of their research life in the two institutional contexts. The multiple data collection methods and multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of the empirical evidence and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. In this study, teachers' voices are heard telling stories of their research experiences. Their stories are retold alongside the stories of the administrative leaders. This multiplicity of narratives engenders a more

reliable and more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of departmental contexts and of language teachers' research experiences situated in these contexts. For data analysis, the study adopted complementary use of narrative and paradigmatic approaches. It invites an in-depth understanding of individuals as well as shared patterns that are highlighted across individuals. The findings suggest that the narrative approach adopted in this study provides a robust way of incorporating temporality, contexts, and social interactions into a coherent story and a window to see and understand the story's situated meaning. It provides language teachers opportunities to be heard. More importantly, it gives language teachers opportunities to be understood. Despite the potential of intrusion into my participants' lives, the narrative approach of this study provided them with opportunities to be heard, to raise awareness of teacher research, to reflect on their identities as teacher-researchers, and to act to improve their teaching practice, more thoughtfully and mindfully.

### **Practical Implications of the Study**

Based on the findings and discussions, implications for practice exist for all involved in the joint endeavour of teacher research, including individual teachers, administrative leaders at the departmental levels and decision-makers at the university level. Even though teacher research is a highly contextualised activity (Xerri, 2019, p. 177), the following suggestions are expected to provoke some thoughts on improving teacher research practice at all levels.

The individual teachers' efforts to be self-motivated and to act agentively in research engagement is crucial particularly when contextual conditions for teacher research are unfavourable and the organisational support for teacher research is absent. Above all, what individual teachers might do is sustain their reflective practice and follow their inclination to ask questions and seek more profound meaning and understanding of teaching and learning. In developing the teaching-research nexus, teachers can start from observing and reflecting on their teaching practice in their own classrooms, where they have more freedom and control and are in a better position to understand

what is happening there than any other external experts. Teachers may draw on the findings of previous studies or their own research in tackling puzzles in their teaching as well as designing courses and learning activities. They may even engage their university students as co-researchers in small-scale research activities and take the learning process as one of co-inquiry (Hanks, 2019). While being inevitably shaped by the changing environment, such as increasing research demands, and being constrained by weak research competence, teachers can still take ownership of their attitudes towards the changes in the working environment and develop a growth mindset. Being open-minded and ready to engage in collaborative teacher research activities will increase teachers' opportunity to experience teacher research, whether driven by external pressure or out of a personal interest. It is crucial for teachers to start with small-scale research and do research within their own classrooms with simple and staged goals. The experiences of teacher research as feasible, achievable and beneficial for teaching may help teachers increase self-efficacy, embrace teacher research as part of their professional life and move from compliance to agency.

The study has several practical suggestions for administrative leaders, who primarily need to understand how teachers do research to learn and grow professionally, what makes teachers want to do research, and what the administrative leaders can do to nurture teachers' learning and growth. Instead of being preoccupied with the quantity of research output, it is essential for an administrative leader to become accountable for creating most effective and beneficial conditions to satisfy teachers' needs for their professional development, both intellectually and spiritually. These conditions are more likely to be fulfilled when:

- (a) Administrative leaders make teachers feel cared for and understood as humans who are constantly coping with the ebb and flow of personal development. For example, administrative leaders may show empathy for teachers by acknowledging the barriers teachers face in research engagement and sharing challenges they themselves experience in research practice. Administrative leaders may also show compassion by listening with interest to

teachers' stories and discussing with teachers how they can help. Trust between leaders and teachers may develop not only because of leaders' competence but also because of the interpersonal relationship between leaders and teachers. Rather than overstressing the collective goals and visions, administrative leaders may also need to acknowledge the obstacles for teacher research engagement and attend to individual needs and provide on-going, context-embedded, individualised scaffolding for teachers' professional development; for example, by taking account of research in calculating working hours. After all, the organisation's collective strategic development is more likely to be realised when each individual teacher thrives.

(b) Administrative leaders make teachers feel trusted and respected as autonomous learners.

Where possible, administrative leaders should invite teachers' voices in forming and reaching shared values and also invite them to make decisions regarding research evaluation policies. It is vital for teachers to use these shared values and visions to guide their teaching and research actions. Meanwhile, self-evaluation could be introduced as an indispensable part of teacher research performance review. Whereas research performance review may serve various purposes, the primary aim is to inform and help teachers' continuous professional development. Therefore, it is important to include self-evaluation in teacher research performance reviews. Through self-evaluation, teachers may realise how research impacts their growth, how it may lead to better understanding of their own learning progressions, what they have already achieved and mastered, what capability they have already owned, and what needs to be done to achieve future goals. In this way, teachers are trusted and respected as an autonomous learner. The research performance review may also serve to inform the administrative leaders how teachers can be better supported and nurtured to become autonomous learners. Meanwhile, administrative leaders can help individual teachers to match their own research interests with organisational needs. However, they need to respect and encourage teachers to pursue their own research interests and to avoid imposing their own personal research interests on teachers.

- (c) Administrative leaders make teachers feel encouraged and valued as knowledge creators. Where possible, administrative leaders may involve teachers in decision-making regarding department development strategies and curriculum reforms. Teachers are not only the ones who merely implement the curriculum reform initiated by the senior leaders but the ones who practice with their own judgement and evaluation. It is crucial to ignite their inclination to question, to reflect and to create. Administrative leaders should provide on-going opportunities for teachers to share the findings of their research and to incorporate their evidence-based teaching practice into curriculum reforms. The recognition of teachers' expertise in innovation and knowledge creation helps teachers embrace researcher as part of their professional identity. When teachers perceive that they have an impact on the strategic development of the organisations, it will enhance their self-esteem and sense of belonging to the community of the organisation. Meanwhile, the alignment between teachers' individual growth with the strategic development of the department will consequently benefit both the organisational and individual well-being.
- (d) Administrative leaders make teachers feel confident as a growing researcher. It is essential for administrative leaders to cultivate a growth mindset among teachers to overcome their low research self-efficacy. Teachers need to be guided to believe that research competence is malleable and can be improved through effort and perseverance. Rather than merely imposing on teachers overchallenging tasks such as publishing in top-tier journals, administrative leaders may help teachers in setting up both immediate attainable research goals and more ambitious long-term goals. The immediate attainable research goals could include writing up an informal research report, giving a public presentation of the study, or publishing in journals with a lower acceptance threshold. Teachers' self-efficacy is developed through continuously achieving these small wins, and teachers are more likely to work hard towards and thrive on optimal challenges. Therefore, administrative leaders might guide teachers to take up challenges as learning opportunities and provide them with positive and constructive feedback on the process of teachers' research learning activities.

(e) Administrative leaders make teachers feel connected as a member of the department-embedded professional learning community. In the environment where the ethos of teacher research and professional communities is absent, administrative leaders should establish and promote communities of professional dialogue and shared reflective practice even though these will be top-down designed in the initial stage. Time and space could be set aside for regular collective research activities as a routine part of collective professional life. Formal and informal dissemination methods could be encouraged as an essential part of regular collective research activities. The practice of sharing evidence-based experiences with other colleagues through in-house conferences or publications would help develop a sense of membership of the department-embedded professional learning community. However, dissemination is not enough. More important is to help teachers realise that they can impact the collective well-being of the community through their effort in sharing their experiences. Teachers' perceptions of this impact would be more likely to enhance teachers' self-efficacy regarding their influence and a sense of relatedness with others in the community. Meanwhile, to sustain the development of department-embedded professional learning community, it is vital for administrative leaders to gradually share the power and influence until teachers take ownership of the community rather than merely being assigned passive membership roles in those communities.

The study also has implications for policy-makers at the university level, particularly in the Chinese higher educational context which is increasingly emphasising research performance and productivity against the backdrop of the Double First-Class Initiative. The challenges the leaders experienced in the study suggest that policy-makers reconsider the current research-based performance evaluation system as a double-edged sword in higher education contexts. The evaluation system can provide strong incentives for research involvement. However, policies that over-emphasise research productivity and aim at maximising production, such as publications and research grants, can hamper innovation and creativity in teaching (Cadez et al., 2017). To better enhance the nexus of teaching and research, which is in line with the ultimate goal of teacher research, the evaluation of



teacher research performance should attach more importance to the quality of teacher research and the practical impact of teacher research on enhancing teaching quality. Varieties of research methodologies and ways of disseminating teacher research should be acknowledged and valued in order to democratise research and legitimatise teacher research (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019). Only in this way will teachers be guided to embrace the external managerial research policies and integrate them into their own intrinsic motivation to engage in research and improve teaching practice. Meanwhile, the consistency of policies at various administrative levels is crucial to support department leaders in utilising policies as a reliable and effective force.

### **Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research**

Although the study contributes to the current literature of teacher research, it is subject to certain limitations regarding the scope of research contexts, methodology and the researcher.

First is the relatively weak representativeness of the two institutions and the participants, though generalisation was not the aim of the study. Even though variation in size and reputation has been taken into account, these two institutions cannot represent all institutions across China. For example, the research resources and affordances might be different in these highly ranked universities. The selection of the participants was subject to the limited number of teachers who were willing to participate in the study. The participants are generally research-active. Consequently, the voices of those teachers with low research engagement were absent from the study even though participants frequently referred to them. Nevertheless, the participants' research experiences in these two institutions, which are embedded in the same broader social and cultural contexts as other institutions in China, will possibly resonate with EFL academics in other institutions. Future research could include more participants from broader demographic contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teacher research.

Secondly, there are limitations with regard to the types of data that were collected from the research field. Unlike teaching practice, day-to-day research practice is not easy to observe,

especially when the participants do research individually. The reported data can only be complemented by data generated by limited non-participant observation. However, I stayed in each of the institutional research communities of practice for one week and took every opportunity to observe their collective research practices. The four monthly reflective journals and my engagement with all the participants through informal communications over a year were attempts to compensate for a lack of sufficient direct observation. Meanwhile, for various reasons, the narrative frames in the study did not retrieve sufficient data about the research environment of the two institutions even though narrative frames are believed to be useful in obtaining a snapshot of a research setting with a large number of participants (Barkhuizen, 2014; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009; Xu, 2014). Therefore, longer and deeper engagement with the research contexts and more observations of collective research activities in future research may avoid this threat to the sound conclusions of the study.

Finally, since this study is a PhD project and the data collection and analysis were conducted mainly by me, a novice researcher, the whole process of the study is unavoidable to be biased by my knowledge, perspectives and research experiences despite various strategies applied, such as member-checking. Another potential threat to the reliability of the study is data translation. Since data collected in all sources was in Chinese, there is a risk of mistranslation, despite there being no difficulty in translating with my level of English proficiency. Bearing this potential impact in mind, while doing the coding and interpreting the data, I did not pay detailed attention to linguistic devices or word choices in the story-telling. Instead, I attended more to the recalling of events and experiences and the stances participants took when they retold the stories (Bruner, 1991).

### **Final Remarks**

This study provides some insights into understanding English teacher research experiences within department-embedded professional communities of practice. It has proposed practical suggestions for teachers, department leaders and university policy-makers, where the primary interest of the

study lies. The inquiry itself and writing up of the thesis meant more than that for me. It is a journey of rediscovery and reconstruction of myself as a person and as a developing researcher.

As a person, I used to have difficulty socialising with strangers and maintaining a relationship with them. This PhD journey has helped to heal as I have gone through approaching and entering my participants' inner world. I used to be a procrastination patient who delays taking action, particularly in the face of seemingly challenging tasks. The numerous deadlines woke me up from the nightmares of failing to submit the thesis and pushed me forward. Gradually, a habit of planning and acting ahead was formed. I used to struggle with educating my boy. This long-enduring PhD journey at my middle age makes me believe that the best practice of family education is that parents set models for children by themselves practising lifelong learning and growing.

As a developing researcher, I have increased my research knowledge and skills through the inquiry. I became aware of the potential risk as a researcher of hastily making claims of "truth" because research is value-bound, and subjectivity and intersubjectivity are inherent and unavoidable. I learned to question myself before I question others. But more importantly, I realise the power of healing when my participants feel heard and the power of telling and retelling stories connects my participants and me as a researcher. It is the benefits to my participants that make my thesis complete and me fulfilled.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Definition of Teacher Research

Researchers	Definitions
Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1990, p. 3; 1999, p. 22)	<b>systematic</b> and <b>intentional</b> inquiry carried out by <b>teachers</b> (made <b>public</b> ); in the broadest possible sense to encompass all forms of practitioner inquiry that involve <b>systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry</b> about one's work in K-12, higher education, or continuing education classrooms, schools, programs, and other formal educational settings. This definition ... does not necessarily include reflection or other terms that refer to being thoughtful about one's educational work in ways that are not necessarily systematic or intentional.
Lankshear & Knobel (2004, p. 9)	teacher-researchers as <b>classroom practitioners</b> at any level, from preschool to tertiary, who are involved <b>individually or collaboratively</b> in <b>self-motivated</b> and self-generated <b>systematic and informed</b> inquiry undertaken with a view to <b>enhancing their vocation</b> as professional educators.
Borg (2013, p. 10)	<b>Systematic</b> inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by <b>teachers</b> in their own <b>professional contexts, individually or collaboratively</b> ... and which aims to <b>enhance teachers' understandings</b> of some aspects of their work, is <b>made public</b> , has the potential to contribute to <b>better quality teaching and learning</b> in individual classrooms and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly.
Nunan (2018, p. 7)	Teacher research can be carried out by <b>individual teachers</b> investigating teaching and learning in their own context, or it can be collaborative with <b>groups of teachers</b> studying aspects of pedagogy across a number of contexts and classrooms. Although teacher research tends to <b>focus on the classroom</b> , teachers can also investigate issues that <b>transcend the classroom</b> . ... a <b>systematic process</b> of inquiry involving formulating a question or questions, the collecting of data that have relevant bearing on the question(s), the analysis and interpretation of the data, and the <b>publication</b> of the outcome ... could be relatively formal, such as publishing an account in a teachers' journal, or relatively informal such as posting a blog account, or telling colleagues about the experience.

## Appendix B: A List of Empirical Studies on English Language Teacher Research in Higher Education Contexts

Primary Research Focus	The Studies
Teacher research engagement and contributing factors	Bai et al., 2013; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2007; Borg & Liu, 2013; Hu & Chen, 2014; Le, 2017; Mehrani, 2015; Meng & Chen, 2019; Meng et al., 2018; Vu, 2020; Wang & Han, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017; Zhou & Zhang, 2016
Teachers' beliefs of and attitudes towards teacher research	Allison & Carey, 2007; Bai, 2018; Bai & Millwater, 2011; Banegas, 2018; Borg, 2009; Chen & Wang, 2013; Gao et al., 2000; Kutlay, 2013; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; Qu et al., 2014; Sadeghi & Abutorabi, 2017; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013; Tavakoli, 2015; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012
Teacher research motivation	Peng & Gao, 2019; Tao, 2019; Yuan et al., 2016; Zuo & Yang, 2019
Teacher-researcher identity construction, negotiation, and development	Banegas & Cad, 2019; Burns, 2015; Dikilitaş & Yayli, 2018; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Tran et al., 2017; Xu, 2014; Yuan & Burns, 2017
Teacher research-efficacy	Reyes-Cruz & Perales-Escudero, 2016; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016
Autonomy and agency	Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019; Xie, 2015
Specific research activity	Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019; Hu & Chen, 2014; Meng et al., 2018
Research culture and contextual influences; research policies; leadership	Bai et al., 2013; Gao & Zheng, 2020; Gu et al., 2014; Huang & Guo, 2019; Huang & Xu, 2020; Pham, 2006
Initiatives to promote teacher research and their impacts	Aga, 2017; Burns & Westmacott, 2018; Burns et al., 2016; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016; Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Edwards, 2019; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Hanks, 2015; Hanks, 2017; Hanks, 2019; Jin, 2015; Lehtonen et al., 2015; Wen, 2020; Wen & Zhang, 2019; Wyatt & Dikilitaş, 2016; Zhang & Wen, 2020

## Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet (PIS) Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee



School of Culture, Languages and Linguistics  
(Applied Language Studies and Linguistics)  
Faculty of Arts  
Arts 2 Building, 18 Symonds Street, Auckland, New Zealand

The University of Auckland  
Private Bag 92019  
Auckland 1142  
New Zealand

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET—teacher participants Fostering an institutional research community of practice**

Name(s) of researcher(s): Xiaoming Xun

Name of Supervisor(s): Professor Gary Barkhuizen and Dr Rosemary Wette

#### **Researcher Introduction**

I am Xiaoming Xun and I am PhD student in the School of Culture, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. My supervisor is Professor Gary Barkhuizen.

#### **The Project**

Since teacher research has widely been recognised as an important means for teacher professional development and institutional contexts have been identified as one of the critical factors that influence teacher research, my study is an in-depth exploration of how teachers engage in research in their university institutions. In particular, I will investigate how an institutional research community of practice is fostered and sustained by English teachers and institutional leaders to enhance teacher research. The study will produce significant implications for policy-makers at these institutions and beyond, which may lead to facilitative institutional contexts for teacher professional development and the well-being of the institutions and communities in the long term.

This project will employ narrative research methods to explore (a) how an institutional research community of practice is constituted and sustained, (b) the related research practices of its members, including institutional leaders, (c) the community's impact on the members, and (d) the role of the institutional leaders in this process.

**Duration:** The data collection period will last for six months.

**Benefits:** Participating in this study will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your ideas about research, your beliefs about research and your own research practices. Through the interaction with the researcher and reading the research findings, you may also develop a new outlook on how to enhance your research engagement and contribute to the well-being of your institution.

**Risks:** There is a slight chance that the research may cause some discomfort for you with regard to your research and teaching practices. However, you will not be expected to talk about any topic that makes you uncomfortable, or that may cause you negative emotions. If you feel that your participation in the study causes you any psychological or spiritual difficulties, you can consult the manager of your Department to make arrangements for you to receive pastoral care, if you decide that you need it.

**Funding:** I have received some funding from the University of Auckland (Faculty of Arts) doctoral research fund to contribute to the costs of carrying out this project.

**Other People:** The only other person who will have access to the data is my supervisor Gary Barkhuizen.

### **Invitation to Participate**

You are invited to participate in this research because you have been involved in fostering a facilitative institutional research community of practice at your university.

A teacher in your institution has approached you via email with the online link to the first anonymous narrative frame survey, together with this Participant Information Sheet (PIS). The PIS will assure you that your participation is voluntary and that anonymity will be strictly observed through the whole process of data collection, storage, analysis, as well as reporting. Completing and submitting the narrative frame survey by you will be taken as evidence of your consent to participate in the study.

If you submit the complete narrative frame survey, you will be asked on the survey if you would like to participate in follow-up interviews and reflective journal writing that will explore your research experiences and practices. If you are willing, you will provide your name and contact details at the end of the survey. If you are selected to participate further, an electronic Consent Form (CF) will be sent to you by me. Teachers will be selected based on a wide variety of research and teaching experiences. Signed CFs will be returned to me and the originals will be collected when I conduct the first face-to-face interview with you.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decline this invitation to participate without penalty. Choosing to participate or not participate will not affect your relationship with your institutional leaders or your position in the institution. Participation in this research is entirely with your consent, and your information will not be shared with third parties.

If you choose to participate in the interviews and journal writing, you will receive a gift voucher to the value of NZ\$50.

### **Project Procedures**

If you choose to participate in the narrative frame survey, you will be asked to:

- Fill-in an anonymous narrative frame survey via an online link sent to you by a teacher from your institution. Completing the survey will take about 30-40 minutes.

If you choose to continue your participation by agreeing to take part in the follow-up interviews and journal writing, you will be asked to:

- Participate in three individual interviews with me, two month apart, each lasting about an hour. They will be conducted in Chinese (or English, if you prefer) and audio-recorded.
- You and I will agree on suitable times and places for the interviews.
- During the interviews, you may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time.
- I will transcribe the interviews verbatim and translate them into English. You will have the option of reviewing the transcripts and translation of your interviews for the purpose of verifying and/or editing its content (you will be able to indicate Yes or No on the consent form).
- If you choose to review the transcripts and translation you will have two weeks to do so from the day you receive the transcript.
- Complete a series of four monthly reflective journals in English (one hour each).

The expected time commitment from you for this study will be a maximum of 9 hours.

### **Data Storage, Retention, Destruction and Future Use**

The narrative frame survey, reflective journals and interview transcripts will be stored as digital files in my password secured computer. The files will be accessible to me and my supervisor only.

The narrative frame surveys, reflective journals and interview transcripts will be printed and stored securely in a locked cabinet in my office at the University of Auckland.

All electronic data will be backed up and stored on the University of Auckland server.

Six years after the research, all printed data will be shredded and electronic data deleted.

The data will be used to produce findings for my PhD thesis, journal articles and conference presentations.

### **Right to Withdraw from Participation**

It is up to you to decide if you want to participate in the project as a whole, or any of its data-collection methods (narrative frame survey, interviews, and reflective journals).

You have the right to withdraw from participation any time without giving a reason or penalty. If you withdraw from the project, you can request for any information you supplied during the interviews and reflective journals to be withdrawn from the study up until one month after your last interview. It is not possible to withdraw data generated by the narrative frame survey.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

1. You will complete the narrative survey anonymously online without providing your name.
2. You will be informed in the PIS that you have the right to decide whether to participate or not in the project as a whole, or any of its data-collection methods (narrative frame survey, interviews, and reflective journals).
3. In the second interview with your institutional leaders, data obtained from the 12 teachers may be discussed with the leaders. If data from the participants are discussed with the institutional leaders during the leaders' interviews, teachers will be assured this will be done in a way that will not identify the teachers. Names, job descriptions or specifics of research activity will not be mentioned.
4. In the research report, no identity of the individual participant or the institutions will be disclosed. The individual participants and the institutions will be assigned a pseudonym.
5. Copies of documents and archival records will be stored securely during the research in a locked storage facility in my office.
6. Digital files of the data from the online surveys, electrical copies of the audio-recorded interviews and digital files of transcripts will be stored on a UoA network drive that is password protected and only accessible by me and my supervisor. The data will be stored for six years after the completion of the study and then destroyed completely.
7. Consent forms will be stored separately from the data in a locked cabinet at the University of Auckland for a period of six years.

**If you have any questions or concerns please contact the following:**

### **CONTACT DETAILS AND APPROVAL**

Student Researcher name and contact details

Xiaoming Xun  
xxun001@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Supervisor and Head of School name and contact details

Gary Barkhuizen  
School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics  
g.barkhuizen@auckland.ac.nz  
+64 9 923 8197

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142.  
Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711.  
Email: [ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz).  
Approved by the University Of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on ..... for three years.  
Reference Number .....



## Appendix D: Approval Letter from the University of Auckland Ethics Committee

Research Office  
Post-Award Support Services



The University of Auckland  
Private Bag 92019  
Auckland, New Zealand  
  
Level 10, 49 Symonds Street  
Telephone: 64 9 373 7599  
Extension: 83711  
Facsimile: 64 9 373 7432  
[ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz)

### UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE (UAHPEC)

17-Aug-2017

#### MEMORANDUM TO:

Prof Gary Barkhuizen  
Cultures, Languages & Linguist

#### Re: Application for Ethics Approval (Our Ref. 019660): Approved with comment

The Committee considered your application for ethics approval for your study entitled **Fostering an institutional research community of practice (IRCoP)**.

Ethics approval was given for a period of three years with the following comment(s):

1. Please proof-read the public documents before use, for eg CF manager: typo, "aany", third bullet point on second has no content

The expiry date for this approval is 17-Aug-2020.

If the project changes significantly you are required to resubmit a new application to UAHPEC for further consideration.

If you have obtained funding other than from UniServices, send a copy of this approval letter to the Activations team in the Research Office, at [ro-awards@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ro-awards@auckland.ac.nz). For UniServices contracts, send a copy of the approval letter to the Contract Manager, UniServices.

The Chair and the members of UAHPEC would be happy to discuss general matters relating to ethics approvals if you wish to do so. Contact should be made through the UAHPEC Ethics Administrators at [ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ro-ethics@auckland.ac.nz) in the first instance.

Please quote Protocol number **019660** on all communication with the UAHPEC regarding this application.

*(This is a computer generated letter. No signature required.)*

UAHPEC Administrators  
University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee

c.c. Head of Department / School, Cultures, Languages & Linguist  
Ms Xiaoming Xun

**Additional information:**

1. Do not forget to fill in the 'approval wording' on the Participant Information Sheets, Consent Forms and/or advertisements, giving the dates of approval and the reference number. This needs to be completed, before you use them or send them out to your participants.
2. At the end of three years, or if the study is completed before the expiry, you are requested to advise the Committee of its completion.
3. Should you require an extension or need to make any changes to the project, please complete the online Amendment Request form associated with this approval number giving full details along with revised documentation. If requested before the current approval expires, an extension may be granted for a further three years, after which time you must submit a new application.

**Appendix E: Narrative Frame Survey**

**(English version)**

The study I am doing now is about\_\_\_\_\_. The purpose of this study is \_\_\_\_\_ . I am cooperating with\_\_\_\_\_/ am the only researcher. In this study, the biggest challenges were\_\_\_\_\_. Our attempts to overcome these challenges include\_\_\_\_\_. I feel happy in conducting this study because\_\_\_\_\_/ not happy because\_\_\_\_\_. I hope to share my study with others by\_\_\_\_\_.

In our department, the initiatives or activities to enhance teacher research engagement include \_\_\_\_\_.

I often/not often participate in these activities because \_\_\_\_\_ . One activity that impressed me most is \_\_\_\_\_ because\_\_\_\_\_. I often/not often share my ideas or research experiences with my colleagues because \_\_\_\_\_ . My comments on research environment in our department are\_\_\_\_\_ because\_\_\_\_\_. I believe the research environment in our department will be improved if \_\_\_\_\_.

As a teacher and a researcher, I evaluate myself as\_\_\_\_\_. I think the meaning of research lies in\_\_\_\_\_. I hope in the future I will\_\_\_\_\_. To realize this aim I plan to\_\_\_\_\_.

If you wish, please tell me another story in your department that influence your research life?

---

---

Further participation

Thank you for providing invaluable information above. I would like to learn more about your research life and your participation in the research community of practice in your department. Would you be interested in discussing these issues further with me?

Yes  No

If YES, please write your name and email address here.

Name:

Email:

This completes the narrative story of your research life. Thank you for taking the time to respond.

**(Chinese version)**

亲爱的老师，您好。请根据以下提示分享您的科研经历。本问卷为匿名填写，仅做研究用途。

我近期正在做的研究是\_\_\_\_\_。这个研究的目的是\_\_\_\_\_。这个研究我是唯一研究者/与\_\_\_\_\_合作研究。这个研究中，我/我们遇到的最大困难是\_\_\_\_\_。为了解决这些问题，我/我们\_\_\_\_\_。在这个研究过程中，让我特别开心的是\_\_\_\_\_，有时也特别沮丧，比如\_\_\_\_\_。我/我们希望通过\_\_\_\_\_的方式与别人分享我们的研究成果。

我们院系也会采取一些措施或组织科研活动帮助老师们提升科研能力，比如\_\_\_\_\_。我\_\_\_\_\_ (经常/不经常)参与院系组织的科研活动或项目，因为\_\_\_\_\_。我参与过的印象比较深刻的一次科研活动或项目是\_\_\_\_\_，因为\_\_\_\_\_。我还\_\_\_\_\_ (经常/不经常)与我的同事讨论研究中遇到的问题或分享我的研究经验，因为\_\_\_\_\_。总的来说，我对院系科研环境的评价是\_\_\_\_\_，因为\_\_\_\_\_。我相信我们院系的科研环境能够得到更大改善，如果\_\_\_\_\_。

作为一名教师同时也是研究者，我对自己的描述或评价是\_\_\_\_\_。我认为研究对于我的职业发展意义在于\_\_\_\_\_。我希望未来在科研方面我能够\_\_\_\_\_，为此，我打算\_\_\_\_\_。

## 其他故事

请再与我分享一两个对您科研生活影响深远的故事。

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以上就是我的科研故事。

## 我的个人信息

1 您的性别是？（请勾选“√”）

男性 ( ) 女性 ( )

2 您的年龄是？（请勾选“√”）

30及以下 ( ) 31-40 ( ) 41-50 ( ) 51及以上 ( )

3 您的最高学历是？（请勾选“√”）

学士 ( ) 硕士 ( ) 博士 ( ) 其他 (请写明，如博士在读，\_\_\_\_\_)

4 您是否有海外学习经历？（请勾选“√”）

是 ( ) 学士 ( ) 硕士 ( ) 博士 ( ) 访问学者 (√) 其他 (请写明\_\_\_\_\_)

否 ( )

5 您是否兼任院系管理工作？（请勾选“√”）

是 ( )，主要负责\_\_\_\_\_ 否 ( )

6 您的研究兴趣是?

\_\_\_\_\_ (例如, 理论语言学/ 应用语言学, 翻译, 美国文学等)

7 您现在的职称是? (请勾选“√”)

教授 ( ) 副教授 ( ) 讲师 ( ) 其他 (请写明\_\_\_\_\_)

8 您在本校从事大学英语教学的教龄是? (请勾选“√”)

5年及以下 ( ) 6-10年 ( ) 11-15 ( ) 16年及以上 ( )

9 您最近五年在各类公开学术会议或研究论坛中发言的次数是?

\_\_\_\_\_

10 您最近十年在国内外各期刊中发表论文数量为?

国内 \_\_\_\_\_, 国际 \_\_\_\_\_, 其中核心期刊 \_\_\_\_\_, 第一作者 \_\_\_\_\_, 合作者 \_\_\_\_\_。

11 您最近十年主持或参与的研究课题或项目数量为? (请举例。)

\_\_\_\_\_。

12 您是否加入过国内外相关领域的协会组织, 研究团队或网上的学术交流群? 如果是, 请具体说明。

\_\_\_\_\_。

叙述问卷到此为止, 感谢您在百忙之中参与问卷的填写。

## 后续参与本研究项目

感谢您提供以上宝贵信息。我想深入了解您的科研生活，不知您是否愿意进一步通过深入访谈与我分享您的研究故事，请进行勾选 (v)。

愿意 ( ) 不愿意 ( )

如果您愿意继续参与本研究项目，请在下方留下您的姓名和联系方式。

姓名:

电子邮箱:

如果您对本研究项目有任何疑问，欢迎咨询本项目研究者。

荀晓鸣

Email: [xxun001@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:xxun001@aucklanduni.ac.nz)

Mobile: 13810388205



## **Appendix F: Guide for the First Interview with the Leader Participants**

The in-depth interviews aim at inviting the leaders to reflect on and evaluate their own roles in the communities based on the following topics:

1. their own academic development experiences
2. their belief about teacher research and their perception of status quo of teacher research in their institutions
3. their perception of the institutional research communities of practice (IRCoP)
4. their perception of the IRCoP on teacher research
5. their efforts to cultivate and sustain the IRCoP
6. triumphs achieved and challenges they are faced with
7. their imagined IRCoP and imagined identity as a leader in IRCoP

## **Appendix G: Guide for the First Interview with the Teacher Participants**

The in-depth interviews are aiming at inviting participants to reflect on and evaluate their research experiences based on the following topics:

1. their educational background in relation to their research life
2. their past research experiences
3. their imagined research community and imagined identity as a researcher
4. research collaboration with colleagues
5. research practices initiated and organised by their institutions
6. their participation in these research practices (practices in communities, their roles in communities) and impact on their research engagement, beliefs about research, emotions and identity as a researcher
7. their perceptions of institutional support to their research practice

## Appendix H: Narrative Frame for Reflective Journals

(English version)

This frame is to guide you in documenting your research activities last month.

My research activities in the last month include

---

\_\_\_\_\_. The major achievements were

---

\_\_\_\_\_. The difficulties and attempts to overcome these difficulties were

---

\_\_\_\_\_. The thing that impressed me most is

---

---

My next research plan/task is

---

---

Anything you want to share with me?

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(Chinese version)

## 反思日志

请您根据本月的研究情况，记录您

- 主要研究活动（个人或集体）

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- 研究进展或研究中的主要收获

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- 研究中遇到的困难及拟解决的办法

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- 研究活动中一件印象深刻的事情

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- 接下来的研究计划或任务

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- 其他您想分享的

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## **Appendix I: Categories and Themes in the Coding Exercise**

### **Tensions**

Categories of tensions

- controlled research motivation vs. autonomous research motivation
- researcher identity vs. teacher identity and family identity
- weak research competence vs. lack of scaffolding
- isolated working patterns vs. desire for collaboration

Needs for support

- competence
- collaboration
- autonomy

### **Initiatives**

Initiatives and policies

- policies implemented
- forms of initiatives

Impact of initiatives and reasons

- improved teaching practice
- deepened understanding of the relationship between teaching and research
- extended identity as a teacher-researcher
- improved research knowledge and skills and positive self-efficacy
- enhanced sense of connectedness and more collaboration among colleagues
- higher intrinsic research motivation and sustained engagement

Conditions of shared research practice

- physical or structural setup for communication and collaboration
- possessing knowledge base
- mutual trust, respect
- mutual engagement and shared responsibility
- norms of continuous critical inquiry for innovation and creativity
- shared values and interest
- strong implementation mechanism and responsibilities

supportive leadership

## **Leadership**

### Challenges

challenges from sociocultural influences

challenges from the university

challenges from interpersonal conflicts

### Roles

negative roles that hinder IRCoP

give negative feedback

lack of respect and care for teachers

show high power distance

give no financial support

be conservative and have no visions for innovation

devalue college English teaching and research or weak research awareness

positive roles that cultivate IRCoP

encouraging and enabling collaboration

modelling of commitment and enthusiasm

inspiring and vitalizing for individual and collective high goals

being innovative and encouraging innovation

setting rules and regulating

scaffolding and Mentoring