

Original Research Article

On the road to becoming teacher researcher — case studies of EFL school teacher development through collaborative action research

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Abstract

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The notion of teacher as researcher has been advocated for decades but its actualization is by no means an easy task. An effective teacher education model, such as university and school collaborative research is of great significance for cultivating research-oriented teachers. Reported here is a multiple cases study of five EFL teachers concerning the impact, characteristics and affecting factors of such projects. Data were collected through interviews, research projects and reflections on the three-year action research. The findings suggest that such projects can be effective in promoting teacher's development as researchers, because they are community-based, participatory, reflective and scaffolded.

Key words: Action research; Collaborative action research; EFL teachers, Teacher as researchers, Teacher development

INTRODUCTION

Seemingly teacher research

The notion of teacher as researcher was proposed by Stenhouse (1975), but could be dated back to the educational reform campaign in the 1960's in Britain among school teachers, with an interest to solve practical problems arising in classrooms and teachers. In Stenhouse and his colleagues' beliefs teachers should take charge of their classrooms and they should be the ones to testify the educational theories in their classrooms. Ideally every teacher is a member of the scientific community, engaged in their laboratories, the classrooms (Zou, 2008). Teachers' professional development can be achieved by means like systematic self-learning, observing experienced teachers or testing educational hypothesis, but the essence of such development has to enable teachers to emancipate, which is best fostered by becoming a teacher researcher (Stenhouse, 1981).

This notion encourages teachers to reflect on their practice as researchers so as to promote their

professional development. Teacher becoming researcher fulfils the needs of education, professionalization, teacher development and curriculum reforms (Li, 2009). On one hand, it is advocated as an important means for teacher development in the ongoing curriculum reform in basic education in China. On the other hand, as far as the varied supporting environment and the vast population of teachers are concerned, it is by far an easy task to actualize. Many school teachers do not have the opportunities to participate in research due to reasons like heavy workload, limited time and insufficient knowledge and support in doing research (Shi, 2009). This echoes what Borg (2009) found in the investigation of English language teachers' of conception of research. The low level of teacher engagement with research is because of a lack of time, knowledge, and access to material. Teacher research need to meet 10 conditions (Borg, 2006), and at least 6 of which are essential: knowledge and skill, mentoring, time, recognition, community and dissemination potential. There does exist a small number of in-depth research projects undertaken

by a few backbone teachers. Like other academic educational research, those projects are not much helpful for improving practice (Wang, Wang & Wang, 2008).

In most cases there are some seemingly or superficial teacher research activities, for instance, preparing lessons in groups about important teaching points and methods, or observing public lessons. Lesson preparations are the most common form of teachers' communal activity at school level. They are deemed as research activity in the teachers' eyes, but they lack the depth of enquiry or effectiveness in solving problems in teaching realities. Those discussions about lessons generally do not have clear themes or depths. In China, observing public lessons often constitute an important part of teacher training programs, either on district or regional levels, but they are only most beneficial to the teacher who gives the demonstration lesson after going through an ordeal-like process of polishing lessons (Guo, 2003). The teachers in the audience seats might merely learn some tricks from the public lesson. They do not have the opportunity to be actively involved in the preparation, appraisal and reflection of these lessons. They mainly watch the showcase lesson and listen to appraisal comments from the authoritative judges (Zhang & Fu, 2009). The near perfect design and execution of such showcases are often unfortunately regarded as unrealistic and unadaptable to their own classrooms. What they have learned from direct practices, without necessary discussion or meditative reflection, or a re-theorizing process, cannot be readily applied to their own teaching situations.

Therefore, there have to be alternative teacher development approaches other than group lesson preparation or public lesson observations. Teachers' research, as determined by their focal attention on improving practice, must address problems in their teaching situations and afford substantial opportunities for developing research capabilities. Hence this study intends to find out the impact of such an alternative collaborative action research on 5 Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) school teachers' development, as part of a bigger teacher action research project, as well as the characteristics and conditions for EFL teacher action research.

REVIEW OF TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH

Difficulties for teacher research

In China, teachers are starting to know the idea of teacher as researcher, but research is still regarded by many teachers as the privileges and responsibilities for academics in higher education institutes (Li, 2009; Shi, 2009). They do not think it necessary to do research on their own teaching. Some other teachers may have felt the need to do more in-depth enquiry into their work, but

are incapable of the systematic endeavor. Only a very small number of teachers are engaged in research due to the following reasons in the Chinese educational context (Li, 2009): First, teachers are not quite clear about the meaning of doing research. In their minds research is equal to theory-oriented inquires, unrelated to practices. The isolation between research and practice is also affected by the separation in administration in schools or institutions. Next, teachers do not have the necessary knowledge base or skills for doing education research. Third, the supportive environment for teacher research needs to be improved. Similarly, although two thirds of teachers are found to be concerned with educational findings in the survey of 300 Turkish teachers' views on education research and want to be involved in research process, most library or book research cannot cater for their needs. What is more important is that these teachers are more concerned with classroom issues such as teacher-pupil interaction and different instruction strategies (Beycioglu et al., 2010).

Limitation of independent and supportive action research

One approach to help teachers to become researchers is action research. Action research is effective in teacher training (cf. Magos, 2007). It can provide teachers with a powerful means of professional growth as it is closely related to their own teaching situations (Burns and Rochsantiningsih, 2006). Teacher action research has been introduced into China for over two decades and there have been some research efforts and there is a rapid increase in publication now. Despite the sheer numbers, most of those articles are theoretical introductions or literary reviews, whereas empirical research is lacking (Peng et al., 2010).

Educational action research is often categorized as technical, deliberate or liberal, but it can be classified as individual, supportive and cooperative or collaborative action research from the ways teachers participate in the action research (Zhao and Wang, 2009). Independent action research is initiated and implemented by an individual teacher without external support. It has great demand on teachers' motivational as well as the knowledge basis, research skills, reflective abilities. Only a very few number of excellent teachers can accomplish this journey. Given systematic studies of action research in a course, for example, it is not easy for teacher to carry out action research. In Christenson et al's (2002) study, only two teachers out of 32 members of a master summer course implemented action research in their own teaching. Action research can change teachers' perceptions to some extent (Yaman, 2010), but in many cases it was a "dead end" for the majority because of time constraints or no administrative and colleague support. They concluded that "it is important for teachers

to participate in all stages of the research process” (p. 271).

Supportive action research is usually implemented by schools or teachers with support from external institutes, usually university researchers. Teachers’ intrinsic motive to change practice sometimes is not fully awakened. This form of action research, particularly those initiated and controlled by outside education theorists may become technology-oriented and produce limited use for practices. For example, the analysis of the failure in a university-school supported action project suggests that the form of support needs to be revised: teachers need to be the initiator of their own research, and the school research section has to facilitate the organization of such projects (Niu, 2006). More importantly there has to be a solid mechanism for cooperation among the triangular participants: teachers, school research section, and university researchers.

Collaborative action research

Collaborative action research is “something which can, and should, be considered by language teachers, as a realistic extension or professional practice” (Burns, 1999, p. 12). It does not only comprise school teachers and university researchers as main participants, but also aided by a third organizing party or administrative party. Being different from the one-sided independent and two-sided supportive action research, collaborative action research is more firm and lasting, as the three parties form a more solid triangular researching community, each fulfilling their responsibilities. School teachers initiate, design and implement their research based on problems in their practices. University researchers provide them with training in methodology, support and sometimes guidance in pedagogy. The third party mostly provides administrative services (cf. Niu, 2009; Wang and Zhang, 2012). Collaborative action research is called for, since each party has its own needs (Wang, Zhang and Lin, 2010). Schools teachers need it to be a pathway for professional development, while university researchers need to innovate theories. Administrative section needs to provide in-service teacher training. Such collaboration offers them an opportunity to utilize educational resources from higher institutes and benefit teachers. This model of collaborative action research differs from other researcher’s definition in the involvement of a supporting administrative party, but in some cases this party could be replaced by the highly motivated and autonomous organization of the teachers and teacher-researchers themselves (cf. Banegas et al, 2013). This model has proved to have great benefit for the beginning teacher (Mitchell et al., 2009), and can promote teacher autonomy (Wang and Zhang, 2014).

The success rate of collaborative action research is significantly higher than the other two forms of research.

For example, in one such university-school collaboration action research project, which lasted three years, in a district of Beijing, 38 participating middle school English teachers, out of the 43 initially signed up, completed 20 action research projects, 12 of which were published in academic journals (Wang, Zhang & Lin, 2010). The teacher continuing education program in Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais that used collaborative action research, consisting of a university professor or graduate student and student teachers in each research team, also found that some groups were successful at completing their research and improved their teaching practice (Mello et al., 2008). Collaborative action research place high demands on both education theorists and teachers, but their cooperation can complement some motivational and theoretical shortages in the first two modes.

METHOD

This study is a multiple case study, having 5 teachers as participants in collaborative action research. It aims to find out the impact of such collaborative action research on the teachers and the characteristics and affecting factors of teachers’ development in such a process.

Research context

The context of the study is a school-university collaborative action research project, where school teachers conduct their own classroom research with university teacher educators as their mentors. The project was launched in Beijing on July 2012 and ended on September, 2014. In this project, 19 university teacher educators consist of professors, lecturers and doctoral and M.A. students with research interest and related practices in EFL teacher education. Thirty-one school teachers signed in voluntarily and were recommended by teacher educators in local educational sectors, who worked as coordinators between the two parties. The research collaboration was completed via lectures and workshops in action research methodology, inter-group presentation and discussion, intra-group discussion and sharing, and one-to-one mentoring (see Table 1). The project aims to promote teacher development by engaging school teachers in active reflection in classroom teaching with scientific approach so as to further improve teaching quality and student outcomes.

Research questions

This paper is based on a one-year longitudinal study that aims to explore the impact of collaborative action research on EFL school teachers’ development as

Table 1. Phases of collaborative action research

	University teacher educators	Collaboration	School teachers
Phase 1	Lectures on action research (what, how and why)	Inter- and intra-group sharing and	Research locus and focus
Phase 2	Lectures and workshops on research methodology	discussion; one-to-one	Research tool development and data collection
Phase 3	Lectures on action plan designing	mentoring	Action plan designing
Phase 4	Lectures on research proposal writing		Research proposal writing
Phase 5	Workshops on action plan revising		Action plan revising
Phase 6	Lectures on data analysis		Research data analysis
Phase 7	Lectures on research paper writing		Research paper writing

Table 2. Participant information

Participants	Ms. X	Ms. C	Ms. L	Ms. Q	Ms. Y
Age type	36-40	30-35	30-35	30-35	36-40
School type	Junior high	Junior high	Junior high	Junior high	Junior high
Education background	College	College	College	M.A.	Teachers' school
Years as EFL teacher	12 years	17 years	9 years	3 years	20 years
Research experience	"classroom" research	"classroom" research	"classroom" research	"classroom" research; academic research	"classroom" research
Reason for participation	For self development	For self development	For self development	For self development	For self development
Action research topic	Reading & vocabulary teaching	Student participation & teacher talk	Questioning & Student involvement	Vocabulary teaching	Classroom interaction

researchers and to analyze the factors that affect the developmental process so as to offer suggestions on collaborative action research programs particularly for EFL school teachers and teacher educators. The research questions are:

- (1) Does university-school collaborative action research promote EFL school teachers' development as researchers? If yes, in what aspects?
- (2) What are the characteristics of teachers' development as researchers in collaborative action research?
- (3) What are the factors that affect teachers' development as researchers in collaborative action research?

Participants

The study takes as participants five teachers from basic educational sectors within the aforementioned collaborative action research project. As shown in Table 2, the participants were all female and they worked as EFL teachers in primary or junior middle school in Beijing. Their working experience and educational background vary but they all had rarely done classroom research in real sense. They were active participants in the project

with expectation to facilitate professional development and student outcomes.

Data collection and analysis

The study lasted from July, 2012 to Nov. 2013 and collected data by means of interviews and documents including the participants' action research reports and reflections. Individual structured interviews were conducted with questions developed through piloting process. With the approval of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and resulted in more than 50,000 words of transcripts out of 200 minutes' recording. The data were analyzed by means of content analysis with inter-raters to guarantee the reliability. Each of them completed a report of more than ten thousand words with assistance from the three mentors. One of the report has been published, and two in reviewing process, and two in pre-submission stage for academic journals. Their reports and separate reflections on their research process were all data sources for the study. The method of content analysis was used to analyze all the data, with full attention to triangulation, inter-rater reliability and research ethics.

Table 3. Phases of collaborative action research

Conceptions on what is needed as teacher researchers	Previous competence in doing research	Competence gained through collaborative action research
Knowledge in theory (5) as in language learning, language teaching, research	Lack of knowledge in theory : No systematic learning (4); too general (1)	Enhancement in language teaching pedagogy(2) and educational concepts(2) ; Knowledge about direction of professional development (2)
Research competence: problem awareness (2); data collection and analysis (5); research procedure (5)	Research competence: none (4); lack of procedural knowledge (1)	Research competence: Knowledge in research methods (5) as in data collection and analysis, writing research report, literature collection and reading; scientific spirit (5); problem and research awareness (5)
Understanding students (1); Love for the profession (1)	Understanding students (1); Love the job (1)	Knowledge about students (5); Professional spirit (2); Knowledge about educational reality (2); Knowledge about selves (1)

Note: The numbers indicate the number of reports.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With careful analysis of the data, positive effects of collaborative action research on teachers' development as researchers were found and factors that facilitate and constrain teachers' development were identified.

Teacher development in collaborative action research: in what aspects

In order to see what teachers gained through collaborative action research, we examined their perceptions on what is needed as teachers researchers and their previous competence in doing research to form comparison.

Table 3 shows that teachers' conception of what is needed to be teacher researcher includes: knowledge in language learning, language teaching and research theories; research competence; student knowledge; as well as work ethics. They all reported inadequacy in the first two areas and just one of them reported they understand students and love the job. Nevertheless, having engaged in collaborative action research, they all reported enhancement in research competence, research awareness, and knowledge about students. Two teachers said that they developed their professional spirit and expanded their knowledge about educational reality and knowledge about selves.

To conclude, collaborative action research promoted teachers' development as researchers by helping them get to know the "what", "how" and "why" of teacher research, to reflect more objectively, to know what's

going on outside the classroom and to love their profession more.

Got to know "what" + "how" + "why" of teacher research

All the participants reported gaining research competence and obtained knowledge in what is teacher research in a real sense, how to conduct it and why they do it, as the teachers said in the interview extracts 1, 2. They overcome the difficulties of being unclear about the meaning of research and inadequate knowledge and skills in doing research as Li (2009) mentioned.

Extract 1 (Ms. X, Nov.1 from interview)

"After I did my own action research, I realized that what I had done before at school was not real research. I used to just sketch a questionnaire and write up a report without any consideration of objectivity and logic. Here I learned that research ought to be precise and what you write in your report should be based on evidence."

Extract 2 (Ms. Q, Nov. 1, from interview)

"I learned a lot about research methodology in the graduate school. But I was lost when I first started to do action research, since I found what I learned was too general and I did not know details in conducting research. I experienced the whole research procedures and I am confident to do research on my own."

Got to reflect more critically

The teachers developed the habit of writing reflections in the research process. Being reflective is an indispensable part and an important quality of being a teacher researcher. In Extract 3, Ms. C reflected on her pedagogy and showed her change in the awareness of using research as a means for improving practice. Ms. L started to change her perspectives on causes of problem in teaching. The change from habitually blaming students to self-criticism is significant. Only when they gain more self-knowledge will they really start to get to know who the students are and what they are teaching (Palmer, 1998). They also realized they need to keep learning and they know the direction of development, as Ms. Y reported in the interview, a teacher who experienced “burnout” after 20 years’ of teaching.

Extract 3 (Ms. C, from interview)

“I used to improve students’ learning by doing a lot of exercises. Now, I will read literature to find out better ways and collect data regularly to make judgments.”

Extract 4 (Ms. L, from interview)

“We teachers are easy to take things for granted. But in fact what you imagined was not what it was. I used to blame my students a lot, I thought they were passive and it made my class boring. But now, I will take different perspectives and begin to think maybe it is me who I should blame.”

Extract 5 (Ms. Q, from interview)

“By learning about research, I realized that I have so many things to learn and I know where I should go.”

Got to know what is going on outside the classroom

Apart from gaining knowledge about pedagogy and research, the teachers reported getting to think and know more about educational realities other than their own classrooms. For example, Ms. Q felt she got to know what is happening in middle schools. She found her focus of development when she was engaged in group discussions and sharing for about three years.

Extract 6 (Ms. Q, from interview)

“In my group, there are three middle school teachers. I have been working in primary school and I rarely get

chances to know what is going on in middle schools. From their talks, I know what is needed in middle school and I know what competence I should focus on in my teaching.”

Got to love their profession more

Both Ms. X and Ms. Y declared that they loved their profession more after the collaborative action research. Ms. X said, “I feel like I am young again and writing a high quality research report made me feel accomplished.” The potential for dissemination (Borg 2006) could boost teachers’ morale and enhance their passion for the career. Ms. Y explicitly claimed in the interview, “I learned a lot from my mentors what is professional spirit.” She also wrote in her reflection that she was inspired by the passion and devotion by the team of the university educators: “as if I was given a shot of excitement and power after each time of activity”. She was urged to conquer whatever difficulties and move on.

Therefore, we can conclude that this form of research indeed promote teachers’ development in knowledge, skills, awareness and professional spirit. They are becoming teacher researchers. The development of professional knowledge is in all the domains: technical, empirical and ideological, more advantageous than if they were left by themselves to do action research (Ponte et al, 2004).

Teacher development in collaborative action research: what characteristics

We found several characteristics of the developmental process of teacher as researcher through collaborative action research.

It is professional learning community based

Professional learning communities are grounded in such assumptions that knowledge is situated in teachers’ day-to-day lived experiences and best understood through critical reflection with people of similar experiences (Vescio et al., 2008). All the participants reported the importance of the professional learning community mainly made up of university teacher educators and school teachers, as Ms. Y said, “In action research program, I can feel I am not alone and we are all moving forward together.” The learning community provides teachers with the platform for development, an opportunity for sharing, and support to move forward, as illustrated from Ms. Q’s response in Extract 8. The non-existence of such a community actually leads to failures in independent and supportive action research (cf. Christenson et al’s 2002; Niu, 2006). Doing research is not one of teachers’ strong

suit and when they feel diffident, not being left alone and having someone to talk to, is essential for teacher's development, and probably in any one's process of entering a new field and embodying a new identity. It is consistent with what Firkins & Wong (2005) found that teachers view collaboration with professional researchers as a positive way for teachers to be apprenticed into the research process.

Extract 8 (Ms. Q, from interview)

"I thought about giving up several times, you know, something really terrible happened in my family and I was desperate. But my mentor encouraged me and I thought I could not just leave in this way. I am now very grateful."

It is teacher needs driven

All of the teachers agreed on the necessity of teacher research to promote teacher development and to improve classroom teaching. Teacher development is regarded as the first educational issue for teachers to do research Borg (2009). Teacher research is advocated as an important means for teacher development by teacher educators (cf. Fu, 2007; Liu 2002), and this study shows that it is necessary for teachers themselves to accept this concept and take it into serious consideration. Only after they accomplish any sort of research will they actually truly believe in the concept of doing research for teacher development. They all came voluntarily and were eager to learn and develop. In other words, they want to bother with professional development (Baily, Curtis & Nunan, 2004). When teachers do not have the intrinsic aspiration to do better with their job, it would be very hard to move them along a three-year journey of action research. In our experiences of cooperating with teachers in previous action research projects, a few teachers would certainly quit a program if they were "forced" to come and they did not realize its benefit at some point. Ms. Q was a novice teacher and found it necessary to learn, and collaborative action research is beneficial for beginning teachers like her (Mitchell et al., 2009). Another teacher, Ms. Y had the "burnout" and needed fresh stimulants in her career. The other three teachers also felt the need for development, which helped them overcome all kinds of difficulties and reached the destination of the research journey.

It is practice-oriented

Teachers' main concerns are teaching efficiency and student learning. Doing research is one way of solving problems and improving practice. When they engage in research, it has to be connected with their practice (Whitehead and Mc Niff, 2006). Purely theoretical

endeavors are not regarded as their missions and they are not genuinely interested. The research topics listed in Table 1 shows that their research is what they are doing in classrooms simultaneously. They start with concerns in their practice and searched for ways to analyze those problems and improve them.

It is participatory

Teachers must be allowed the opportunity to experience the whole process of doing research. The research topics, action plans have to come from and are created for their own teaching situations. Their active participation is essential for the success of conducting research. The data analysis suggests that the most effective form of participation is group discussion, as three participants reported in the interviews. Ms. Q mentioned previously in Extract 7 that she was inspired by group discussions as if she got "sunlight". Two teachers said that group discussions were helpful because they shared experiences in groups. They said they received very specific suggestions from mentors in group discussions, and they "understood educational realities" from such discussions. Lectures were reported to be helpful by two participants, because lectures offer research procedures and methods, which were most lacking initially. This confirms Kwakman's (2003) finding that teachers participate most in professional activities as reading, sharing ideas with colleagues, or improving lessons.

It is a reflective process

Being reflective is regarded as a prerequisite in any type of teacher research, and collaborative action research is no exception. The teachers all wrote reflections in and on their actions. As Ms. C responded in the interview to the question of what they gained from the research: "The process of research is in fact a very good process for reflection, and in this process you find out you know something and don't know many other things, and you little by little, you got to know more at difference cognitive levels, and you learn more and more things."

It needs scaffolding

Student learning needs scaffolding, and it is true with teacher development. It is found that the most effective form of scaffolding in the collaborative action research is mentoring. All the teachers reported that one-to-one mentoring is most helpful. Mentoring is "an inter-personal, ongoing, situated, supportive, and informative professional relationship between two or more individuals, one of whom (often the mentor) has more experience in the profession, craft or skill in question"

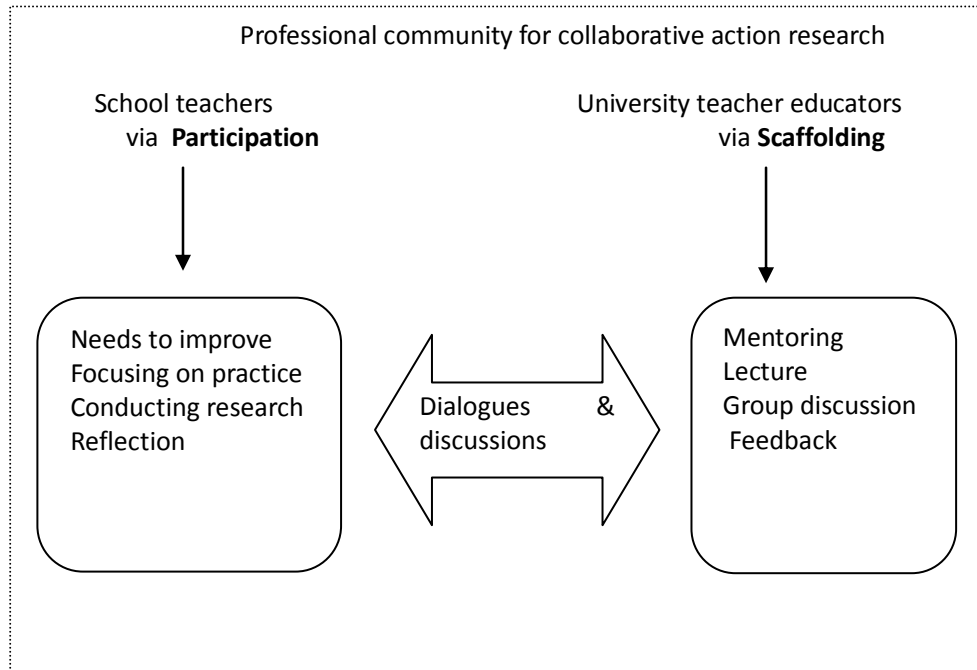


Figure 1. Synthetic characteristics of teacher development via collaborative action research

(Baily, Curtis and Nunan, 2004, p. 207). In this project, mentoring offers the teachers individualized guidance and support in conducting the research. For example, they all expressed gratitude for the detailed feedback they received from the mentors on their initial problem identification and revision, action plans, proposals, data collection and analysis, or research reports at various phases. Both Ms. X and Ms. L wrote in their reflections the details of how they got help from mentors on analyzing quantitative and qualitative data they had collected. Ms. Y described how the mentors helped her question herself and find evidence. On the other hand, mentors also encouraged and pushed them to move forward. As in Extract 7, Ms. Q, the only teacher who had a master degree and trained in psychology, had to “leave behind” her training in psychological research methodology and “re-learn” the paradigm of action research. The turn was hard for her, especially as a young novice teacher of primary pupils. But she did not give up the research endeavor, due to her own hard work and help from the mentors.

Extract 7 (Ms. Q, from her reflection)

There was two times when I struggled and my work nearly stuck at these two points. What helped me to continue was my persistence in the cause of education. More importantly, it was because I had support and encouragement from the research team of X University. The first time was at the point of identifying problems. I

was probably too young and had to let go what I had had and needed to find problems through self-negation. Apart from the face issue, I was overwhelmed by all sorts of problems when I first became a teacher and did not know where to start. Then, our mentors sat by my side and walked me through this stage by reviewing all the problems I encountered. And I was led to the core problem. Even the discussions and inspirations among other teachers in our research team “shed rays of sunlight” on me in the difficult early stage. The second time was...

The relations of these characteristics can be illustrated by Figure 1.

Factors affecting teacher becoming researchers

The characteristics contain facilitating factors for teachers to become researchers through collaborative action research. At the same time we found several contextual and personal factors that impede teachers becoming researchers. Contextual factors include socio-cultural, institutional and inter-personal factors (Gu, 2009). Personal factors consist of personality, motivational and cognitive factors.

There are several contextual factors that buffer teachers’ engagement in their research. Heavy workload is a factor reported by all the teachers for affecting research. All of them had to teach about 12 to 15 hours weekly and they have other duties as the head teacher or English faculty coordinator. As Ms. L said, “I get too much

work to do at school. I do not have sufficient time and energy sometimes". Every day they are also faced with endless homework and test sheets to grade as mandated by the school. Other extra-teaching duties also take up a large amount of time. Time is the first condition for doing research (Borg, 2006). However, all the participants managed to find time for their action research. Other factors include: lack of resources, inconvenience in class arrangement to attend lectures or workshops, and limited time for action research activities.

Personal factors that were reported to affect teachers' progress in the action research mainly include difficulty in following up with the research. Four of them felt they sometimes could not catch up with other teachers. Ms. C often explained for her delay at some points, "I am kind of slow, you know, like when I tried to choose the research topic, I got too many ideas and it took me a longer time to narrow down. It is a drag." Three of them said they were passive, despite the urge and support from mentors. Ms. Y told us, "We meet once a month, so I find my research passion and perseverance often declines as time goes by. I will postpone my research and choose to do something else." Family burdens were reported by two teachers. One teacher experienced health problems, which were serious barriers for some time.

Those factors may exist in all kinds of development situations. Teachers' strong will to succeed plus external support in empowering professional communities will help them overcome such obstacles along the rocky journey of becoming teacher-researchers and embrace a nice identity at its destination.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to find out whether collaborative action research can promote EFL school teachers' development as researchers, and in what aspects it helps teachers develop as researchers and what are the most helpful forms of collaboration. The findings suggest that university-school collaborative action research can promote teachers as researchers. It meets all the essential conditions listed by Borg (2006) by empowering teachers with knowledge, research skill through mentoring and community and the potential for dissemination. Their cognition of research was also transformed.

Teachers reflect in action and on action often at school. But the appropriateness of it is worth questioning. Teacher reflection is often based on subjective or so-called objective judgment without data support. Action research promotes teachers' objective reflection on reflection or action with scientific inquiry into the classroom practice. Action based on objective reflection is prerequisite to improving classroom teaching, plus

better understanding of their students and wider educational realities. The most beneficial forms of collaboration for teachers turned out to be mentoring, group discussion and then lectures. Theoretical knowledge, research skills and affective support are what teachers need most.

Both contextual and personal factors influence teachers' process of becoming teachers. When they have the internal yearnings to improve themselves, considering research as an important pathway for development, they can overcome various difficulties on the road to becoming researchers. The external professional community made up of guiding mentors and peers can safeguard failures. Personal factors may impede their development, but those barriers can turn out to be the force that makes them stronger once they are conquered.

This study has implications for future collaborative action research programs:

(1) University teacher educators need to keep the balance between top-down lecturing and bottom-up learning. The participating teachers found half of the lectures meaningless. It does not mean the lectures were inappropriate. It is just that they were not offered at the appropriate time. Group-based and individual-based help, probably more costly, has better and more ever-lasting effects.

(2) The balance between mentoring and self-learning need to be maintained in such collaboration. To give a fish or to teach how to fish? This is a question that constantly comes to the teacher educators' mind. Pointing out problems in their teaching, making action plan packages, or handling the data for them would have saved much more trouble, but would instead leave them still hopeless with such tasks next time, and thus deprive them of the opportunities to learn through practicing such tasks. Without those essential skills, they would never have the confidence as a researcher.

(3) We need to keep the balance between academic standards and teachers' competence as researchers. We often need to ask questions like: What is the ultimate objective of action research, to publish academic paper or to improve classroom teaching? And how can we possibly combine the two? Publishing in academic journals would always be regarded as a symbol for being a researcher. Then, all the "doings" in these research phases would help with the "being" of a researcher.

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