English Teachers' Research Engagement: Current Barriers and Future Strategies

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Abstract

Reflections on the relationship between Iranian ELT researchers and practitioners suggest that research-practice gap has been an endemic feature of our language education programs. This issue has recently become a prime concern for many educational researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders. As such, calls for empirical investigations of measures to be taken in order to improve the relationship between research and practice were made. The present study was carried out to explore the extent to which English teachers are engaged in doing and reading educational research, and also the barriers that impede them from research engagement. Qualitative interview data were collected from two groups of Iranian teachers: high school teachers, and teachers at private institutes. The analysis of the data revealed low levels of engagement in terms of both reading and doing research. The findings also showed various barriers to research engagement including: barriers related to the production of research, barriers related to the use of research, barriers related to the lack of collaboration between researchers and practitioners, and barriers related to the educational system. The study concluded with a discussion of a number of practical strategies that can be employed in the Iranian ELT context to improve research-practice gap.

Keywords: current barriers, potential strategies, research engagement, research-practice gap

Introduction

Questions concerning the relationship between English language teaching (ELT) research and practice emerged as soon as language teaching as established as an academic field of study. The emergence of language teaching departments in many universities and academic institutions across various parts of the world during the mid-twentieth century (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) coincided with intellectual currents that were primarily concerned with "the issue of reliable knowledge" (Jordan, 2004, p. 27) and emphasized the power of science and laboratory methods to uncover truths and facts. From this *scientific* perspective, the role of ELT researchers was considered as merely intellectual labor, and the purpose of research was defined as producing arguments and ideas, generalities and theories. Researchers were regarded as "academic theorists" and struggled to give their labors scientific legitimacy, a single best way to study the manifold problems of teaching and learning quickly defeated traditional approaches that "amateurs and those without graduate training" (Reese, 1999, p. 3) used to employ. This approach, in large measure, framed educational research as a hierarchical enterprise, whereby

researchers were positioned as producers of knowledge and practitioners as users (Lingard & Blackmore, 1998).

Following recent developments in applied linguistics, however, this perspective toward research and the split between language researchers and practitioners began to be questioned. Reflective teaching, for instance, opened up a new avenue toward professional development, and it was promoted "as an important means for in-service teachers to upgrade their professional knowledge, undertake pedagogical innovations and assert greater agency in their professional practices" (Gao, Barkhuizen, & Chow, 2010, p. 62).

Action research, an alternative research approach was developed to improve the quality of teaching and to promote making informed decisions in language classrooms by urging "teachers to become researchers in their own classrooms" (Oberg & McCutcheon, 1990, p. 142). It is often considered as a potential way to encourage teachers' engagement in research and subsequently to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners (Burns, 2005).

More recently, teacher-researcher movement (also known as practitioner-research) was developed in ELT as a more democratic form of inquiry, hoping to empower teachers through their involvement in classroom-research (Allwright, 1997; Nunan, 1997). Focusing on emerging practical problems and aiming at illuminating such problems, teacher-researcher movement rests on the idea that teachers should liberate themselves from "ideas solely imposed by others outside the classroom. In a sense, it constitutes an acknowledgement that teaching belongs to teachers and that as the experts about their own practice, teachers are the ones most able to understand and refine their work" (Oberg & McCutcheon, 1990, p. 142).

A further wave of criticism has been leveled against traditional conception of research and the relationship between language researchers and practitioners by critical-minded applied linguists at the forefront of these efforts. From this perspective, teachers' engagement in research can echo their voices in the TESOL profession. "They need to be encouraged to move out of their submissive position and to take a much more innovatory, as opposed to implementary, role in curriculum development. One way to do this is to adopt the perspective of the researcher" (Gurney 1989 p. 15, cited in Borg, 2009).

These initiatives have been sustained in many western countries by new educational policies which are "characterized by a drive to engage classroom teachers more fully both with and in educational research and thus to make teaching an evidence-based profession" (Borg, 2007 p. 731). One fundamental argument underpinning this drive concerns the benefits that it can have for teachers' professional development (Kincheloe, 2003; Lyle; 2003). It is also argued that teachers' engagement in and with research brings about making pedagogical decisions informed by sound research evidence, and "this will have a beneficial effect on both teaching and learning" (Borg, 2007 p. 371).

Inspired by the interest in encouraging practitioners' more informed use of and involvement in research, in the Iranian ELT context various strands of inquiry have recently emerged. Some researchers, for instance, have criticized Iranian ELT research studies for focusing too one-sidedly on university students and also for having a limited scope of investigation (e.g. Mehrani & Khodi, 2014; Mehrani, Samar & Behzadnia, 2012; Samar, Mehrani & Kiyani, 2012). Others have explored the underlying ideological foundations of applied linguistics and ELT research in Iran (e.g. Mirhosseini, 2013). There are also studies that have attempted to compare researchers' research interests with practitioners' research needs (Mehrani, Samar, 2012), as well as those who investigated the educational policies that impede teachers' research engagement (Mehrani, in press).

Although these research studies have examined various aspects of the gap between researchers and practitioners, there seems to be a paucity of investigation into factors that prevent teachers from being engaged with/in research. In fact, the literature searches for this study were unable to identify any empirical research study into Iranian teachers' problems in engaging with/in research. Therefore, our knowledge of the barriers that impede ELT teachers' research engagement is extremely limited.

The researchers believe that the existing gap in the Iranian educational context does not simply equate to a lack of utilization of research findings in the classroom practice, and can never be improved by merely removing one or some obstacles. But it is the result of the interaction of a range of various factors that are parts of our current educational and academic systems. Thus, improving teachers' research engagement in each educational context necessitates in-depth investigations into teachers' personal, professional and social realities. On this basis, the present study was conducted to explore the extent to which Iranian English teachers use research findings in their classroom practice. In addition, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive outline of the factors that determine and/or influence teachers' research engagement. Therefore, the following research questions were raised to provide a guiding framework for the present study:

1) To what extent do Iranian English teachers use research findings in their teaching?
2) Where practitioners do not use research findings, what reasons do they cite?

Method

Participants

Data were collected from teachers in Neyshabur, Mashhad, and Tehran. While the selection of these particular cities simply reflects their proximity and accessibility to the researchers, looking across these geographical locations enabled us to consider whether the issues that teachers raised were national or local in character, and also provided some check that the findings of the study were not simply the results of idiosyncratic conditions in a given school or educational institution. To widen the scope of our exploration we asked two groups of teachers – teachers who were involved in the Ministry of Education, and teachers who were engaged in teaching at private language education centers – to participate in the study. Twenty three teachers, with teaching experiences ranging from two to 23 years, volunteered. Of these teachers, three had Master's degrees, eighteen had Bachelor's degrees, one had a professional associate degree and one was a graduate student of teaching English as a foreign language.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. Prior to conducting the interviews, however, the researchers prepared an interview guide. The guide was developed based on the literature and the researchers' previous informal talks with practitioners as well as researchers. The questions raised in the interview guide were mainly centered around two main themes: teachers' engagement in/with educational research, and the influential factors that impede or encourage their engagement. To encourage the interviewees to express themselves fully and freely, they were asked whether they preferred to speak in Persian or English. With the exception of one, all teachers opted to speak in Persian. After obtaining each participant's agreement for audio-recording the interview sessions, the teachers were individually interviewed. There was also room for more flexible interaction through which teachers were able to elaborate on any matters relevant to their views and experiences of research

engagement. The interview sessions lasted, on average, about one hour. They were then transcribed and fully content analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Examining the research commitments of teachers as the focal point, the aim of this study was to shed light on whether, which, and under what circumstances educational research is used by teachers. Such an examination is critical to the understanding that is required for improving the research-practice gap, because it helps us examine academic research discourse from the point of view of those who have largely been excluded from it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Teachers' responses are treated as a platform for considering the implications of the study for a better understanding of the existing research-practice gap. Therefore, the discussions that follow reflect teachers' views and interpretations about the gap. We have attempted to provide relevant quotes from teachers' responses to convey key themes and what they said about themselves.

In response to our questions about the extent to which teachers read research materials, their responses varied. There were many teachers who plainly acknowledged that they "don't study regularly" or even "don't study at all". However, a few teachers stated that they study "only when they need to". There were also some teachers who reported more precise and frequent levels of research reading.

Generally, I study about one or two hours every week. I read issues of Roshd Magazine…Once or twice a week I also check different websites…

Generally, I study at least for an hour per night, but sometimes I read more… For example, when I am supposed to talk about a particular point or do something.

Some of the participants who consult research studies reported using a wide range of resources. The research materials ranged from specialized peer-reviewed journals such as *System* and *TELL* to online forums and professional weblogs. However, the majority could not even name a few printed sources. For instance, one of the experienced teachers involved in this study had "never heard of *Roshd EFL Journal*". Another teacher emphasized that he did not read academic research journals nor did he know any of them. These assertions demonstrate that academic research journals which represent the stereotypical and traditional forms of scientific research are not frequently used by teachers. Instead, teachers are mainly engaged with research through internet-based materials that can be easily accessed. This may have to do with the availability of web-based research materials, suggesting that perhaps having an "easy access" to research findings is a decisive factor in determining the level of teachers' research engagement. However, a careful examination of the responses shows that teachers' tendency toward web-based research sources is not only because research findings are more easily and more immensely available in the internet but also because they are often found in a brief, non-technical, and plain language. This lends support to the commonly held belief that teachers prefer *digested* research findings that are briefly presented in such sources as weblogs and forums to technical and lengthy academic articles.

When prompted with questions regarding the extent to which they do research, teachers admitted that they do not usually do educational research. A few teachers explained that they were involved some research-like activities such as comparing the popularity of some language teaching methods, or trying out different alternatives for teaching vocabulary, but they were mostly reluctant to express that they had done any real research.

Barriers to Research Engagement

Throughout the interviews teachers were also asked to mention and elaborate on the barriers that impede them from engaging in research studies. In what follows we have attempted to discuss the key themes that cause teachers to keep away from research in four broad categories.

Barriers that relate to the use of research.

Teachers' time restrictions. Although most teachers valued educational research for its contribution to their professional development, many instructors, particularly those teaching at private institutes, raised questions about how they were to use research. Given their heavy work load and tight schedule, some teachers asserted that they have difficulties finding time to read or otherwise engage in research.

I am teaching full time from early in the morning till late at night. If I find any free time I may study.

You know it also takes many hours to read them…

Yeah, there are lots of good texts but who can read them? I leave my family at 7 and when I get back home I am so tired that can't even get ready for what I am going to teach next day... I just take a look at the books [that I am teaching].

These comments suggest that the circumstances of teachers' jobs do not easily allow many of them to spend time on reading research papers. A lack of time, as a "predominant reason" (Borg, 2009, p. 370) for preventing teachers from engaging in research, has been cited by many researchers. For instance, Gore and Giltin (2004) mentioned teachers' lives do not easily create time for reading research reports. On this basis, one might speculate that if teachers had more free time, they would probably dig through volumes of research. However, comments made by some other ELT practitioners, especially high school teachers, reveal that this is not an accurate assumption, at least in the Iranian context. A few teachers remarked that they do have enough time to read and do research, but indicated that they rarely take time to study:

Well, I do have time, but nothing motivates me to be after research. Believe it or not, it is not at all different for the Ministry of education how much of your time and energy you devote to research.

I do have a lot of free time but I prefer to spend my time doing something else than studying.

Although heavy work load and time restrictions might seem to be a major barrier for highly motivated instructors, it seems that time alone cannot account for teachers' research disengagement.

Inaccessibility of research. Another major and related reason articulated by teachers was the recurrent issue of inaccessibility of research reports. Although a small number of teachers indicated that they use the internet "to find useful and practical techniques of teaching," many asserted that they do not have easy access to research papers particularly those conducted in Iran.

If the resources were available, studying would be even easier.

I don't read academic research journals nor do I know any of them… No, no I have never heard Roshd EFL Journal

I study online materials and forums more and academic research papers less.

These comments indicate that there is a perceived resentment of the "out of touch" nature of academic work and of its distance from teaching work. While it is important that research be easily accessible in the practice setting, practitioners expressed that they experience troubles in receiving research productions. Previous studies have similarly reported inaccessibility of research papers as a commonly cited reason for their lack of engagement in research (e.g.

Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2003; Macaro, 2003). In this respect, Funk, Tornquist and Champagne (1989) stated that a crucial step in increasing the utilization of research results by practitioners is the broad dissemination of research findings that are relevant and ready to use, in a form that is understandable to them. Given that the major platforms for communicating research results to other researchers are academic journals and research conferences, it seems practice-oriented workshops and non-academic conferences can open new avenues for research dissemination and enhance communication between researchers and practitioners if such meetings are planned in and by educational – not academic – centers.

Continuing problems with dissemination can be linked to a lack of comprehensive research database. Though not explicitly mentioned by interviewees, implicit in their comments is the absence of an all-inclusive archive of research findings offering pedagogical implications of academic studies in "a wide range of teaching issues".

Teachers' lack of specialized knowledge of research. A number of interviewees asserted that they experience difficulties in reading and understanding scholarly research papers. For instance a high school teacher plainly declared:

Research papers are very difficult for me. When I am going to read a paper I have to take a dictionary and check a lot words in it to understand what it says. It is very difficult and time consuming.

The issue of teacher's language deficiency was implicitly mirrored in this research during the process of data collection too. In fact, the interviewees' tendency to communicate in Persian can be interpreted as a further indication of their inadequate English proficiency. Therefore, it may be justifiably argued that a strong command of English is a pre-requisite for effective understanding and critical evaluation of research papers.

However, studies conducted on native speakers showed that these teachers also need to develop a specialized knowledge of research (Gore & Giltin, 2004). Zeuli (1994) for example, contends that to understand research papers better, teachers need fewer technical, though substantive, explanations of how sophisticated forms of evidence support authors' ideas. Teachers also need encouragement to note salient, underlying assumptions about teaching and learning that guide research studies. Accessible, explicit descriptions of these assumptions would be relevant and useful as would accessible descriptions of theoretical frameworks underlying research paradigms. Gore and Giltin (2004) passionately argue that in teacher education programs, teachers are given some basic knowledge and skills in reading research, but not enough for them to engage with it. They go on to conclude that presenting research "in all its messy, fragmented, manipulated reality may simply further undermine its credibility and give teachers even less reason to use it" (p. 51).

Barriers that relate to the production of ELT research.

Complexity of research papers. Another related point that emerged from the analysis of teachers' problems in engaging with/in research was the complexities that teachers attributed to the discourse of research.

No, it takes me a lot of time. I am not claiming that I am perfect [in English] ... but when I read articles, I take Richards' dictionary [A dictionary of applied linguistics and language teaching] ...

[I don't read] difficult books or papers.....because I can't understand.

I prefer short points to lengthy papers and discussions.

Comments of this nature suggested that the level of difficulty and complexity of the majority of research studies makes it hard for teachers to understand or interpret what is being said; it appears that reading academic texts is a daunting task for teachers. Consistent with this problem, the literature suggests that teachers usually rely more on personal interpretations of the academic discussions as opposed to defensible interpretations based more firmly on the text (Zeuli, 1994). Alongside previous studies, these comments, therefore, suggest that research would probably be used by teachers more often if simpler, shorter, and easier accounts of research papers were readily available.

Generalizability of research findings. A further concern articulated by the teachers was the perceived failure of academic research to address the unique properties of the particular contexts in which teachers are teaching. As the following assertions show, the contexts in which teachers work have their own unique features which make it hard for them to apply research findings. In these contexts, teachers have to deal with idiosyncratic educational policies, problems and concerns:

I think this lack of motivation is dominant in most high schools. But where I am teaching [Elite High School], it is totally different.

They [academic researchers] do not pay attention to the kinds of problems we have to deal with in our classrooms…Last year one of my students cut the class at the end of the year for about a month, and when we called his parents they said he [the student] is helping us! These problems are common are not addressed in research papers.

I sometimes read book but more often I talk to my colleagues for questions I may have…Just to mention a single case; I have a pupil who speaks only in Persian. I don't know why she does so… You know, Persian is forbidden in our classes…I don't think these things are addressed in books.

The above comments emphasize the differences between teaching contexts, and the difficulties in transferring knowledge from one site to another. While it can be argued that these teachers do not appear to recognize or appreciate the similarities across different teaching sites, given teachers' "lack of movement" between classrooms, schools and educational contexts (Lortie, 1975), their emphasis on the particularity of their teaching scenarios is not surprising. Teachers' perceived uniqueness of the classroom, as well as its unpredictability, not only raises concerns about the anti-global nature of educational research, but even constrains the extent to which teachers' experiential and practical knowledge can be used.

The quality of academic research. Some of the strongly worded comments made by the teachers raised concerns about the quality of academic research. A number of interviewees questioned the technical quality of the conducted research. They complained that in some studies the scientific and the ethical norms are not respected, and there is a lack of creativity in conducting research.

I do have access [to research papers] but I don't read them… They [studies] are not done to improve the quality of education… just published so that they [researchers] can get their grants.

They only follow a single approach and obtain the same results; you can't see much innovation and creativity in papers…they are replicated, if not copied.

Research papers are not often qualified …The quality is low… No one considers improving education as his responsibility.

In these statements, a strong feeling of mistrust toward ELT research is invoked, and the majority of research is described as "not genuine", "not qualified", "repetitious" and

"uncreative". These comments imply that teachers want academic research to provide them with alternative technical advice, creative applications of teaching strategies, and innovative approaches. Nonetheless, for some researchers, the validity of educational theories and research can only be confirmed through the replication of previous studies and providing unambiguous evidence. However, when an academic community diverts its focus of inquiry to a handful of research areas and endorses only a restricted array of fashions in research, no room is left for innovation and creativity, and researchers are consequently encouraged to compete rather than to cooperate (Mehrani et al, 2012). Additionally, the narrow and one-sided focus of researchers might be due to researchers' lack of insight into and control over the issues and the contexts in which they conduct their research (Gore & Giltin, 2004). The result of all this is the view that researchers keep on re-inventing the wheel and that research makes little progress (Levin & O'Donnell, 1999).

Practicality of research findings. Another consistent concern which was recurrently articulated by the teachers was that research studies do not often yield practical results. This complaint refers in particular to research studies that are conducted in artificial environments and those that focus on questions that are not pertinent to the problems that language teachers experience in their classrooms. The teachers also asserted that research papers are mainly devoted to "theoretical stuff" which may "look very organized and neat" but do not capture the complexities involved in language teaching.

I don't study theoretical books; I never read research papers because they don't contain things to be used in my classroom.

Language teaching theories look very organized and neat but language teaching practice is not at all like that.

You know teaching is much more complicated than what theories describe. I passed some theoretical courses during my college years, but the English courses I took helped me more in my teaching. For instance, in our "free discussion" course I learned much more than in teaching methodology [courses]. I learned both English, and how to teach English. Our instructor was teaching us English, but we were also learning how to teach English, how to lead a discussion, how to seek everybody's idea…

The above assertions show that while teachers want practical advice on what to actually do in their classrooms, they doubt the capacity of research to provide such advice in a way that will take into account the complexities of their teaching contexts. Teachers' comments give the impression that they doubt the relevance of research to their work and convey a sense that research does not and cannot answer questions that may be specific to a single classroom. This negative opinion of the practitioners toward research is justified to the extent that research does not offer pertinent and practical results (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003). Sometimes, research articles deal with problems that are too insignificant or too remote from the context of teachers' interest. For instance, studying "how Iran's nuclear issue is represented in British newspapers" (see Koosha & Shams, 2005) or "examining the ways through which the idea of war has been suppressed in Gorge Bush's speech" (see Amalsaleh &Sajjadi, 2004) never falls into teachers' primary teaching concerns. Yet, such off the point issues remain the focal areas of a number of published papers in Iranian ELT-related journals (Mehrani, & Khodi, 2014).

Barriers that relate to educational system.

Lack of financial and intellectual support. A perceived lack of a support system was also cited as a common hindrance. Many teachers complained that their efforts are not valued by the educational system.

Teachers are not at all financially supported for studying, reading, and doing research. In the Ministry of Education no one cares about your research.

The most important thing which prevents me to study more is financial problems. I have to spend money for buying the sources...

Therefore, practitioners should receive support in the form of time, money, assistance, and collaboration from their organizations for actively using research. A lack of such supports may not, however, explain why the vast majority of language teacher do not actively use the results of research because while many teachers explained their low engagement with research in terms of a lack of financial support, some agreed that time for research was not built into their workloads and teachers are not expected to engage in/with research.

The educational system is the most important de-motivator; it does not ask teachers to be after research, innovation, and change…It does not care about the quality of teaching.

There is no evaluation, appreciation, nothing. There is no difference between those who work hard and those who do not. You are not considered as teachers; you are only a personnel code for them. You feel there is no need for research, change, and effect.

Thus, although a lack of financial support might be a main barrier for some teachers who feel doing and reading research is not their job, barriers to research engagement remain primarily attitudinal (Borg, 2007). This leads us to the next important theme raised by teachers.

Teachers' conception of research and teaching. According to Zahorik (1986), general attitudes toward teaching can be classified into three main categories: science/research conceptions, theory/philosophy conceptions, and art/craft conceptions. Each of these characterizations carries with it defined orientations toward teaching, what skills it involves, and what teachers must know (Freeman & Richards, 1993). Studies show that English teachers' conception of the ELT profession directly influences their research engagement. In particular, teachers who see ELT as a scientific undertaking are more likely to have a higher level of research engagement whereas those who equate ELT with an art or a value-based endeavor appear to have less or no research engagement (Mehrani, 2013). A number of teachers in this study also commented that doing and reading research is not a part of their responsibilities as a teacher:

As a teacher I don't think I have to study… Nor do other teachers in our high school.

I don't study because my knowledge is more than enough for teaching. I have already studied when I was at the university… I am a teacher now.

These comments suggest that unless teachers assume that doing and studying research is an integral part of their job, they should not be expected to be committed to research. However, it should be pointed out that the educational system plays a determining role in the formation of teachers' conception of their profession. For instance, pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, teachers' evaluation system, and the description of teachers' duties play key roles in the formation of their conception of ELT. An interviewee in this study sensibly suggested that if in teachers' job descriptions and schedules "a couple of hours" be specified for research and studying, not only do "they feel that doing and reading research are parts of their job", but also they feel "they are supported to consider their professional development more seriously".

Negative view toward research and innovation. Teachers also suggested that, generally speaking, the educational system negatively views research and innovation.

I am afraid [to apply research findings]. For example I do not use weblogs for teaching anymore. Because keeping a classroom blog is not what they like… If it is a school,

they say why do let foreigners put comments in your blog …If it's an institute parents may intervene and say they are "misguiding our children"… This happened to me.

Many people who are involved in education have got traditional ideas; managers, teachers, parents, many.

According to these teachers, the dominant perspective toward innovative and creative educational activities in the educational system and more broadly in their traditional society is negative. Implicit in this view is that research and technology associated with modern language education are indeed luxuries that can only be practiced in relatively affluent conditions (such as private language institutes).

Mismatch between educational research and educational materials. In line with the supposedly negative perception of educational system toward educational innovation, some teachers particularly complained about the incongruity between educational materials and research results. They were particularly scathing of the outdated and old-fashioned books they had to teach.

Books and other educational materials are also de-motivating… [The] textbooks we teach at high schools are really disgusting, they are really boring. Sometimes I have to close my eyes when I am teaching...

My brother is 6 years older than me… I remember that when he was a high school student he used to study the same books I am currently teaching. They are really outdated and old-fashioned.

The books make you use traditional methods of teaching. Junior high school textbooks have not been revised in the last 15 years. So I don't feel any need to study research and learn new methods of teaching.

Books are among the main problems. If they change them, I have to change my methods of teaching…

Here educational materials are strongly condemned as "de-motivating", and "problematic". Practitioners engaged in educational system consider them among the main barriers of innovation and research utilization. The notion that research could be used in both designing suitable educational materials and improving educational quality is quite evident in teachers' comments. However, the fact that research studies are not relevant to what teachers do in the classroom takes this position to its extreme and is indicative of the breadth of the gap between language research and practice.

Inefficient teacher evaluation system. Another consistent and major obstacle that teachers articulated placed the credibility of the current teacher evaluation system into question. Put simply, many teachers doubted that the educational system considers their educational efforts in its evaluation:

If a distinction is made between teachers who work well and those who do not, it can change many things.

I think the teacher evaluation system is problematic. The only criterion…is the ratio of passed/failed students. Authorities force us just to have a "longer bar of pass". They only look at the "famous bar".

The above statements indicate that the current teacher evaluation system does not even consider teachers' efforts in applying research findings to classroom teaching as an indicator of teachers' professional development. Such deficiencies not only reveal that the current teacher evaluation system needs fundamental modifications but they also imply that the whole educational system serves a particular type of ideological and political interest.

Barrier that relates to collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

Lack of collaboration. In order to promote research utilization educational organizations should provide facilities for regular collaboration and cooperation between researchers and practitioners. In fact, a number of teachers in this study blamed their educational organizations for not having regular collaborations with academic centers and educational researchers. In particular, teachers were skeptical of the existence of collaboration on equal terms between educational practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

We also do not have any collaboration or cooperation with researchers.

I don't know any of them [researchers] at all…There is no workshop or conferences in our district.

I don't participate in teacher training meetings, because they talk about everything except research and the quality of education.

If the divide between researchers and practitioners is to be revisioned, one possible strategy is that researchers in association with policymakers explore more cooperative types of relationships with practitioners. Such strategies would, however, require greater humility on the part of academics and policy makers as well as language teachers (Gore & Giltin, 2004).

Conclusion

Through the analysis of teachers' responses we identified four categories of problems that constitute the research-practice gap. Each category includes a variety of causes. Some causes relate to the production of research, others to the use of research or a combination of both. Table 1 summarizes these various causes in four general categories.

Table 1. *Classification of teachers' reasons for lack of research engagement*

Categories of barriers	Causes of research disengagement
Barriers related to the use of research	Teachers' time restrictions
	Inaccessibility of research
	Teachers' lack of specialized knowledge of research
	Teachers' conception of teaching and research
Barriers related to ELT research	Complexity of research papers
	Generalizability of research findings
	Quality of academic research
	Practicality of research findings
Barriers related to educational system	Lack of financial and intellectual support
	Negative view toward research and innovation
	Mismatch between research and educational materials
	Inefficient teacher evaluation system
Barriers related to collaboration	Lack of regular collaboration and cooperation between researchers and practitioners

In the present study, the obtained results concerning teachers' engagement, suggest low levels of engagement both in terms of reading and doing research. Given the absence of comparative data in the Iranian context, the researcher cannot comment on how this finding relate to research engagement in our ELT community more generally. Nevertheless, compared to

the findings reported by other researchers (e.g. Borg 2007; 2009; Nassaji, 2012; Gao et al, 2010) in various countries including Turkey, Nigeria, Oman, China, Japan, etc., this finding is not surprising and reaffirms the existence of a wide gap between research and practice in the Iranian ELT context.

This exploratory study also showed that there are various kinds of reasons for teachers' low engagement with research. Although it seems that each of these reasons could partially account for teachers' lack of or low research engagement, these various barriers are closely related and should not be treated separately. For instance, a lack of sophisticated teacher evaluation system may decrease teachers' motivation for developing a specialized knowledge of research. Burkhardt and Schoenfeld (2003) point out that a lack of conclusive and practical results have led many practitioners to develop a negative view of educational research. According to these authors, the "negative vicious circle" that widens the gap, can, however, be turned into a positive one when the right measures are taken. Therefore, in attempts that are made to bring researchers and practitioners to a closer harmony adopting a holistic view is more likely to result in better achievement.

For educational research to enlighten and improve teachers' practice, certain changes must be made by researchers and other stakeholder groups. Sometimes these changes require radical political actions because educational problems usually lie deep in the structure of society (Shipman, 1985). Given the current socio-political and economic conditions of Iran, it seems that at this time no such action is likely, yet, as educational researchers, we feel the responsibility of producing regular reminders for some inadequacies in the Iranian ELT profession. Therefore, in what follows we state list of suggestions for improving research-practice link in our ELT community.

Academic researchers and university professors want language teachers and policy makers to study their research papers and to benefit from their findings. However, recent investigations show that there is currently a huge gap between what researchers offer in their academic papers and what teachers demand for improving the quality of their practice. This is perhaps due to the scientific, precise and highly restrictive standards that are imposed to researchers in academic centers and have made research reports obscure and very technical. In order to make research understandable and accessible to teachers, researchers are recommended to avoid the use of technical jargons and complicated language in their research reports in favor of plain and brief explanations. Researcher should also attempt to explain the complicated statistical analyses in laymen's terms (Drill, Miller & Behrstock-Sherratt, 2013). Because the discoursal and contextual realities of teachers' profession do not easily allow them to learn the complex language of research; rather they often prefer bulleted lists and brief synopses of research findings to lengthy academic discussions (Drill et al, 2013). This may help researchers to ensure that their research could be read and understood by teachers, and at the same time convey to teachers that their professional desires are taken into account by researchers.

Researchers are also suggested to be clear about their research sites, research populations, and the possibility of generalizing their findings to other contexts. A recent investigation in the Iranian ELT context (i.e. Samar et al, 2012) revealed that, during the last decade, more than 60% of ELT research studies had been carried out only in academic settings and on university students. On the other hand, only 7% of the studies had focused on students in our public schooling system, including junior and senior high schools, and pre-university centers. Thus, one may speculate about the generalizability of the knowledge that is produced in our research studies. Such knowledge may not have the potential to be directly applied by practitioners into

their classroom practice and help them solve their educational problems (Mehrani & Khodi, 2014). Because teachers are often considerate of the unique features of their own classrooms and are skeptical about the relevance of the studies conducted in other contexts, particularly when there are clear differences in terms of proficiency level, gender, classroom settings, etc. (Drill et al, 2013). Thus, it is important that researchers specifically mention the features of their research populations and explain the considerations for generalizing their findings.

A further recommendation is that researchers familiarize themselves with alternative traditions of educational inquiry. Although the dominant paradigm in the Iranian ELT research is quantitative-experimental, alternative approaches to research such as ethnography, classroom exploratory analysis, action research, case study, etc. can open dimensions of insight into the processes of language teaching and learning that are not even discernible within a positivistic perspective (Lazaraton, 2005). In addition, to focus on more practical aspects of language teaching, researchers can directly go to the field, observe classrooms and consult practitioners. "Recommendations for further research" section of academic articles is not the only source of finding research questions. Research starts with a problem, and the best source for finding problems is observing practice. Extensive classroom observation and consultation with practitioners can help to come up with well-grounded and worth-doing research questions. Finally, when writing research reports, researchers can keep language teachers in their audience design to get your ideas across. Because assuming teachers as the readership would help researcher adapt the contents and wordings of their research papers to the knowledge level of practitioners (Drill et al, 2013).

Our analysis of teachers' reasons for not using research in their educational activities showed that they often do have an easy access to research studies. Therefore, to bring the research supply into teachers' demand, policymakers in our educational system can establish an educational research database for public use. As, Drill et al, (2013) discuss, the financial burden of journal subscriptions, books and workshops is an important barrier to teachers reading and using research. If the educational system manages to eliminate this barrier, teachers' access to educational research would definitely be facilitated. One way to do this is to establish an educational research database, similar to ERIC, at a national level. In addition, policymakers can encourage researchers to particularly focus on educational problems by specifying particular research grants for problem-based studies. Informal investigations show that in Iranian state universities and academic centers all educational research proposals are often evaluated based on the same procedure and there is not any fundamental difference between the specified grants for theoretical and practical research studies. Educational policymakers are thus suggested to devise a different procedure for evaluating research proposals and specify particular budgets for conducting research studies that intend to propose solutions for real educational problems. They can also develop professional networks for researchers and practitioners; because social and professional networks can provide teachers with opportunities for developing and sharing their pedagogical knowledge. Such networks would be optimally functional if both groups of researchers and practitioners are actively involved.

Editorial and advisory boards of almost all Iranian ELT-related journals are traditionally being occupied by tenured academics. Inviting qualified teachers to join academic editors in reading, evaluating and commenting on manuscripts that are submitted for publication not only increases the quality of research papers, but also reflects teachers' voice in academic papers. Such a policy, in the long term, prevents the domination of a particular ideology, or approach in the Iranian ELT research. Editors of academic journals can also specify special columns for

teachers' stories, narratives, forums, and so on. This not only provides a space for exchanging ideas between researchers and practitioners but also extends the scope of the readerships of academic journals, which is often confined to university centers (Drill et al, 2013). By the same token, editorial panels can promote alternative models of educational research such as action research and teacher research in educational settings, by developing a liberal perspective toward the discourse and language of research articles. This should not be interpreted that as the publication of poorly conducted and badly reported research papers, but it means that short articles that reflect teachers' experiences written in plain and simplified language should also be considered for possible publication.

The last but not the least, Iranian teachers are not usually considered potential participants in our academic conferences, workshops and seminars. Not only should the organizers of academic meetings promote teachers' participation, but they also should encourage teaches to take active parts in various stages of planning for conferences, seminars and other academic activities.

We would like to finalize with a strong plea for a multidimensional cooperation. We are of the belief that as long as our research community, teachers, policy makers, and administrators do not cooperate and collaborate in the direction of improving the gap between research and practice in the country, satisfactory improvement in this regard would not be likely.

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