

College English Teachers' Conceptions of Research: An Institutional Case Study from China

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Abstract: It's has been a long-proved fact that Chinese college English teachers are weak in research. Language teachers' research engagement is greatly influenced by their conceptions of research. The institutional case study focuses on the college English teachers' conceptions of research in a Chinese non-key university. The questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews of 6 teachers of typical demographic features show that besides the confirmation of quantitative studies, their academic awareness in qualitative research is growing. Most of them have realized the pedagogical effects of research on teaching and the publicity feature of research, though some of them still assess teachers' reflective practice as research. In contrast to the senior associate professors' blurry perception of research, the young lecturers seem to have a rather comprehensive and rigorous definition. The college-English-teacher identity to some extent has hindered their conceptual development of research and the construction of the identity as a researcher. Moreover, the impacts of teachers' educational background, in-service training experiences, and gender differences should not be ignored. This study implicates that the university administrative should lay due emphasis on raising the practitioners' conceptions of research before imposing the research requirement to them. Regular in-service professional development programs should be normalized to update teachers' research conceptions, raise their research awareness, and research literacy, and finally promote their research engagement.

Keywords: College English Teachers, Conceptions of Research, Identity, Teaching, Researcher

1. Introduction

Teachers' studying their own teaching is a better way to promote their professional autonomy, classroom decision-making, and pedagogical reflection, and then improve their teaching effects [1, 17, 26]. Therefore, teachers around the world are increasingly encouraged to engage with and in educational research [9].

With the influence of the campaign of teacher professional development in the world and Chinese domestic reform and opening-up, research has also become an important component of Chinese teachers' professional knowledge structure [29]. Academics' research outputs have become highly valued in recruitment, promotion, and job security [21]. Although great emphasis has been laid on raising teachers' research capacity in Chinese higher education institutions, Chinese TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teachers' research competence is not too optimistic [3, 5, 12, 31, 32], especially for college English

teachers (CETs) who teach non-English majors and usually shoulder a heavier workload of teaching due to the expanding collegiate population [23].

The value a teacher attaches to the outcomes from conducting research determines his/her motivation to do research [2]. Understanding what teachers believe research to be has a great impact on their research engagement [9], and understanding language teachers' conceptions of research is the prerequisite to promote research as a means of professional development for teachers and empower teachers as teacher-researchers [12, 16].

In contrast with the large number of research on how to guide teachers to do research, there is a paucity of empirical research on language teachers' conceptions of research [4, 9], particularly the relations between such conceptions and their identity when they are facing the transition from the teaching culture into the research culture.

Due to the significance of research conceptions on research engagements, as well as the sustained weakness in

research for CETs, CETs' conceptions of research appeal the author to conduct such a study. This study is also undertaken to meet the call of Simon Borg and Yi Liu [12] for specific case studies in individual language teaching organizations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teachers' Conceptions of Research

Teacher research is defined as "systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, individually or collaboratively (with other teachers and/or external collaborators), which aims to enhance teachers' understandings of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms, and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly" ([10], p. 395).

Several features should be highlighted in this definition: "systematic inquiry", "qualitative and/or quantitative", "made public", "better quality teaching". Liu & Borg [23] reported four contradictions in teachers' conceptions of research: research for publication and pedagogical purpose; research of theoretical and practical; quantitative research and qualitative research; personal and institutional motivations to conduct research. Teachers' reflections on their practice which are not systematic have been excluded from teaching research although teaching research itself may be reflective [15, 24].

Public dissemination has been established as a key criterion for research [9, 12]. Teachers' private inquiry conducted in the classroom mainly for their own professional development or their own purposes is not identified as research for promotion unless it's published [12, 28]. A broad definition of "public" refers to the sharing of an enquiry for scrutiny in either oral or written form on formal or informal stages [9]. However, former studies on Chinese CETs found that more emphasis was laid on the pedagogical improvement instead of the public attention towards the study conducted [18]. Some language teachers in the teaching-oriented universities also expect more forms of research rather than the written publications [2].

To be a researching teacher is the essential means and goal for teachers' professional development [19]. Teaching can be informed by the cutting-edge research findings [13, 30]. However, there's a dearth of high quality and internationally influential research in Chinese foreign language field, one major reason is that Chinese TEFL teachers fail to recognize the pedagogical and professional benefits of research [35]. The related empirical research also proved this point, teachers seldom or occasionally read or do research if they perceive the weak influence of engagement with or in research on their teaching [27].

Simon Borg's large study among 12 countries in 2009 found that English teachers' conceptions of research were inclined to conventional scientific notions of inquiry. They

gave extra weight to statistics, objectivity, hypotheses, large samples, and variables and emphasized the research's pragmatic use for teaching. The teacher educators from Saudi Arabia also held technical views towards the characteristics of research. They insisted that quality research should involve experimental designs, large samples, data collection from questionnaires, and employ some form of statistical analysis [11].

Several studies in China on teachers' perceptions of teaching research and the qualities of high-quality research (such as [14, 19, 23, 27]) corroborated previous studies in the west. They supported the quantitative notion of research, although some of them were skeptical about the integrity and applicability of the quantitative study [23]. Teachers could master the nature and qualities of teaching research, distinguish the differences between teaching research and reflective teaching. Moreover, besides objectivity and representativeness, they also attached great importance to the practicability of teaching research [19].

Later duplicated studies in other countries (such as [6, 8]) also found similar results, i.e., teachers' conceptions of research were close to a quantitative paradigm. Like previous discoveries [9, 19], teachers in B Mehrani [8] also unanimously claimed that educational research must solve practical problems and leave pedagogical implications. Such conceptions of research have removed teachers away from feasible research that they can conduct in teaching and resulted in their scarce involvement in research [9].

2.2. College English Teachers' Identity

Due to the expansion of higher education at the end of 20th century in China, many undergraduate English majors and later master graduates were recruited as CETs due to their language proficiency rather than academic research competence. PhD holders take up a rather small proportion of the college English faculty [23]. Therefore, they are inherently deficient in academic literacy. What's more, it's a common practice for Chinese CETs to be overwhelmed with teaching. Thus, they are frequently regarded as "instructors" instead of "academics", compared with their academic counterparts [12]. Their research performance is less productive than those who teach English majors and other disciplines [33]. Consequently, they tend to live at the margin of the academia [22].

Previous empirical research (such as [12, 20, 34]) have indicated that CETs are increasingly assessed and stimulated to switch their identity from a teacher to a productive researcher under the backdrop of university managerial reform. Due to the teaching-dominated features of their identity and the illiterate research background, some practitioners wish for the differential review measures for CETs (such as [4]).

As to CETs' identity research, more efforts have been laid on the tensions between their identity of being a craftsman and their expected role to be a research-oriented researcher and the requirements of researcher engagement (such as [20, 22, 34]), as well as how their professional identities have been reconstructed as a teacher-researcher (such as [7]). Teachers' perceptions of what counts as research and what value

research have been proved to be determined by the individual research experience, institutional research atmosphere and the manageability of research [2]. What are the relations between college English teachers' conceptions of research and their identities? Special attention needs to be paid to this issue.

After the overview of previous research, institutional case studies on CETs' conceptions of research are rather scarce, especially in the non-key universities, which are transiting from the teaching culture to the researching culture. Thus, the current study conducted in a regional university in China (pseudonym: University F) intends to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do the college English teachers perceive research?
- 2) How do they perceive their identity as college English teachers?
- 3) What are the relations between their conceptions of research and their identities?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Site and Research Focus

University F, a regional undergraduate university, which has been experiencing a transition from the teaching culture to the researching culture, was chosen to be the research site. All the staff in each academic rank are encouraged and required to do research after the issue of the reform of the professional rank appraisal.

The data used in this paper are part of a larger study which tries to explore CETs' research conceptions and engagement in University F. The larger study replicates the sequential explanatory strategy in Borg and Liu [12]. After collecting the quantitative data by the questionnaire, follow-up interviews were conducted among the eight volunteers who left their names and contact information at the end of the questionnaire. This paper focuses on six participants' conceptions of research according to the distribution of their academic ranks, research experiences, gender differences, and the representativeness of their answers.

3.2. Participants

The College English Unit in University F is mainly comprised of two professional types, i.e., the lecturers and associate professors, and most of the faculty are female teachers. There were no teaching assistants, professors, and PhD holders when the research was conducted. The demographic information of the six purposely selected participants can be seen in the following table (Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.). Though all of them are master degree holders, *Hong*, *Qin*, and *Lian* received their master's degrees through in-service graduate programs while *Juan*, *Yong*, and *Fang* were recruited as full-time graduate students. Moreover, *Hong* received the academic training during the visiting study in a key university nearby three years ago. Written informed consent was signed by them one by one, and they were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity before the interview.

Table 1. The demographic information of the participants.

Name	Gender	Professional rank	Research interests	Years of teaching	Educational background
Juan	female	lecturer	Teacher professional development	6-10 years	master
Hong	female	lecturer	Linguistics	16-20 years	master
Yong	male	lecturer	Translation	16-20 years	master
Fang	female	lecturer	Stylistics	21-25 years	master
Qin	female	associate professor	English teaching	21-25 years	master
Lian	female	associate professor	Culture and teaching	21-25 years	master

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire instrument used in this study was the first two part of the inventory in Borg [9]. Means of the interview were negotiated according to the convenience of the participants and were finally conducted either face to face, over the social media or on the cell phone. In the interview, the participants were asked to explain why they assessed certain scenario in the questionnaire as research and why they emphasized certain research qualities. In order to answer the second research question, two more questions were added to collect their perceptions of their identities as CETs, i.e., "How do you perceive your identity as a college English teacher?" and "Do you consider yourself as a researcher, why or why not?" (The second question is to complement the first one). The interview time over the participants' conceptions of research lasted over 30 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, tape-recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed verbatim into Chinese and then checked by the participants for accuracy. The quotes used in

this paper were translated into English and then sent back to the participants once more to check for any inaccuracies during translation or alternations. The interpretations in the article were also read through by them to verify authenticity and ask for their permission for use.

Qualitative content analysis [25] was used to analyze the interview scripts. The transcribed scripts were firstly read through to get the general understanding. NVivo 12 Plus was then employed to help generate the initial codes, and similar codes were classified into the superior themes.

4. Findings

4.1. Teachers' Conceptions of Research

Findings have shown that the participants share something in common. They all admitted the pedagogical effects of research on teaching and publications were better evidence of research, but meanwhile most of them stated that the reflections and efforts made to improve teaching and the "analyze-improve-share" model could also be called

“research”, despite no publications coming out.

However, the participants' conceptions of research differ between academic ranks and genders. The two associate professors seemed to adopt a rather blurry perception of research. They both claimed that any efforts aiming to reflect, analyze, and improve teaching can be classified as research. Hence, they considered most of the scenarios as research. For example,

Interviewer: Let's come to the sixth scenario, the one about vocabulary teaching.

Lian: Just as those discussed above, it's also research. For example, you may do some research on the positive vocabulary in order to better apply them into teaching. (Interview with Lian)

The two associate professors regarded most of the listed research features rather important, except *d* “Hypotheses are tested” and *h* “The results apply to many ELT context”. *Lian* argued that not all the hypotheses could be verified and *Qin* said that the ELT context was too general since the primary school, middle school, and college teaching contexts were totally different. Moreover, *Lian* whose research interest is “culture and teaching” had no idea about *k* “Variables are controlled” and she was not sure whether the researcher's attitudes should be objective or not.

As a contrast, the lecturers seem to have a much more precise, rigorous, and comprehensive understanding of research compared with the associate professors. According to *Fang's* opinion, research should rise to the theoretical level, and simple reflection and general knowledge of the status quo cannot be classified as “research”. Thus, she denied Scenario One, Five, Seven, Eight, Ten as research. Both *Juan* and *Fang* thought that “Triggered by certain research questions, research should be the inquiry using corresponding research methods for concrete research aims.” So, they assessed certain scenarios as teaching reflections or practice rather than scientific research. For example, *Juan* thought that Scenario Eight is “probably not research”, since it did not belong to the efforts based on certain research questions.

Fang's elaboration of Scenario Four showed her definition of research includes data collection, data analysis and being open to the public. E.g.,

Interviewer: Scenario Four, you chose “Definitely research”.

Fang: You see, he (a university lecturer) distributed questionnaires to 500 teachers, which ensured a wide coverage and could collect all kinds of opinions and facts. Then analyses were done based on the statistics. Finally, the paper was written and published in academic journals. Therefore, it can arouse the attention of the academic peers to discuss and reflect. So, I think it's research. (Interview with Fang)

Both *Juan* and *Fang* considered Scenario Three as a kind of literature review study, which also belonged to research. This is in sharp contrast with *Qin's* idea, “He just discussed the key points in the literature and summarized others' opinions. It's just like a review and should not be considered as research.” (Interview with *Qin*).

Compared with the vague judgement of the two associate professors, *Fang* and *Yong* pointed out the method used in Scenario Six is the experimental research.

As for the gender difference, *Yong*, the only male teacher, seems to have more comprehensive perception of research. When it came to Scenario Seven, *Lian* considered it as administrative statistics and not research, while *Yong* selected “definitely research” and justified that one significant purpose of research was to contribute good ideas to the government.

“This belongs to the field of teaching management. Many of my classmates' articles have impacted the fundamental policies of our country... they offer their suggestions through academic articles and submit them to the administration. This is the final aim of research. Your scientific verification can effectively guide the practice and the policy-making of government sectors.” (Interview with Yong)

Most of them are more familiar with the quantitative research model and unanimously regarded such scenarios as scientific research. However, a typical discovery in this study shows that teachers have come to know qualitative studies and action research, although their conceptions of these two kinds of research are still at a primary level and even a little inaccurate. For example,

Interviewer: What about Scenario Five?

Juan: It should be a typical kind of qualitative study. You see, class observation was conducted and then followed by discussion and reflection. The research paper was the result of the analysis and final output. (Interview with Juan)

Interviewer: You classified Scenario Six as research, why?
Qin: It's about vocabulary teaching. The aim is to explore the better teaching method and then apply it into future teaching. The teacher also conducted a comparison test and analyses between the two classes, it could be a kind of action research. (Interview with Qin)

After confirming some of the listed research qualities, such as “The researcher is objective”, “The results apply to many ELT contexts”, and “The results are made public”, the lecturer participants challenged many of the rest. For example, both *Fang* and *Hong* stated the data collection methods should be based on the nature and aims of the research, so questionnaire was not a necessity. *Hong* added that qualitative research had nothing to do with variables and did not require many participants. The researcher could even track one person's development. But she said that the information collected for one participant's study did not have to be that large enough, which violates the convention of qualitative study.

4.2. College English Teachers' Identity

Themes in this part were generated by either classifying the codes or citing the quotes of the participants to serve as the native concepts.

4.2.1. The Same Identity Against the Marginalized Backdrop

Although nearly all of them feel that there is no difference between their college English teachers' identity and that of

others in the same university (including those teaching the English majors and those teaching in other faculties), some of them also mentioned the marginal role of CETs according to people's stereotyped images and the literature. The following shows Hong's paradoxical feelings,

Hong: With respect to the identity, I feel we are the same as other teachers. However, compared with those teaching English majors in our college, it seems that, we are a little marginalized. People tend to say that the competence of teachers in the College English Teaching Unit are a little lower than those teaching English majors, not only in teaching, but also in research. Such a saying is not only popular in our university, but also among others. The differences in the identities do exist. But in fact, I think there're no such differences, since there are many excellent teachers in our unit. (Interview with Hong)

4.2.2. Important Role But Unmatched Treatment

Qin, Lian and Fang emphasized the important role of college English for the huge number of non-English majors. At the same time, *Fang* also blamed the heavy workload of CETs and the unfair treatment of the college English courses.

Fang: I think our university does not lay due emphasis, concerning the CETs' workload and the quality of college English teaching. You see, most of us have at least 12 periods of lessons per week, some even have 16, and especially the "large-class", the number of some even exceeds 100, that is kind of irresponsibility if we take consciousness into consideration. (Interview with Fang)

Several participants complained about their time, which had been dominated by classes. *Yong* compared the role of CETs as "busy bees" to show their commonness and busy work in the university.

4.2.3. Restrictions to Professional Development

Both *Juan* and *Yong* have expressed their concern over the constraints of college English teaching to their professional development. *Juan* also conveyed her expectation to teach students with higher academic level. *Yong*, whose research interest is translation, stated that college English teaching had nothing to do with teachers' research foci and in the long run would restrain their thinking. He also called on the university management to review CETs in a different way.

Juan: I think this can be called as "personal identity". Now, I am on the post of college English teaching. I would try my best to do my work well and let my students be proud of me. But on the other hand, I expect to teach those students with higher academic level. It is said that "teaching others is teaching yourself". The more excellent students would demand more of me and then would push me to learn. That's it. (Interview with Juan)

Yong: CETs are facing students from different majors. What they teach has little to do with their major, which would confine the ways, orientation and depth of their thinking and then hinder the development of their research. Suppose there were two teachers with the same competence. One was assigned to teach translation to the English majors, the other college English to non-English

majors. The differences between them would emerge ten years later. Therefore, the faculty administrative should adopt different policies to the academic requirement of CETs. (Interview with Yong)

4.2.4. "The Researcher Identity Is Far Away from Me"

Most of the participants were firstly startled and then denied it completely, when asked whether they considered themselves as a researcher. *Lian* considered herself as just an "ordinary teacher or teaching craftsman". *Yong* was kidding himself as "a peripheral outsider at the academia". *Juan*, who is rather active in research, denied herself either because,

"I haven't reached the level of being a researcher. I think the real researcher should stand high and see far. He/she should have formed their own research areas and their research achievement will guide the practice forward. As for me, I haven't formed my own research interests yet, and got no research outputs, let alone any influence on the practice. Thus, I'm not a researcher according to the scientific definition." (Interview with Juan)

Lian and Hong said frankly they did not literally try to do research at all. Like *Juan*, *Hong* pointed out three qualities of a researcher, i.e., reading a lot, producing a lot, and solving lots of problems, while she had none of them and did not have enough time to devote to it.

5. Discussion

With consideration of the three research questions, this part will discuss the participants' conceptions of research, their perception of CETs' identities, and the relations between the two, together with other influencing factors on their research conceptions indicated by the findings.

Most of the participants have realized the benefits of research on teaching although some of them are not actively engaged in research. This is a favorable discovery compared with Qu, et al. [27] and Zhou [35]. Although they approved that publication was an important symbol of research, some of them still assessed the work to improve teaching as research, which echoes the emphasis on pedagogical effects proved in previous studies (such as [18]), and indicates teachers' expectations for various forms of research [2]. It also adds evidence to the tensions between research for publications and pedagogical practice, theoretical research and practical research in Liu and Borg [23].

Most participants affirmed studies of quantitative paradigm as research, and approved the importance of related characteristics of quantitative study. This resonates with the findings in former studies (such as [9, 11, 23]). However, despite teachers' unanimous acceptance of the quantitative research scenario, some teachers began to defend for other approaches of research, such as action research and qualitative studies, which is different from previous research (such as [12, 23]). The possible reason may be because qualitative research is growing more and more popular in academia in the past decade.

The participants' perceptions of their marginal roles, i.e., "busy bees", "teaching technicians", and non-researcher identity are aligned with the literature [12, 22]. Some of them even foresaw the impediment of such identity to their future professional development, esp., research literacy. Such identity restricts their research engagement and research conceptions. *Yong's* expectation of differential treatment for CETs is also in line with the previous literature (such as [4]).

Findings in this research also reveal that teachers' conceptions of research are also closely related with their educational background, in-service training experiences and gender differences. It's noteworthy that senior associate professors failed to distinguish reflective practice from scientific research. The young and middle-aged teachers, who tend to have a higher educational background than the senior teachers, have a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of research, and they are also acquainted with the various kinds of research forms. For example, *Fang* and *Juan*, as graduates from key universities, could distinguish scientific research from teachers' informal pedagogical practice and give a more scientific definition of research. Moreover, compared with senior teachers, they can identify literature review study as a kind of research, besides empirical studies.

Teachers' conceptions of research also showcase gender differences. Compared with the female teachers, the male teacher, *Yong*, seems to have a much broader perception of research, which can serve government decision making.

The participants, whose majors or research interests are not around teaching or applied linguistics, have little knowledge about some options of the high-quality studies (such as "Variables are controlled") which implies that some items of Borg's questionnaire should be revised to suit teachers from different educational background. It also reflects a fact that applicants' pedagogical content knowledge has not been a criterion assessed in teacher recruitment or considered as an issue that should be improved in teachers' in-service professional development. It also indicates that teaching research could be a better solution to solve the conflicts between CETs' identity and their research interests, which are beyond applied linguistics.

In-service training will leave a deep impact on teachers' conceptions of research. *Hong's* research awareness towards qualitative research has been proved to be more advanced compared with the two senior teachers who have the same educational background with her.

Their perceptions of the "researcher" not only indicate their perceptions of their own identity, a complete "teaching technician", but also showcase their conceptions of research, which are beyond their competence and hard to approach and in turn hinder their engagement in research.

6. Conclusion

The case study of CETs in a non-key university has shown their diversified conceptions of research which are influenced by their identity, educational background, in-service training,

and gender differences. Although quantitative research paradigm is affirmed as scientific research as to their beliefs, some of them already turn their attention to qualitative studies. The senior associate professors' perceptions are a little behind those of the lecturers, which are more rigorous and comprehensive. Overall, their CETs' identity has impeded the construction of their researchers' roles and the conceptions of research.

This institutional case study is without limitations based on the small number of participants. However, it does leave some implications for university management, especial for non-key universities. Support and mentoring should be offered to college English practitioners to develop their knowledge of what research is [12]. In-service professional development programs can be held to broaden teachers' conceptions of research to all kinds of feasible and operable approaches. Educational research should be encouraged and highlighted in order to inform pedagogy rather than isolating research away from daily teaching practice. Only in this way can teacher research become prosperous in the future.

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