

Understanding Language Teachers' Motivations towards Research Engagement: A Qualitative Case Study of Vietnamese Tertiary English Teachers

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Abstract : Among various professional development (PD) options available for English as a second language (ESL) teachers, especially those at the tertiary level, research engagement has been recently recommended as an innovative model with a transformative force for both individual teachers' PD and wider school improvement. Teachers who conduct research themselves tend to develop critical and analytical thinking about their instructional practices, and enhance their ability to make autonomous pedagogical judgments and decisions. With such capabilities, teacher researchers are thus more likely to contribute to curriculum innovation of their schools and improvement of the whole educational process. The extent to which ESL teachers are engaged in research, however, depends largely on their research motivation, which can not only decide teachers' choice of a PD activity to pursue but also affect the degree and duration of effort they are willing to invest in pursuing it. To understand language teachers' research practices, and to inform educational authorities about ways to promote research culture among their ESL teaching staff, it is therefore vital to investigate teachers' research motivation. Despite its importance as such, this individual difference construct has not been paid due attention especially in the ESL contexts. To fill this gap, this study aims to explore Vietnamese tertiary ESL teachers' motivations towards research. Guided by the self-determination theory and the process model of motivation, it investigates teachers' initial motivations for conducting research, and the factors that sustained or degraded their motivation during the research engagement process. Adopting a qualitative case-study approach, the study collected longitudinal data via semi-structured interviews and guided diary entries from three ESL tertiary teachers who were conducting their own research project. The respondents attended two semi-structured interviews (one at the beginning of their project, and the other one three months afterwards); and wrote six guided diary entries between the two interviews. The results confirm the significant role motivation plays in driving teachers to initiate and maintain their participation in research, and challenge some common assumptions in teacher motivation literature. For instance, the quality of the past and actual research experience unsurprisingly emerged as an important factor that both motivated and demotivated teachers in their research engagement process. Unlike general suggestions in the motivation literature however, external demand was found in this study to be a critical motivation sustaining factor while intrinsic research interest actually did not suffice to help a teacher fulfil his research endeavor. With such findings, the study is expected to widen the motivational perspective in understanding language teacher research practice given the paucity of related studies. Practically, it is hoped to enable teacher educators, PD program designers and educational policy makers in Vietnam and similar contexts to approach the question of whether and how to promote research activities among ESL teachers feasibly. For practicing and in-service teachers, the findings may elucidate to them the motivational conditions in which they can be research engaged, and the motivational factors that might hinder or encourage them in so doing.

Keywords : teacher motivation, teacher professional development, teacher research engagement, English as a second language (ESL)

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