The Role of Engagement in Research in Enhancing the Professional Development of English Language Teachers in Universities

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Abstract

Research engagement among educators is important for professional growth and improving teaching quality in higher education. This study investigates the role of engagement in research in enhancing the professional development of English language teachers at four state universities in Sri Lanka. Since this area is not explored much in South Asia, it is of great importance. Identifying the role of educators as teachers and scholars, the research observes how institutional, personal, and systemic factors shape their engagement. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers and structured surveys from 82 participants to examine motivations and difficulties. Hence, three themes were identified: Motivation for Professional Advancement, Institutional Support, and Personal Interest. Career advancement was a significant component, and educators believe that research is essential for credibility and promotions. Additionally, intrinsic motivators such as managing pedagogical concerns and intellectual curiosity were identified as important. However, participation was hindered by obstacles like a lack of resources, time limits, and severe workloads. Negative early research experiences and a lack of mentorship, particularly for early-career researchers, further affected confidence. Institutional assistance differed; while some reported having access to grants and workshops, others experienced confusing policies and minimal encouragement. The study emphasizes the necessity of quality research time, improvement of resources, and mentorship initiatives. A culture that is focused on research can be promoted by consistent institutional frameworks and encouraging national policies. These findings offer practical suggestions for enhancing research participation, which can help educators, institutional leaders, and officials who want to promote educational contributions in Sri Lanka and similar backgrounds.

Keywords: English Language Teachers, Higher Education, Motivators and Barriers, Professional Development, Research Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Research is widely acknowledged as a prominent aspect of the professional development of academics (Belcher, 1994). Research and academics are interconnected, and engaging in research helps enhance intellectual curiosity, motivates curriculum innovation, and supports the rigorous improvement of teaching techniques. Consequently, this contributes to the gradual enhancement of academic excellence, increases awareness of the new developments in their field, and thereby introduces more creative teaching methods, immensely contributing to educational development and enhancing knowledge. Furthermore, teachers of any other areas, similar to English Language teaching (ELT), are expected to contribute to academic research to help them enhance the knowledge that already exists. Research engagement helps to increase the quality of research work by enhancing a culture of evidence-based pedagogy. In addition, teaching that is connected to research helps to provide a deep learning experience through connecting theoretical applications and real-world scenarios. However, connecting research with teaching could be challenging as research funds, time, and support are scarce. Hence, these restrictions demotivate teachers to involve themselves in research, which emphasises the value of support and regulations that motivate an academic environment that values research.

Research is considered the most important part in the second language context (Borg, 2009), and it is supposed to advance the professional development (Belcher, 1994). It was identified by Kiely and Davis (2010) that instructors and doctoral students who are teaching and studying a second language in the academic setting are expected to engage more in research work compared to second language teachers who teach in non-academic institutes. As Bai and Millwater (2011) mention, developing research is a significant approach in the higher education sector. As such, in order to enhance the quality of teaching and strengthen the learning outcomes of students, it is mandatory to minimise the gap between researchers and educators in the

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education sector. Furthermore, as Allison and Carey (2007) mention, the theories developed by the researchers in the higher education sector encourage teachers to teach more appropriately.

The most significant and practical approach to bridging the gap between educational theory and practice is when teachers decide to engage themselves in research. As mentioned by Borg (2013), teachers who engage in research are involved in a critical role in familiarising themselves with a classroom environment, which improves the significance and value of academic research. In addition, the literature on professional development emphasises that engaging in research helps teachers to evaluate teaching methods, adapt to new movements, and participate in discussions regarding policy and regulations. Even with these advantages, there are crucial differences in teacher engagement in research that can be attributed to various institutional, fundamental, and individual reasons.

Research influences the educational practices in a significant manner, and it helps to uplift the educational practices. Since 1970, a noticeable difference has been seen between researchers and other academics engaged in the education sector (Hargreaves, 1996; McIntyre, 2005). Thus, an absence of efficient communication channels between these two groups has hindered the development and implementation of evidence-based teaching methodologies. According to Hargreaves (1996), adopting evidence-based research practices holds the potential to enhance the effectiveness and success of teaching.

It is observed that research involvement in many developing countries, such as Sri Lanka, offers special opportunities and challenges. The English language is considered one of the key factors to move forward in academics, contribute to economic development, and international communication. Therefore, English language teachers are crucial in providing students with the essentials to face society confidently. However, engaging in research is still not in the highest place among these teachers, as they frequently face challenges such as funding, immense workload, and inadequate support from their relevant institutions.

According to Gunawardana and Karunarathna (2017), who carried out research at a Sri Lankan state university on experienced ELT professionals, it was revealed that several teachers were unaware of research on ELT. These teachers did not have any idea about research until they completed research as part of their degree programme. Although most of the teachers at first denied the contribution of research in developing their skills as teachers, after completing their research, they realised how research could help them to improve their professional and academic skills, exposing them to novel ideas as teachers. This example itself shows the teachers' ignorance about research studies.

The research problem for the study emerged from a pilot study conducted by the researcher with the English language teachers in state universities and the researcher's experimental knowledge. According to the results revealed from the study, it was identified that there is a gap between the research published in English language teaching when compared to other academic fields such as social sciences,

engineering, medicine, computing, and management. The results identified that several factors, such as time constraints, limited access to research funding and resources, and minimal support from the institutes. According to Altbach and Salmi (2011), this limited access can affect academics from keeping them away from the new developments in their particular discipline. However, this is a common factor which is observed in most of the developing countries. These restrictions limit teachers' ability to provide knowledge to the field and impede their professional development as well. The least resources restrict academics from staying updated with the new trends in the field. In addition, issues of proper mentorship also make the beginners of the academic career isolated. As mentioned by Ylijoki and Ursin (2013), a lack of proper mentorship also makes the academics who have just started feel isolated. Therefore, it is hard to improve their skills required for sustained research engagement.

These facts emphasise the need to identify how English language teachers engage with research, and how the engagement with research influences the professional development, and also impacts successful teaching. This situation enhances the need to develop some approaches that strengthen a strong research culture and build a healthy research environment, and uplift the professional development of English language teachers in state universities.

Despite the obstacles, several intrinsic and extrinsic causes continue to inspire many Sri Lankan educators to pursue research. The pursuit of knowledge and the desire for intellectual development are inherently strong motivators. Research gives teachers the chance to investigate novel concepts, question assumptions, and progress in their field. Many find that the inquiry process itself is incredibly fulfilling, leading to a sense of both personal and professional contentment.

Additionally, extrinsic motivators are important, especially when it comes to job advancement. In order to excel in an academic career, it is mandatory to have publications in indexed journals, as research is considered a major part in the academic context. Therefore, despite the obstacles faced when conducting research, most educators engage in research work to advance to higher positions.

Furthermore, the support extended through the institute has an impact on the ultimate research output as well. Most institutes consider arranging procedures and regulations that benefit the academic excellence of the teachers. These include organising workshops, encouraging study leave, and arranging flexible lecture hours. These steps promote a comfortable working environment for educators by minimising difficulties. Hence, institutional support is crucial in the Sri Lankan context.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of engagement in research in enhancing the professional development of English language teachers in Sri Lankan state universities. Since research is considered a main factor for academic growth, the study tries to identify what factors motivate and encourage teachers to conduct research, barriers to healthy research participation, focusing on

institutional, systemic, and individual difficulties. Furthermore, the study examines how institutions either help or hinder research involvement in the university context.

The study helps to minimise the gap that existed in the literature review by analysing the experiences of research engagement of English language teachers in developing countries. Although these concerns are in discussion in other countries, it is not being discussed deeply in the Sri Lankan context. The impact of these results may influence educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers. The study helps to understand the factors that help to improve the involvement in research, and thereby face challenges more capably. The results of the study will motivate the higher management to be more supportive and encourage research as an essential academic component. The study emphasises the need for national support to address the problems and provide culture-centred research in the higher education sector.

The study focuses on the significance of encouraging a research-oriented environment within the universities. Since the study emphasises the challenges and successes of English language teachers in research engagement, the findings of the study help to develop existing policies and implement new policies that help to establish a comfortable research environment for academics. The study can consider these results in designing mentorship programmes and research workshops in the university settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research is one of the key foundations for the development of knowledge in various fields such as Management, Science, and the Humanities (Borg, 2010). When focusing on the field of Education, research is not only considered as the basis for pedagogical invention, but also as a method to advance teaching practices and report classroom-related challenges (Burns, 2009). Several obstacles affect the research engagement in higher education. These include the issues in applying theoretical results to a real classroom setting (Borg, 2009), minimum access to resources, limited time duration, and insufficient institutional support (Lee & Boud, 2003; Brew & Boud, 1995). These obstacles may minimise the quality and the practical approach of educational research, as it is difficult to approach the professional reality of teaching (Kiley & Mullins, 2005).

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on two significant theories: the theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to the theory of Planned Behaviour, once behaviour is influenced by their "attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control." When considering the purpose of research engagement of university teachers, it is identified that their participation in research depends on their opinion on its value, the prospects of the institute, and their capability to engage in research within the limitations. According to the Self-Determination theory, which focuses on intrinsic motivation, it emphasises three psychological needs: "autonomy, competence, and relatedness". These three needs help to enhance motivation. It is identified that teachers are most interested in participating in research when they feel autonomous, competent, and experience

meaningful relationships with their colleagues. These two theories provide both motivational factors as well as factors that obstruct research engagement among English language teachers, which helps to examine this particular study in depth.

Challenges in Conducting Research

Research can be considered a key feature that helps in understanding diverse areas. Nonetheless, executing effective research presents various challenges. This part emphasises several main challenges encountered by researchers. Acknowledging these challenges can allow researchers to strive for more significant results that enhance knowledge and serve society.

Educators frequently struggle to implement research outcomes in their classrooms, since these studies might not cater to real-world requirements (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004). Moreover, certain educators question researchers' knowledge of the classroom setting. Lack of familiarity with technical terminology and an inadequate understanding of research methods and theories also obstruct the capacity to effectively use published research (Mackey, Polio, & McDonough, 2004). As a result, numerous educators avoid referencing these kinds of publications (Borg, 2010). Although the main aim of these studies is to enhance classroom learning and instructional methods, they frequently do not connect with teachers' urgent needs. Research can continue to impact educators by validating their beliefs and creating innovative teaching methods (Ellis, 1997).

Teachers have different reasons for participating in research activities. A study conducted by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012) in Saudi Arabia found that teacher educators were more likely to engage in reading and research, mainly for professional development and career progression. Moreover, insufficient time surfaced as a significant obstacle for educators. Nassaji (2012) observes that numerous studies do not align with teachers' concerns and difficulties.

When considering globally, English Language Teaching (ELT) Instructors encounter comparable challenges. Borg (2010) noted that insufficient time and restricted access to research resources were significant obstacles, although educators showed a willingness to participate in research to improve their professional abilities. Xu (2013) discovered that Chinese university EFL teachers faced challenges due to teaching overload, insufficient resources, and a shortage of mentorship. Nevertheless, these obstacles and involvement in research enable educators to encounter student learning challenges more efficiently, enhancing their teaching methods.

Certain educators consider research results to be of lower worth compared to hands-on experience (Medgyes, 2017). Sato and Loewen (2018) proposed that workshops facilitating direct communication with researchers might promote teacher involvement. Moreover, certain educators feel annoyed when researchers gather data but do not disclose study findings, fostering doubt regarding the worth of the research. Monetary limitations and limited access to research databases also present considerable difficulties (Borg, 2010).

TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) researchers mostly emphasise theoretical understanding, whereas TESOL teachers concentrate on practical implementation. Burton (1998) noted that a significant amount of research fails to challenge actual classroom problems, frequently relying on complex theories that are not easy to grasp promptly. Borg (2009) surveyed TESOL Instructors from 13 nations and discovered that time limitations, restricted access to resources, and less interest were obstacles to research involvement. Similarly, Tavakoli and Howard (2012) discovered that teachers in the UK prioritised the practical relevance of research.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which affected globally, further enhanced the challenges in engaging in research. A survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) discovered that 80% of participants revealed that engaging in research was obstructed as a result of travel restrictions and the termination of conferences.

There are some situations where research is not given proper recognition within the institution. Allison and Carey (2007) discovered that Canadian teachers felt discouraged from conducting research, as their primary role was perceived to be classroom teaching. Most individuals consider research as an outside responsibility. However, engaging in research and publishing it is challenging, despite the benefits.

In conclusion, teachers' involvement in research in the context of ELT encounters various challenges, such as uncertainties about the relevance, limited resources, and restrictions on time. Nevertheless, addressing these issues and enhancing the association between teachers and researchers may minimise the distance between theory and practice. An approach to combine research with practical requirements and encouragement through workshops and mentoring may enhance the involvement in research. Teachers can improve their professional development and methods of teaching, and assist their students better when these challenges are properly addressed.

The Contribution of Research to the Professional Development of Teachers

Professionalism is a necessary feature that establishes an individual's knowledge, skills, and commitment to ethical principles. According to Evans (2008), professionalism involves a sequence of actions and behaviours that resemble the ethics and values of one's profession. Professionalism impacts the aspects of the profession and signifies its reputation and purpose. As with any other profession, professionalism is important for teachers and students alike, permitting academics to elaborate learning prospects and encourage development. This opinion is encouraged by a common ethical context and involves the skills, knowledge, and approaches that enhance teaching and learning.

According to Gunawardana and Karunarathna (2017), professional development involves examining challenges, objectives, and remedies to enhance a teacher's abilities, knowledge, and expertise. When considering the global level, the significance of teacher professional development became more recognised in the early 21st century (Bates, Swennen, & Jones, 2011). Successful professional development involves mentoring, peer coaching, study groups, and fostering collaborative learning settings (Brownwell et al., 2006). These programmes assist teachers in improving their teaching techniques and making informed choices, ultimately aiding their development and responsibility as educators.

Research is often considered a fundamental element of professional growth (Lunenberg et al., 2014). According to Loughran (2014), teaching is a "research journey". He emphasises that active engagement in research provides proper insight into student learning and better teaching methods. However, most teachers do not engage in research due to a lack of motivation (Dimmock, 2016). Even though some participate in workshops and training, after some time, they again stick to traditional teaching techniques. In spite of these problems, professional development programmes provide better opportunities for those who aim to develop their careers and improve their knowledge.

The connection between research and teacher identity is important. Research enables teachers to analyse the teaching methods and then modify them accordingly, addressing the requirements of the students. This initiative promotes professional development and increases teacher identity (Goodnough, 2010).

As Borg (2014) mentions, engaging in research conferences provides opportunities for teachers to get a proper understanding, share ideas, and discover creative methods. Research conferences provide opportunities for teachers to talk about the issues in the classroom, discover new techniques, have discussions with other academics, and improve professional development. According to Rouf and Mohammed (2018), limitations in time, heavy workloads, and insufficient support from the institution limit the professional development of teachers.

As Dilkilitas and Yayli (2008) mention, action research provides a different path for professional development, which allows educators to identify problems, examine the methods, and work as a team to apply solutions. The participation in various research projects allows teachers to innovate, improve techniques, and build confidence in their professional skills. However, the absence of previous research experience and insufficient guidance may obstruct these endeavours.

The quality of teachers is closely linked to the standards of an education system (UNESCO, 2013). Excellent teachers motivate students, enhance their confidence, and cultivate a passion for learning. Research is essential for enhancing teacher quality by supplying evidence-based strategies and insights into successful instructional methods (Shulman, 1986). By incorporating research into their practices, educators improve their teaching methods and adjust to various student requirements.

In conclusion, research makes a significant contribution to expanding the professional development of educators by enhancing their understanding, improving their methods of teaching, and encouraging learning. Teachers can benefit in several ways while engaging themselves in research, such as

constructing professional capital, cooperating with colleagues, and adopting new methods. Encouraging research and professional development is significant for improving educational quality and obtaining positive outcomes for learners. Participating in research not only strengthens teachers but also enhances the entire educational environment, assuring enduring advantages for students and communities as well.

Teachers' Motivation to Engage in Research

Motivation is the energy that encourages individuals to engage in a particular action. According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011), motivation is not only considering the primary reasons for taking an action but also considering the continuous determination and extent of that effort. From an intellectual perspective, motivation is influenced by one's self-image (Dornyei, 2009). In the university setting, where opportunities are high, aspects like the work environment, opportunities for progress, professional development, and a motivating team culture stand as significant aspects in enhancing motivation.

Mehrani (2015) points out four primary factors that motivate teachers to participate in research. Pedagogical motivation encompasses addressing teaching difficulties, refining pedagogical approaches, and boosting meta-cognitive awareness to support both Instructors and students.

The expectations of administrators, co-workers, and students provide institutional motivation, which forces teachers to achieve institutional goals. Professional motivation supports expanding the excellence of education, strengthening professional development, and creating social connections within the academic community. Furthermore, instrumental motivation comprises exploring new developments, participating in academic conferences, and reaching personal goals, which ensures ongoing development and importance in the discipline.

Research engagement is a key factor for teachers' professional development. Teachers engage in research to develop their instructional practices, enhance professional connections, and improve efficiency in the classroom (Watkin, 2006; Everton, Galton, & Pell, 2000). Although most teachers engage in research while they were studying at the university, after some time, the engagement in research becomes a challenge for them. According to Mehrani (2015), most Iranian teachers who engaged in research as students limited their research practice when they started working. This disparity shows that research engagement may be influenced by institutional support and teaching responsibilities than previous exposure.

In China, school leaders and policymakers promote research engagement among language teachers (Gao & Chow, 2011). Nonetheless, obstacles like oversized classes, insufficient institutional backing, and a focus on examinations discourage educators (Borg, 2010). Yuan, Sun, and Teng (2016) discovered that although teachers initially perceive research as a means to address classroom challenges, many encounter difficulties due to insufficient knowledge and skills, highlighting larger obstacles to research involvement (Burns, 2009).

Aga (2016), who conducted a study in Ethiopia, stated that professional development activities such as attending conferences, receiving recognition, and promotions are the main motivators to engage in research. However, even with these motivators, teachers face numerous issues such as high workloads, curriculum limitations, time restrictions, and insufficient support from the institution. The work required for research frequently surpasses the expected advantages, causing some individuals to focus on other money-making endeavours. Institutional policies addressed that 25% of faculty time be dedicated to research, highlighting the significance of fostering a supportive research atmosphere.

The position of English language teaching (ELT) in academia also influences motivation. Compared to fields such as mathematics, ELT frequently does not receive as much societal acknowledgement (Leung, 2013). Furthermore, ELT specialists encounter obstacles like reduced salaries and restricted disciplinary association (Stanley, 2016; Borg, 2013).

In conclusion, motivation is crucial for academics to engage themselves in research. According to the existing literature, motivational factors such as pedagogical, institutional, professional, and instrumental motivation emphasise research engagement, whereas difficulties such as high workload and inadequate support obstruct it. However, engaging in conferences and chances for professional development activities serve as strong motivators; still, a separation between effort and benefits can cause teachers to minimise the importance of research. Grasping these elements is crucial for cultivating an atmosphere that promotes and motivates teachers' participation in research, thereby boosting their professional development and impact on education. However, according to the study, the research gap exists in understanding how English language teachers' motivation and their engagement in educational research are built by both internal factors, as described in Self Determination theory, and external influences as explained in the theory of Planned Behaviour, as in the context of Sri Lankan state universities. The study addresses this gap by identifying the relationship between motivation, institutional setting, and professional approach to understand the factors that affect English language teachers' participation in research. The study, therefore, contributes to theoretical and practical approaches to promote a research-oriented environment in the ELT contexts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This current study examines the perceptions, motivations, and challenges that urge research involvement among English language teachers. The study used a mixed-methods approach to analyse data, particularly a sequential mixed-methods approach. It identifies both quantitative and qualitative evidence that suggests practical recommendations to improve research engagement. The mixed-method approach included two main areas: qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey. The sampling method used for the survey was snowball. The snowball method was used as it is hard to reach the population due to their tight work schedules. However, the semi-structured interviews were conducted using the

convenience sampling method. The study was conducted with academics who teach the English language in four state universities in Sri Lanka.

The qualitative phase consisted of performing detailed interviews with 10 English language teachers. The participants for this study were selected using convenience sampling, ensuring representation from all academic positions. Furthermore, participants were chosen to represent individuals who are highly involved in research and those who are involved themselves with less or no research.

The data that was collected through interviews was semi-structured, and it consisted of open-ended questions. The semi-structured interviews helped the participants to state their experiences and thoughts while assuring that the main areas of the study, motivators, challenges, and institutional factors, were given prominence. The questions focused on participants' reasons for engaging in research, difficulties faced in engaging in research, and their views on the support given by the institutes.

Examples of questions included:

- What motivates you to engage in research?
- What challenges have you encountered during your research journey?
- How has your university supported or hindered your research activities?

The interviews took about 30 to 40 minutes, and it was conducted both physically and online. The participants who could not attend physically were interviewed via Zoom video call. The interview data were then recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission. The transcribed data were then analysed thoroughly to identify main themes and sub-themes. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. The main themes consisted of career progress, institutional encouragement, participants' desire, and professional development.

The quantitative survey, which was distributed at first, enabled to improvement of the results received from the qualitative approach; interviews. The survey was carefully designed and distributed to receive the initial results of the study. It also helped to decide the questions in the interview and decide on the main themes and sub-themes as well. This method is used to match the survey results with the actual experiences of the academics.

The survey was divided into three parts. The first section, Demographic, included questions about participants' age, gender, academic rank, years of teaching experience, and level of research involvement. The second section, Research Motivators and Barriers, included questions to measure the extent to which various factors influenced participants' research engagement. Finally, the third section, Institutional Support, included items assessing participants' perceptions of institutional resources, mentorship availability, and policies promoting research.

The survey was sent online to a wide range of English language teachers at the four universities, resulting in 82 replies. Snowball sampling was utilised with the original participants suggesting colleagues who could be interested in taking part. The digital format facilitated distribution and enabled participants to finish the survey when it suited them best. The questionnaire consisted of six sections, which approximately took 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

The study used a mixed-method approach to examine English language teachers' engagement in research and the impact of it on their professional development in Sri Lankan state universities. The qualitative and quantitative data both provided sufficient details to understand motivators, barriers, and institutional influences related to research participation.

The qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The first step of this approach is familiarisation. According to this step, it is important to familiarise oneself with the interview transcripts by reading them several times, which enables one to get a clear picture of the participants' thoughts. The second step involves generating initial codes by paying attention to phrases that align with research motivations, experiences, and challenges. As the next step, these codes were divided based on their meaning. For example, when participants mentioned "I do not have enough time to engage in research due to more lecture hours and coordination duties", the code was identified as a lack of time. If the participant reported "research publications are a must for my promotions," the code was identified as a career requirement. When participants expressed their interest in doing research as "I like to engage in research when I see its impact on me", it was coded as a sense of individual interest and motivation.

When the analysis of the responses was conducted, three themes were developed: motivation for professional advancement, personal interest, and institutional support. The first theme reflects how research is conducted to receive promotions and academic recognition. The second theme reflects how personal satisfaction impacts research engagement, and the third theme reflects on institutional factors such as time and resource limitations, and concerns regarding mentorship.

This thematic approach helped in providing a clear understanding of the research study while supporting facts to identify the research problem in depth.

The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software was used to analyse the quantitative data while focusing on the frequencies and percentages. These were used to analyse motivating factors as well as challenges regarding research engagement.

The study analysed categorical variables to get a comprehensive understanding of the research. Hence, it was identified whether there was a difference between junior lecturers and senior lecturers in how they viewed institutional support. This helped to get insights into how participants described factors such as professional status, experiences, and perception of research engagement while emphasising a strong statistical relationship.

The descriptive analysis provided a strong interpretation of the data. The quantitative results helped to emphasise the qualitative results gathered from the interviews. Therefore, it provided a more detailed understanding of the motivators and challenges for the participants. Both qualitative and quantitative data lay a strong foundation for the research by emphasising the factors affecting the research engagement of English language teachers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the study provides a comprehensive view of the factors that influence research engagement among English language teachers in Sri Lankan state universities based on three themes: Motivation for Professional Advancement, Institutional Support, and Personal Interest. Each of these themes focuses on challenges and the relationship of institutional and personal factors that influence the research activities of academics.

Motivation for Professional Advancement

Motivation is one of the key factors that drives research engagement. Most academics are motivated to engage in professional development activities such as participating in conferences, publishing research, and engaging in academic discussions. According to the results, motivation is linked to external factors derived from research engagement. These factors involve career progression and personal satisfaction gained from research engagement.

According to the results, 61% stated that ELT conferences enabled them to increase their theoretical understanding, strengthening the significance of conferences in providing more intellectual and professional relationships. In addition, 83% had presented their research in conferences while strongly favouring sharing their work with others and getting more comprehensive ideas. Furthermore, 64% of participants stated that they are well aware of the publication procedure. Nonetheless, these results also highlight differences in access and assistance, as not every participant felt equally prepared or motivated to take advantage of these opportunities.

Advancement in one's career emerged as a key motivator, with academic promotions in Sri Lanka closely linked to publication achievements. One of the participants stated, "Without publications, moving forward in the academic ladder is nearly impossible." Another said, "Research is the currency of our field," emphasising the significance of research for career growth. These statements further strengthen the results received through the survey, in which 78% mentioned career advancement as the main motivation to participate in research. These responses were especially noticed among the teachers who started their academic career recently, as they consider research as important for developing their academic career and obtaining recognition within their workplace.

These results correspond with international trends, as underscored in research by Borg (2013) and Burns (2010), which stress the importance of institutional policies in influencing academic conduct. Nevertheless, the emphasis on publications threatens to encourage a strong attitude toward research, where the amount might obstruct the quality. One senior lecturer mentioned that, "Research enables me to investigate issues that interest me", and "It's not solely about career advantages; it's about individual development and fulfilment." These ideas prove Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which emphasises that intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are both important in contributing to a better time to engage in research. To minimise these issues, organisations must ease the burden linked to publication metrics while promoting settings that support significant and impactful research. Academics are motivated to engage in research activities for their career development and intellectual improvement when they are provided with proper research funding, mentorship opportunities, and professional development. When a comfortable research culture is established that gives both self-satisfaction and opportunities for professional development, universities can trust that research continues to remain an essential factor for academic success.

Institutional Support

Institutional support became a vital factor in research participation, affecting the availability of resources, financial support, and career prospects. Hence, 36 participants mentioned that they received support from their institute to attend ELT conferences. This emphasised the difference in assistance among other universities. The support that the universities provide to academics is influenced by the opportunities received by the academics to attend research conferences, access research materials, and receive funds for research projects. The lack of proper funding also appeared as an issue, as 54% reported that they did not get proper funding or guidance regarding it. This disparity disrupts their opportunity to attend academic events and receive access to research opportunities while restricting their academic development.

A few of the senior academics reported favourable experiences, considering that access to workshops, research funding, and current academic resources were vital supports for their research endeavours. According to the results, one participant mentioned that "The funding we obtain significantly impacts our work", and "Without their presence, it would be impossible to participate in international conferences." There were a few other participants who also mentioned that restrictions on accessing journals and other research instruments were difficult.

One of the most important factors for researchers is mentorship. In the absence of proper mentorship, collaborations with peer networks were also noted. Therefore, it was identified that providing proper mentors for teachers is one of the most important considerations. Despite the career status, it is mandatory to receive proper mentorship as it can greatly impact the research work. It was also identified by one participant that it is better if the newly appointed academics can collaborate with seniors to conduct research, as it will help them in providing good guidance. When issues such as financial support, resource availability, and mentorship issues are addressed, it can make a comfortable environment for more research work and academic success.

These details emphasise the significance of establishing strong support from the university. In addition to providing proper research tools, funding, and mentorship helps to

achieve success in academics. These issues can be considered to apply policies that will create a better research environment for all academics.

Personal Interest

Individual passion and a desire for knowledge also significantly contributed to encouraging participation in research. For numerous educators, research was viewed as not only a professional duty but also as a fundamentally satisfying experience. A participant compared research to putting together a puzzle, saying, "I appreciate the challenge that research presents. It's related to putting together a puzzle—discovering solutions to significant inquiries." These feelings highlight the importance of intellectual satisfaction in maintaining involvement in research. Nonetheless, this motivation was not widespread. A limited number (8) of participants shared concrete instances of utilising their research results in their teaching methods. These instances underscored the ability of research to enhance teaching resources and techniques, but also showed a lack of involvement in applying research within the classroom.

Adverse early experiences, like inadequately structured undergraduate research projects, surfaced as major obstacles to sustained involvement in research. Individuals who encountered difficulties at the beginning of their academic journeys frequently had trouble restoring their confidence and passion for research. Conversely, individuals with favourable early experiences or access to continuous peer networks and institutional support indicated ongoing interest and engagement in research.

These findings enhanced the importance of mentorship and workshops for establishing a long-term research engagement among academics. Most junior academics need proper guidance, feedback, and collaborations that can help to minimise negative experiences and establish strong confidence in engaging in useful research.

Furthermore, minimising the distance between research and classroom practice is a main challenge. Some academics consider the importance of research in implementing new teaching methods, while others try to fit the findings into practical situations. Therefore, implementing action research that addresses the challenges may establish a more comfortable educational environment.

Academics can improve their interest in engaging in research when they become curious to learn about their field. The university can establish an academic culture where research is personally fulfilling and professionally impactful when the issues obstructing the research engagement are addressed accordingly.

The findings summarise the barriers to healthy research participation among English language teachers, which align with the objectives of the study. When considering the institutional level, issues that prevent teachers from doing research are identified. There are difficulties in accessing research funding, limited opportunities to access research funding, and a lack of proper mentorship. When the systemic level is considered, policies such as considering the number of publications over the quality were a challenge for academic promotions.

When considering the personal level, the negative research experiences encountered earlier, lack of confidence, and insufficient research exposure during undergraduate days obstructed the long-term motivation. These results prove that research engagement is not only connected with personal interest or motivation but also with circumstantial challenges linked with the academic environment. Addressing these issues is important to develop a healthy research culture in Sri Lankan universities.

CONCLUSION

The study was set to examine the role of research engagement in enhancing the professional development of English language teachers in Sri Lankan state universities. The study examined motivations, institutional support, and barriers to participation. The results show that research engagement is connected by both intrinsic motivations, such as academic curiosity and personal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivations like career advancement and recognition received in academics. The institutional support received through funding, mentorship, and access to research opportunities is important in strengthening or restricting research participation. Finally, the study depicts that making stronger institutional support, promoting research-informed teaching, and addressing institutional and personal barriers are important in producing a comprehensive research environment among university English language teachers.

In conclusion, although the data shows a dedicated team of professionals actively involved in research and conferences, it also points out various gaps in institutional support and the real-world application of research outcomes. These deficiencies demand a comprehensive strategy. Enhanced funding methods, regular support, and improved incorporation of research into teaching practices are crucial for elevating professional growth and the educational influence of research initiatives. Moreover, cultivating a nurturing and inclusive research atmosphere by implementing strong mentorship initiatives, fair resource allocation, and strategies that manage gender and rank inequalities can enable educators to excel as teacher-researchers. In doing so, institutions can enhance personal academic journeys while fostering a culture of excellence and innovation that aids the entire academic community. Finally, addressing these gaps could be identified as an approach to a sustainable academic environment.

In order to improve research engagement among academics, several steps can be applied. If the university could provide more research time by balancing teaching workload and providing space for teachers to pay attention to academics while completing teaching duties, it would be beneficial in many ways. Research practice can be improved more when more attention is directed to infrastructures such as libraries, journals, and digital databases. Since the academics who newly join the career do not have much experience in the beginning in research, it is recommended that they work on research with seniors and obtain more exposure before engaging in individual research. Furthermore, professional development sessions can be organised to raise awareness on research methods, publication techniques, and writing methods. Finally, initial

exposure to research can be provided with properly designed undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

The results of the study show how research participation is influenced by personal motivation, organisational factors, and different obstacles. When these concerns are addressed, academics can experience a comfortable research environment. However, to address these challenges, universities must give more attention to research-friendly policies that create a comfortable setting for academics. Furthermore, establishing a strong bond between research and teaching practices is important for the development of the academic environment. The importance of action research should be prioritised as it helps to address actual classroom issues that can help to minimise the gap that exists between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Research seminars and workshops will support academics to share their findings and discuss their issues, thereby contributing to the improvement of teaching methods. When the research environment in the university system is strongly established, the academic and teaching community benefits significantly. Therefore, it is evident that establishing a strong research environment can highly impact the university. Such an environment contributes to sustainable institutional development.

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