

EFL Preservice Teachers' Motivations towards Research as a Tool for Their Professional Development - A Case Study in Vietnam

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Abstract: *This paper examines EFL preservice teachers' motivations towards research as well as their motivational changes during this process of implementing a study. The research was conducted at a University of Foreign Language Studies in Vietnam and involved five EFL preservice teachers from Faculty of Foreign Language Education during their teaching practicum. The data collected from narrative inquiry indicated that the preservice teachers' research motivations were impacted by the congruence and discrepancy between their different self-concepts suggested by Higgins (1987) and how they formed and affected their research engagement in their particular contexts. The implications of these findings are also discussed.*

Key words: *EFL preservice teachers, motivation, self-concepts.*

I. Introduction

Teachers have been regarded as professionals who are claimed to be trained as reflective pragmatists, who have the ability to link instructional applications to research, and who can cascade knowledge to other teachers through the publications concerning their own teaching (Koutselini, 2008; Rock & Levin, 2002; Rosiek & Atkinson, 2005). As Churcher (2007) maintained, teachers have responsibility to take part in studies related to their professional development and a number of factors played a significant part in the development of the idea of a researcher-teacher (Rock, & Levin, 2002).

A review of the literature on the topic of teacher research has demonstrated that this activity is considered as a systematic process motivated by a need to carry out a study aiming to deal with a problem or investigate into a particular issue and requires cooperation with different stakeholders (Rogers, 2004). The reasons for teachers implementing research or taking part in on-going projects can be varied including enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, keeping updated with new trends in the field and evaluating their own teaching performance (Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004). Regardless of the great benefits of research activity for teachers, it has been not as popular as expected in a number of schools of different levels in Vietnam, particularly in higher education (Canh, 2018). According to him, the research activities at university level have been implemented in a scattered manner and thus have made unremarkable contributions to the enhancement of educational quality and socio-economic development. In particular, a number of lecturers spend more time and devote more effort into teaching than doing research. Moreover, the quality of their studies is quite low and its social implication is rather limited (Nga, 2011).

This paper aims to yield insights into the motivation for doing research of teachers, particular EFL preservice teachers at a university in Vietnam, which can help to have. To achieve this aim, the researcher attempted to identify significant factors affecting EFL preservice teachers' motivation for research and discuss their motivational changes.

II. Literature Review

A recent review of the literature on the topic of teachers and professional development found that the critical thinking of teachers on their teaching practices plays a greater role in their career development compared with workshops or seminars in the field (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Nowlan, 2001). This can be due to the fact that teachers who are eagerly involved in the research activity are more active and committed in their professional development (Smith & Sela, 2005) and thus, derive greater satisfaction in their career (Valli, 2000).

The benefits of being a research-teacher can be varied, particularly for their professional development and reflective thinking about their own practices (Johnson, 1993; Liston, & Zeichner, 1990; Nowlan, 2001; Ponte et al., 2004). Moreover, a research-teacher can help promote a research-based school culture and cement the relationship among teaching staff in a school (Gu & Wang, 2006; Johnson, 1993). The research activity can also enable a teacher to bridge the gap between a researcher and practitioner and put theories into application (Ersoy & Cengelci, 2006). Furthermore, they can have a chance to revise the current programs and evaluate different theories (Johnson, 1993) as well as being a change agent in the educational field.

However, the research practice among teachers is known to meet with a number of challenges. Some common obstacles can be easily drawn from a growing body of literature including teachers' lack of knowledge and time for conducting research (Hopkins, 2002; Smith, & Sela, 2005; Shkedi, 1998; Yalaza-Atay, 2003). Inadequate support and guidance from their educational institutions as well as restrictions imposed by the school administrators are some of the other obstacles faced by teachers during the process of conducting research (Ersoy & Cengelci, 2006; Yalaza-Atay, 2003).

Therefore, it is of great importance to encourage action research in teacher education programs at higher institutional level. Numerous studies have indicated that the training of research methodology should be provided in education programs for preservice teachers so as to enable them to become researcher-teachers and critical thinkers for their professional development (Beisser, 2000; Çepni, Küçük, & Gökdere, 2002; Johnson, 1993; Liston, & Zeichner, 1990; Peker, 2006; Price, 2001; Shi, 2006; Tom, 1985; Valli, 2000). This is due to the fact that candidate teachers can reap multiple benefits from active participation in the research activity. According to Rock and Levin (2002), preservice teachers have a chance to enhance their critical thinking, reflection, questioning as well as problem solving skills throughout the process of implementing research. Moreover, conducting research can help them develop strategies related to their own teaching practice and thus, prepare them better for their careers and the role of being a teacher. When engaging themselves in such activity, preservice teachers are able to obtain considerable experience in doing research including challenges involving this process and obstacles a research-teacher has to cope with.

Therefore, there has been a vast amount of literature on the topic of pre-service teachers' conducting research over the last 20 years (Ersoy & Cengelci, 2006; Chant; Christenson et al., 2002; Gitlin et al., 1999; Price, 2001; Rock, & Levin, 2002; Smith, & Sela, 2005). Previous work has only focused on the attitudes and perceptions of candidate teachers on research, their perceptions of research courses provided in teacher education programs as well as their experiences during the research process. Nevertheless, these studies might fail to adequately address the issue of what motivates preservice teachers to participate in classroom research, hence, this present research aims to examine three EFL preservice teachers' motivation to conduct action research at a university in Vietnam. This piece of work hopes to contribute to the literature about language teacher's research motivations and their changes in their concepts as well as factors affecting them during their implementation. Two questions need to be addressed for the current study:

- 1/ What were some sources of motivation of EFL preservice teachers to conduct action research?
- 2/ How did their motivation change during the process of implementing action research?

Talking about motivations, as Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) maintain, motivations can not only determine the reasons for teachers' activities but also can decide their commitment to the activities' sustainability as well as their efforts to pursue them. Similarly, according to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011), motivation refers to "what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action" (p. 3). Meanwhile, as a cognitive-affective construct, this term is closely associated with a person's concept, that is, the way they view themselves. For the current study, we are going to focus on EFL contexts, particularly, teachers in Vietnam who are currently encouraged by the MOET as well as school leaders to participate in research.

Another framework employed in the current study is the self-discrepancy theory suggested by Higgins (1987)

which focused on three basic domains of the self including (a) the *actual* self representing the attributes a person is believed to actually possess; (b) the *ideal* self referring to the attributes a person would ideally like to have (such as wishes, hopes or aspirations) and the *ought* self indicating the attributes a person is expected to possess (such as obligations or responsibilities). According to Higgins (1987), the compatibility between these three domains of self can improve and boost motivations, the inconsistency or self-discrepancies between them may result in adverse impacts on motivations. Nevertheless, as Gao and Xu (2014) claimed, it is possible for a particular person to overcome these conflicts between the selves and regain their motivations if he/she learns how to make use of self-regulatory strategies or take advantage of the support from other stakeholders.

In addition to these domains of self, there are other selves which have been described in the possible self theory by Markus and Nurius (1986). The theory indicates what an individual believes as potentially possible in relation to himself or herself. In other words, possible selves may stem from what happened in the past but have imagined visions in the future (Erikson, 2007). Based on the theory, two types of selves have been suggested: (a) *hoped-for* selves representing what an individual would like to or anticipate to possess: and *fear-selves* referring to the attributes that an individual would like to avoid and consider them threatening, which may have potential influences on his or her motivations and actions. In fact, despite the fact that previous studies employed the possible selves framework in the field of teacher development and teacher identity (Hamman et al., 2010), very few efforts have been devoted to exploring how this theory may relate to teachers' motivation.

III. Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a University of Foreign Language Studies in Vietnam and involved three EFL preservice teacher from Faculty of Foreign Language Education during their teaching practicum. Since they were in the final year of their training program, they were all required to do their teaching practicum under the supervision of an in-service teacher at different primary and secondary schools in the city. During this period of time, they were encouraged to implement action research with the students they taught.

This current piece of work adopts a qualitative case-study approach by exploring three EFL teachers' motivations towards research. The participants were selected through convenience sampling, one of them was doing their practicum at a primary school, the other two at an upper secondary school.

With the purpose of obtaining profound insight into PSTs' process of doing action research from which factors affecting their motivation and demotivation into this activity were identified, a case study, a category of qualitative research was selected as the basis for my study. In fact, the case study has been known to be a widely-used approach to address teacher-related issues, for instance, in teacher development and identity (Bullough, 1991; He & Cooper, 2011), teacher retention and teacher resilience (Howard & Johnson, 2004). With the intention of acquiring a thorough understanding of the issue, I opted for narrative inquiry as the major methodological approach. The data were transcribed and analyzed by the first researcher through a qualitative inductive process. Throughout the period from the beginning to the end of the research implementation including their motivational changes, different themes were identified and then were further examined based on the possible selves theory and the self-discrepancy theory.

IV. Research Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed how the three EFL preservice teachers' motivations towards research altered by the compatibility and discrepancy among their different selves (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nutrius, 1986).

At the beginning of the research, the student teachers were quite motivated to carry on action research since they were trained to recognize the values, the benefits of action research in solving their problems related to their teaching and obtain their ideal selves which were "facilitators of their students' learning" / "an interesting and effective teacher". All of these gave them impetus to take part in action research in order to enhance their teaching performance.

This is in agreement with the ought selves that the participants felt the need to live up to, I mean the external expectations, the requirements and great encouragement from the Faculty, and from the management boards of the university to train them to become teacher researcher in the future. At this stage, the harmony between the ideal and ought teacher selves enhanced their motivations to participate in action research (Higgins, 1987).

"We are totally aware that it is our responsibility to do research and this has been part of the faculty and the university policy to promote this activity over the years. Therefore, we can receive a lot of support from them and innovative ideas in our fields are always appreciated". However, although the preservice teachers were

aware of the benefits of doing action research, they were also worried about their lack of research knowledge and skills which might become an obstacle for them during the process. For some of them, that could be the first time they conducted research. Therefore, they witnessed a contradiction between their actual selves (a preservice teachers with limited knowledge and experience in research) and their ideal / ought self. Such conflict had an adverse effect on their research motivations.

"I am not so sure about several steps in conducting research. I am wondering whether I can find out anything from my study. I am feeling so nervous."

"What can I do now with this whole bunch of data? How daunting!"

"Dealing with the data can be daunting to me".

Nevertheless, the fact that the Faculty proposed the idea of collaborative action research, meaning that those who did their teaching practicum at the same school could cooperate to implement the research really made them feel relieved. In addition, the Board of Deans said that they would always receive support from the inservice teachers at the Faculty anytime they need during the process of action research, which enabled them overcome their psychological barriers and became more ready for the research.

V. Motivational Changes During the Research

During the process of implementing the research, the preservice teachers experienced certain ups and downs due to contextual factors influencing their self-concepts (Markus & Nurius). One of them is rigid school curriculum leading to the discrepancy between their different selves. Students' attitudes and supervisors' feedback can be another significant factor in shaping teachers' motivations (sometimes they felt doubtful about their teaching innovations whether it was effective and interesting for their learners, creating a feared teaching self (a teacher failed to meet students' expectations / supervisor's requirements) as opposed to her ideal self. Last but not least, lack of confidence in their research knowledge and skills, together with these contextual factors mentioned above resulted in a decline in their motivation levels towards their research.

Nevertheless, at this stage, thanks to their cooperation with other preservice teachers and the Faculty lecturers, the participants could deal with challenges, could solve the classroom problems, which helped reinforced their beliefs in the potentials of action research and of course, brought them close to their ideal selves (a facilitator of students' learning / an effective teacher) and their ought selves (teacher researcher advocated by the educational reform and school leaders). All of these factors helped heightened their motivations towards the research activity.

Finally, the preservice teachers' improvement in research competence and motivations in turn helped them develop new possible selves (a more competent and strategic preservice teacher / reflective teacher) casting light on their upcoming professional practice and development.

Implications & Conclusions

The current study focused on preservice teachers' research motivations and how the participants encountered a variety of personal as well as contextual challenges and sought their support from the university lecturers and their peers.

The research yields profound insight into preservice teachers' research motivations impacted by the congruence and discrepancy between their different self-concepts (i.e. the actual self, the ideal self, the ought self and the feared self) and how they formed and affected their research engagement in their particular teaching contexts.

Several implications can arise from the research findings. In EFL contexts, preservice teachers might lack research experiences and knowledge so external stimuli and assistance from the Faculty, the school leaders might be very essential to offer them opportunities and incentives for teachers to do action research. It is also useful to encourage them to engage in collaboration with their peers as well as other research activities / consultations, which can help develop their research knowledge and skills, reflect on their difficulties they may have to cope with and shape a positive self-concept with stronger motivations towards classroom research. By doing that, not only can student teachers receive needed guidance and support but they can also develop a sense of autonomy in their action research to sustain their long-term research motivations and efforts as well as maximize the benefits of classroom research for their professional development.

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