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# *A Dialogic Approach to Fostering TESOL Teacher-learners' Research Engagement: Insights from a 'Learning-to-Research' Procedure*

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As an important site for teacher learning, teacher education (TE) courses are a promising context to provide teacher-learners (TLs) with “systematic, intentional and well-organized instruction” (Johnson, 2015: 517) of various kinds, including guided instruction on research engagement. However, little research has explored the role of TE in promoting second language (L2) TLs’ research engagement, especially in MA TESOL courses where conducting research is not obligatory and/or restricted to high-GPA students only. This study addresses the above-stated gap by investigating L2 TLs’ perceptions of a dialogic research-engagement procedure (REP) designed to promote their engagement *with* (using/reading) and *in* (doing) research within a post-graduate instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) course. The study offers insights into TLs’ evaluations of the REP (e.g., impact, process, challenges and mediating factors) and describes REP stages that can be integrated into TE courses.

## **Teachers’ Engagement *with* and *in* L2 Research**

A high level of research engagement, involving not only engagement *with* reading and being critical consumers of research but also *in* doing research (Borg, 2010), benefits L2 teachers in multiple aspects.

First, it empowers them to make more appropriate pedagogical decisions informed by others' and their own evidence-based research, leading to positive impact on their professional development (PD) and teaching practice (Hargreaves, 2006). Second, in *engaging-in-research*, teachers' role is not constrained to 'consuming' and 'transferring' L2 knowledge produced by academics; they act as agents who 'transform' (i.e. create, adapt and modify) knowledge about learning and teaching (Kiely & Davis, 2010). Third, research engagement could help teachers refresh their perspectives in profound manners, including developing new ways of seeing, doing, and thinking, forming new ways of talking, and establishing new ways of knowing through validating their hypotheses with existing L2 theories (Borg, 2010).

Despite these benefits, research has revealed barriers to L2 teachers' research engagement, primarily due to the lack of institutional support and teachers' concerns about the practicality and applicability of research in practice (Sato & Loewen, 2019). While efforts from different stakeholders are needed to tackle these challenges, we argue that TE plays a crucial role in promoting teachers' positive attitudes toward research, thus fostering their research engagement. Within TE courses it is worthwhile to provide TLs with hands-on experience in a series of systematic research engagement activities, with teacher educators (TEs) being instrumental in linking research and practice.

## **A DIALOGIC APPROACH TO ENHANCING TLs' RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT**

Adopting a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, Johnson (2015) proposes enacting within TE "collaborative teaching-learning relationships" (p. 517) where TEs interact dialogically to offer timely expert explanations and advice (i.e., *mediation*) that will help shape and reshape TLs' knowledge of teaching, and create *zones of proximal development* (ZPDs) where they could conduct well-informed instructional practices with assistance from TEs. To enact this 'learning-to-teach' experience, Johnson designed a *dialogic* TE practice which involved creating a multiple-staged team-teaching project. TLs worked in a team and with the teacher educator to observe an ESL lesson, co-constructed a lesson plan, participated in a practice-teach, then an actual-teach, and finally wrote reflections on their experiences. The dialogic feature was demonstrated most clearly in the practice-teach, where the teacher educator and fellow classmates regularly provided immediate and tailored feedback to the TLs. While Johnson's dialogic practice

targeted TLs' learning-to-*teach*, given its reported effectiveness in accommodating and personalizing teacher learning, this procedure arguably can be applied in TE courses to aid TLs' 'learning-to-*research*' experience.

Studies have shown that many TESOL TE programs world-wide emphasize research but focus on learning about research rather than conducting research (Munthe & Rogne, 2015). Consequently, although the TE context requires TLs to read and (occasionally) do research, this does not necessarily result in TLs' positive attitudes and actions in research. Therefore, it is essential to develop a systematic, well-scaffolded procedure for promoting TLs' research engagement and for investigating the impact of such an opportunity on their attitudes towards research engagement. Our overarching research inquiry is: What are L2 teacher-learners' perceptions of the design and impact of a dialogic research engagement procedure (REP) for facilitating their engagement *with* and *in* L2 research in a TE course?

## METHOD

### Participants and Context

Participants were sixteen English-L2 teachers (1 male, 15 females; age range: 23-40 years old) with different nationalities: Chinese, Japanese, Saudi Arabian, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Korean. They had diverse teaching experience at various levels (i.e., primary, secondary, and university), varying from six months to 15 years ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 4.62$ ). At the time of the research, they were enrolled in a 13-week TE course on ISLA in a coursework master's program in Applied Linguistics at an Australian university. Students in the coursework pathway predominantly take courses to fulfil graduation requirements. An end-of-course research project (i.e., dissertation) is optional and mainly available to high-GPA students. Additionally, while the program offered research methods courses as part of the curriculum, similar to many MA programs in the Australian context, students were often predominantly required to engage *with* research to complete assessments, rather than actually conducting research. The focal ISLA course concerned various topics (e.g., interaction, input, output, L1 use, feedback etc.) with the goal of enabling TLs to understand L2 learning processes and issues surrounding classroom L2 learning, and think critically about research findings and its relationship to instruction.

## Study's Design

Participants were guided to complete a series of activities designed to promote their research engagement, so-called REP, with three purposes: increasing TLs' understanding of research procedure, guiding them to carry out an L2 study, and raising their awareness of the importance of research for L2 pedagogy. The REP's activities were incorporated from Weeks 2 to 11 of the 13-week ISLA course.

The REP's design was informed by Johnson's (2015) dialogic approach to enhancing teacher learning, enacting its three main principles: systematic, dialogic, and reflective. First, we established a multi-staged *systematic* procedure, comprising two main components based on Borg's (2010) conceptualization of teacher research engagement: engaging *with* (i.e. reading and using) and engaging *in* (i.e. doing) research, which was further divided into six stages: reading, using, designing, conducting and reporting, disseminating, and reflecting on research. Second, the activities in each stage were underpinned by the sociocultural perspective to L2 TE (Johnson, 2009), which emphasizes scaffolding. That is, TEs offered systematic and continued support through *dialogic* interactions (i.e., TLs engage in consultancy dialogues with peers and TEs), which aimed to foster TLs' cognitive development and mediate their learning (Johnson, 2015). Third, the REP incorporated *reflective* practice (i.e., reflection entries) to help TLs deepen their understanding of knowledge produced by research and the process of doing it. Finally, the REP was designed in a recursive process where the TLs could go back to previous stages where necessary. For instance, while designing their study (Stage 3), the TLs could repeat earlier stages (Stage 1) of reading and critiquing L2 research to make informed decisions for their research.

The '*engage-with-research*' component (Stages 1 and 2) was introduced first to provide the TLs with scaffolded knowledge about various research types. They were asked to *read and critique* diverse ISLA research (e.g., practice-oriented, empirical, and action research etc.), and make connections to their practices. Then, they *critiqued and presented* in pair one self-chosen empirical study in a 20-minute oral presentation. While the reading activity helped them engage with *reading* research to gain a deeper understanding of the research procedure, the engagement activity (i.e. *critique* and *relate* to their teaching practice) served as a springboard to exercise their cognition about research, and seek help from peers and the TEs. Throughout the first two stages, participants wrote weekly journals on a shared platform (Blackboard) to reflect on their understanding of L2 research, reading engagement, and discussions with their partner. The TEs regularly

commented on these journals to informally assess the TLs' cognitive development in research and offer dialogic support, often in the form of clarification, explanation, and questions to provoke further thinking. To avoid conflicts of interests, TLs were informed that their reflections were not analysed until they received the course's grade.

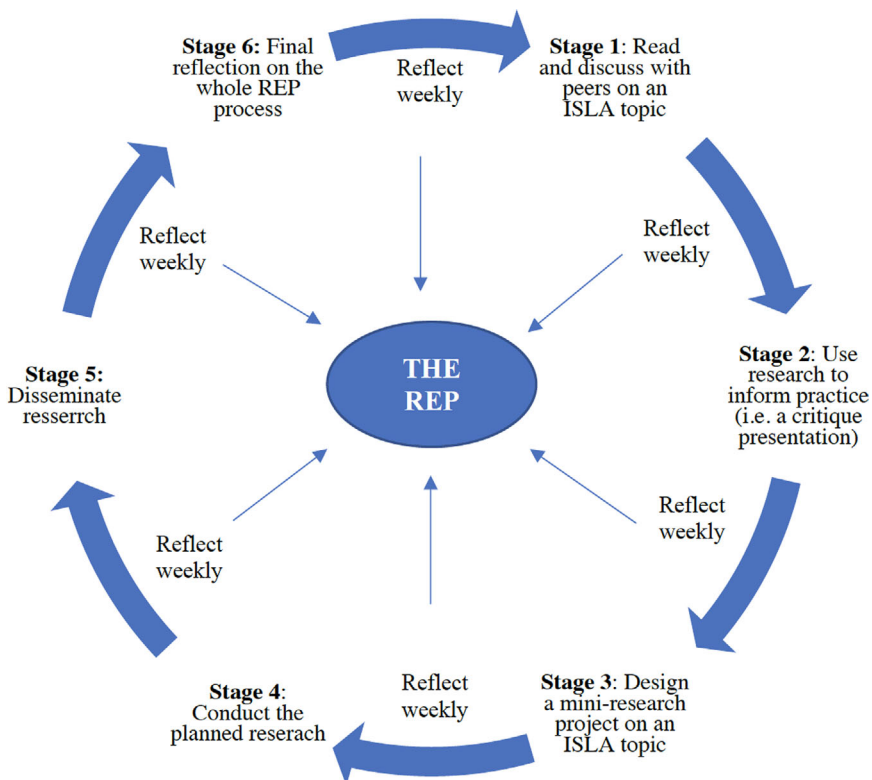
Built on the previous stages, the '*engage-in-research*' component (Stages 3 to 5) provided opportunities for TLs to put their theoretical research knowledge into practice. They were guided to systematically conduct their mini-research project on an ISLA topic of their interest (see Appendix 1 in supplemental materials for examples of mini-research topics). Because the course concerned how languages are learned in classroom settings, TLs were encouraged to conduct classroom-based research, bearing in mind that ISLA research also includes other types.

The '*engage-in-research*' activities were organized in a series of workshops where TLs identified research gaps, designed a study, and practised collecting, analysing, reporting and disseminating findings in poster presentations. Notably, they participated in two one-on-one dialogic consulting sessions with the TEs at crucial points in the REP to discuss their study design (Dialogue 1) and their data analysis (Dialogue 2). These individual conversations were for the TEs to provide timely assistance and mentorship to help TLs complete their research. In Stage 6, TLs wrote reflections on their research engagement experiences. The reflections concerned benefits and challenges of their engagement *in* and *with* research. This was to feedback into Stage 1 of the REP for further research implementation. Therefore, the REP was perceived as a cycle, starting with Stage 1 until Stage 6 and then circling back to Stage 1 (see the REP's stages in Figure 1 and Appendix 2 in supplemental materials).

It should be noted that the REP was designed collaboratively by the authors, also the focal ISLA course's instructors. Our motivation of promoting research engagement within a TE course stemmed from having worked with L2 teachers who either did not see the relevance of research for their practice, or had the desire to conduct research but lacked guidance.

## Materials

Data were collected from TLs' weekly reflections (i.e., journals in the course's Blackboard), and focus-group interviews. The participants wrote weekly reflections on the REP's activities and a final one at the end of the REP (Stage 6) reflecting on the whole REP experience. Each reflection was about 100-150 words long; 129 reflections were



**FIGURE 1.** The dialogic REP cycle.

collected, totalling 19,500 words. Reflection prompts elicited participants’ perceptions in three aspects: design, effectiveness of weekly REP activities, and what was learnt weekly. Participants were also encouraged to ask queries about their research engagement within the REP to get TEs’ support. The 30-minute focus-group interviews (three in total, each comprising 5-6 TLs) occurred two weeks after mini-research reports were submitted, and explored TLs’ overall evaluations of the REP and factors affecting their research engagement. A focus-group format was used to provide participants with an opportunity to exchange ideas.

## Analysis

Data were analysed following a theme-based approach. Firstly, the first author read the data to locate and highlight segments containing

participants' views about the research inquiries (i.e. perceptions and impact of the REP, contributing factors to research engagement). Next, all highlighted segments were re-read and initial codes were generated based on keywords that directly referred to the research inquiries. Finally, similar codes were grouped into themes. The second author also followed this procedure to double-code the entire data. All identified themes were discussed and agreed by the two coders.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Perceptions of the REP's Design

When asked about the systematicity of the REP's design, 13 TLs (82.5%) stated that it was appropriate, starting with reading and critiquing published research (i.e. engagement *with* research), and then designing and conducting their individual research (i.e. engagement *in* research) (see Excerpt 1).

#### Excerpt 1: Appropriate design

*It is very important for us to start reading research articles first because it can provide some background information about what researchers did. Then, we can start practising doing classroom-based research. I think this procedure helped us develop more of the idea of classroom-based research because it was about theories [i.e. reading research] and then theories in practice [i.e. doing research] (P1—Focus-group interview).*

The REP's systematic feature enabled P1 to realise the usefulness of combining reading, critiquing, and doing research. Most participants (93.75%) reported that with carefully designed and detailed guidelines, the REP helped them “*systematize the knowledge of classroom-based research*” such as “*reading and critiquing research and then producing it*” (P10—Reflection).

These results indicate that the multi-staged design of the REP seemed effective in enabling the TLs to make a smooth transition from *reading* to *doing* L2 research. They were able to shift between their roles as consumers and producers of research, with the latter often deemed more difficult to foster among practicing L2 teachers (Gilliland, 2018). Given often-reported challenges to maintain teachers' interest and involvement in research beyond TE, we argue that activities that systematically involve teachers in both *reading* and *doing* research within TE courses (e.g. the REP) could effectively foster teachers' research engagement.

Additionally, our findings demonstrated the benefits of TLs engaging in *dialogic* talks with the TEs throughout the process of their



research engagement, especially during the mini-research stages when they conducted their own studies. Excerpt 2 showed how interactive discussion with the TEs helped TLs to shape and reshape their research inquiries.

Excerpt 2: TEs' provision of assistance in weekly reflection exchanges.

*P5: This week we learned about different types of corrective feedback. Although it's useful to know several techniques to correct learners' errors, I wonder about positive feedback? Things like 'good', or 'well-done' to let learners know which aspects they did well? How do they compare with negative feedback? Could I do my mini-research on this?*

*TE: Good reflection! You could look at this from either a teacher's or learner's perspective, perhaps observe a language lesson and see how much a teacher provides both positive and negative feedback, then use this data to ask follow-up questions with the teacher and learners?*

P5: Thank you. I've formed these research questions following your advice...

(P5 – Weekly reflection)

P5 was initially unsure about her of research topic since positive feedback was not part of the lesson that concerned only negative feedback. Through the exchanges in the weekly reflections, the teacher-educator validated her research ideas and provided suggestions on how she may explore them further. This dialogic process later resulted in P5 being able to formulate her research questions. Such timely assistance in the early stage of TLs' research-conducting journey is arguably crucial toward maintaining and enhancing their motivation to engage in research.

The TLs also commented on the usefulness of these dialogic opportunities generated by the REP.

Excerpt 3: Dialogic talks help TLs refine research ideas.

*I really appreciated the opportunity to discuss my research ideas and inquiries about research with the teachers in my weekly reflections and one-on-one discussion. It really helped me find the direction for my research. At first I wasn't sure if I should do observation or survey research. When I talked to the teachers they explained these tools and showed examples. So I got clearer and decided to use surveys as they suit my research and context. (P10 – Focus-group interview)*

Excerpt 3 demonstrates how regular discussions with the TEs helped P10 select an appropriate research tool for her project. In this case, the TEs acted as more experienced researchers and provided assistance relevant to the TLs' immediate learning needs, arguably creating a ZPD where the TLs were able to make well-informed decisions during their research endeavour.

Moreover, 11 participants (73.3%) acknowledged in weekly reflections that the REP's *reflective* principle was conducive to internalizing what they learned about research in the course.

#### Excerpt 4. Benefits of reflection tasks

*I enjoyed doing weekly reflections. They helped me summarize important points about ISLA research and research skills, and realize what I understood well and what I didn't. I also liked that my teachers read my reflections. If I am in doubt about anything I could ask and they responded very quickly in the reflection forum. (P13 – Focus-group interview)*

Previous research suggests that one way of increasing teachers' PD (e.g. research engagement in this study) is to provide opportunities to reflect on their teaching and learning (Farrell & Kennedy, 2019). Thus, the reflective feature of this REP could potentially be a tool for facilitating teachers' research engagement and thus could be implemented not only in ISLA but also non-ISLA TE courses.

Although commenting positively on the REP's design, all participants stated two major challenges. The first concerned the intensity of the REP activities. The TLs were asked to read and critique research articles and do a mini-research project within a three-month-semester, which was perceived as "*a bit overwhelming*" (P14—Reflection). Fifteen participants (93.75%) expressed "*though I enjoyed it [the REP], it was a bit overwhelming, with lots of activities during a short time*" (P7—Reflection).

The second challenge, reported by nine participants (56.25%), concerned access to research sites. One shared "*for me it was okay because I could access my colleague's class back home, but it was difficult for some who had to form their own group of participants*" (P11—Focus-group interview). All participants were international students, and thus did not teach any classes while studying in this TE course. These results indicate that the challenges associated with the REP mainly concerned logistic aspects (i.e. time pressure and access to classrooms). Thus, future implementation of the REP could be lengthened, especially in the mini-research component, to allow more time for TLs to engage in doing research, and that access to L2 classrooms would be advantageous.

## Perceived Impacts of the REP

Interview responses and reflections revealed positive changes in TLs' perceptions towards research engagement as a result of their participation in the REP, as reported by 93.75% of participants.

### Excerpt 5: Increased interest and critical thinking

*Before participating in this procedure, I was not a fan of research. After reading a lot of articles, I tend to switch to think that research is actually really interesting. The more I read, the bigger the knowledge base/data in my mind became. As a result, I have critical thinking skills. I can critically think if some research findings are useful for my teaching. I also know what research is based on and if I want to do a PhD, I could find a topic for my PhD based on what I read.* (P10—Focus-group interview).

P10's comments showed changes in her perceptions before and after her involvement in the REP: from being "not a fan of research" to embracing the benefits of reading research such as developing "knowledge base", practicing "critical thinking", and confidently thinking of a topic for a PhD after reading research. She also admitted an increase in her critical thinking. This is significant evidence that the dialogic and scaffolded REP contributed to developments in teacher cognitions about research (Johnson, 2009).

### Excerpt 6. Greater research knowledge and benefits to teaching practice

*Before I enrolled in this course I had very limited knowledge about research. After participating [in the REP], I read a lot of academic papers and know what research is. It provides me with a clear structure of an area of research. The studies are always the same in terms of structure. I also know the students' perceptions. Those ideas make me rethink critically about my teaching and what I can do to improve my teaching".* (P5—Focus-group interview)

Excerpt 6 indicates that apart from increasing their knowledge about research (i.e. *structure of a study*), the REP enabled TLs to *rethink critically* and potentially *improve* their teaching practice. These results suggest that *engagement with research* was crucial in developing teachers' familiarity and critical perspectives toward published research (Borg, 2010).

Excerpts 7, 8 and 9 demonstrated TLs' perceptions toward the transition from reading to doing research, and indicated multiple positive influences of the REP (as reported by 81.25% of the participants).

### Excerpt 7. Sense of achievement and enjoyment

*For me, reading research papers is fun, but when I did the research it's more enjoyable because you really put all you read into practice. It's like... ah should I do that? I got good results and I can answer my research question. It was quite satisfying in the end. I am quite positive about doing more research. (P7—Focus-group interview).*

Excerpt 7 shows that the process of conducting the mini-research project enabled P7 to adopt a renewed perspective toward research, again reflecting significant changes in teachers' thinking and understanding. Notably, he also expressed a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction, which encouraged him to conduct further research.

### Excerpt 8. Increased confidence in doing research

*In this [REP], the mini-research provided me with experience of observing students in the class. I think doing this research encouraged me to develop my critical thinking skills and confidence in conducting other research (P4—Focus-group interview).*

### Excerpt 9. Reinforced research skills

*Before doing this research, I did not know anything about conducting research. Now I know it is not difficult to do research. I know what I need to conduct a research project. I think next step is that we should apply the research we just generated in classrooms. (P6—Focus-group interview)*

Excerpts 8 and 9 show that the REP helped TLs develop their research skills they had previously learned but not used. More importantly, they indicated an increased awareness of the essence of research for teaching and started thinking about ways to apply their research findings to the classroom.

These comments converge to imply that the REP motivated TLs to be confident and find enjoyment in conducting research. The results also suggest that the REP positively impacted on their perceptions of research engagement at the attitudinal level (i.e. moving from low interest and limited research engagement to a favourable stand of wishing to read and do more research). These positive impacts are crucial because it is a starting point for encouraging L2 teachers' research engagement, thus addressing long-standing concerns about teachers being outsiders of the research community (McKinley, 2019).

Despite being positive about the REP, all TLs expressed apprehensions about their future research engagement, mostly due to time constraint, lack of institutional support and professional resources, rewards for research attempts. These barriers, albeit not uncommon, need not be perceived as a shutdown for all research-promoting endeavours.

Although fostering teachers' research engagement requires collective efforts from different stakeholders (teachers, institutions at all levels, and academics), at least at the level of TE, programme leaders could contribute to promoting L2 teachers' research engagement by embedding a similar procedure (e.g., the REP) into their curricula.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study evidenced some positive impacts of a systematic, dialogic, and reflective learning-to-research procedure (ie., the REP), on TLs' research engagement. These impacts included increased research interest and awareness, enhanced research knowledge and skills, senses of fulfilment and research enjoyment. However, the intensity of training activities and limited access to classrooms were the challenges to the REP's implementation. Additionally, teachers' lack of motivation due to contextual and institutional constraints were obstacles to their future research engagement. This study has limitations regarding its small-scale and predominant reliance on qualitative data. Additionally, it did not analyse the mini-research projects' results or consider TLs' use of previous knowledge and experiences in the REP. Despite the limitations, this study suggests that the REP could be embedded in a TE course to promote TLs' research engagement at least within and potentially beyond TE, thereby contributing to strengthening the research-pedagogy nexus.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Supplementary Material