



Language teachers' beliefs about research: A comparative study of English teachers from two tertiary education institutions in China



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ABSTRACT

Teachers' beliefs about research are critical to their research engagement. This study investigated Chinese English language teachers' beliefs about what counts as research and what value research has. Interviews were conducted with 12 English teachers from two Chinese tertiary education institutions. Thematic analysis revealed that their beliefs about what counts as research ranged from book/dictionary compilation and translation, through literature synthesis and teaching reflections, to principled inquiry. The value of research for them was representative of a continuum ranging from meeting institutional research requirements, benefiting teaching, to professionalism and satisfying psychological needs. The teachers from the two institutions displayed differences in their beliefs about research. These differences were attributed to the dissimilarities in their personal research experience, the institutional culture, and the manageability of research. The findings provide pertinent implications for tertiary education institutions and language departments as well as for language teachers to become more research-engaged.

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1. Introduction

Language teachers' research engagement has been a topical issue over the past 20 years. Researchers in the field of second/foreign language teaching have not only advanced theoretical discussions about the needs, benefits, problems and possible solutions of language teachers' engagement in research (e.g., [Allwright, 1997](#); [Borg, 2003](#); [Xia, 2009](#)), but also published research methodology books to guide language teachers to conduct research (e.g., [McDonough & McDonough, 1997](#); [Mackey & Gass, 2005](#)). However, whether language teachers identify with the forms of research and the many-faceted benefits/value proposed by the leaders in the field is an interesting topic to examine.

China is referred to as "a powerhouse in terms of English language teaching" ([Braine, 2005](#), p. xvii) with its largest number of English language learners in the world ([Wei & Su, 2012](#)). Such a significant amount of government and individual investment makes the success or failure of English language teaching crucial. Against such a backdrop, as well as the inclusion of researching and publishing as part of the role performance of English language teachers in Chinese tertiary education ([Xu, 2014](#)) and the introduction of the academic journal ranking system at the beginning of the century, English teachers' research engagement in China seems particularly pertinent. However, their research outputs, research engagement, and

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research motivation were apparently unsatisfactory (e.g., Bai & Hudson, 2010; Bai, Hudson, & Millwater, 2013; Borg & Liu, 2013; Xu, 2014).

Beliefs about research underlie research performance and motivation for research, and teachers could be reluctant to research and publish if they perceive no value in research (Bai, Millwater, & Hudson, 2012; Chen, Gupta, & Hoshower, 2006; Huang, 2006). The reported lack of research engagement, motivation and productivity among English teachers in China, therefore, necessitates an in-depth examination of the beliefs they hold about research. However, few studies have attempted to understand English teachers' beliefs about research from their own perspective and even less have focused on cross-institution comparison. This study intended to fill this research gap by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are Chinese English teachers' beliefs about what counts as research?
2. What are Chinese English teachers' beliefs about the value of research?
3. How do the research beliefs held by the English teachers from two Chinese institutions differ?

2. Literature review

2.1. Beliefs, motivation and performance

It is widely accepted that beliefs hold a central position in human attitudes and actions (Bem, 1970; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Belief refers to the perceived relation between an object and its attributes (Bem, 1970; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). People all hold many beliefs about many objects. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) distinguish between descriptive and inferential beliefs, with the former identical to primitive beliefs deriving from one's experience. Inferential beliefs, however, transcend direct observations. They come from two sources: previous learned relationship, or logical reasoning. Fishbein and Ajzen also identify external authorities as a source of beliefs, which include news media, publications, and people. They put them under the name of informational beliefs.

Vroom (1995) links people's beliefs with job motivation in his Expectancy Theory. According to Vroom, beliefs are the underlying elements of motivation, which is in turn central to the explanation about our choices. Vroom holds that a person's force to perform an act i is the function of the valence of an outcome j and the expectancy that act i will be followed by that outcome. That is, if a person views positive valence in a particular outcome from an effective performance and believes that the effective performance determines the attainment of the outcome, they will view the effective performance positively. The person's level of effort will be predicted by the level of performance that they would like to achieve, assuming that they believe that more effort produces higher level of performance.

Therefore, motivation for conducting research can be predicted by the measure of a teacher' perceived importance of the outcomes associated with being research productive multiplied by the measure of the subjective probability that high performance level of research will be followed by good outcomes (Chen et al., 2006). In other words, teachers' beliefs about the value of research are paramount in determining their motivation for conducting research. The more value a teacher attaches to the outcomes from conducting research, the more motivated they become towards research.

Beliefs are not only the essential element for an individual, but central to the definition of organizational culture (Williams, Dobson, & Walters, 1993). Shared beliefs, values and attitudes in an organization constitute a strong institutional culture. The change of the organizational culture from teaching to research, for instance, depends to a large extent on the change of the whole set of beliefs of the staff in the organization (Pratt, Margaritis, & Coy, 1999). Conversely, institutional culture also has impacts on individual beliefs (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). Teachers' beliefs, values, and thinking are not only the products of individual cognition, but also strongly influenced by the social context that teachers interact in (Stein & Brown, 1997). A tertiary institution, with its missions, blue prints, and incentives put in place, makes clear to its staff the priorities and aspirations of the institution. Individual teachers who are able to adjust their activities according to what the institution encourages get rewarded (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Institutional culture can also form peer pressure so that any deviation from it can be frowned upon or discouraged (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). In order to foster a research culture among language teachers and facilitate a smooth transition from a teaching culture into a research one within language faculties, it is necessary to identify individual language teachers' beliefs about research first.

2.2. Language teachers' beliefs about research

Compared with considerable rhetoric in language education literature calling on teachers to conduct research for the benefits of solving classroom problems, rendering classroom changes, and theorising one's practice (e.g., Borg, 2003; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; Shu, 2002; Xia, 2009), only a few isolated studies have examined language teachers' beliefs about research empirically (Bai et al., 2012; Borg & Liu, 2013; Borg, 2007, 2009). These studies found that English educators usually hold a "standard" view of scientific research (Borg, 2007, p.743); that is, research, to them, is quantitative in nature, involving questionnaire surveys and statistical analysis. In addition, they feel uncertain about the benefits that research can bring onto their continuing development as English educators. Language teachers in China are no exceptions in their conceptions about research. They share similar beliefs about the value of research as their colleagues in other English

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