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Research Paper

The Impact of Action Research on Teacher Professional Development: Perspectives from Iranian EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Action research is an efficient tool for the teachers to tackle the problems in their classes and enhance teaching and learning process. This study explored EFL teachers' perceptions about the effect of conducting action research on their professional development. It also probed into the challenges and problems that teachers experienced during the conduction of their action research as well as the support structures which are needed in this regard. Ten EFL teachers were involved in doing classroom-based action research for one semester. Qualitative data were gathered through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and diaries. Findings revealed that action research

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contributed to teachers' professional growth through increasing their awareness of their role as teachers and of their students' needs, providing opportunities for self-reflection on practice, increasing professional confidence, developing a sense of leadership and autonomy, and creating a positive classroom atmosphere. Nevertheless, the participants struggled with three major challenges during the conduction of their action research: lack of time, lack of academic research knowledge and lack of institutional support. It is concluded that contrary to the existing professional development programs, action research can act as a cost-effective, contextualized and efficient professional development instrument tailored to individual teachers' specific teaching circumstances and classroom peculiarities. Finally, suggestions are made for promoting action research engagement in language education contexts.

Keywords: Action research, Reflective teaching, EFL teachers' perceptions, Teacher education

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1. Introduction

Second language teachers, educators, and researchers have long been concerned with the issue of how to make language teaching and learning as effective as possible within the context of the classroom. It is taken for granted that principled interventions must be induced in teaching practices, teaching materials, curriculum development, and educational policies in order to improve learners' achievement (Best & Kahn, 2006). The question which remains is what informs the potential changes in the abovementioned aspects or what is the nature of the systematic basis for building up such interventions. One point of view is that the changes in the educational structures need to be based on sound theories and findings of previous research; this leads to evidence-based teaching practices. Relying on research findings rather than using personal assumptions and hunches, teachers are better equipped to systematically gather information about classroom issues

and, subsequently, take action to bring about desirable informed changes and improvements. In fact, a great deal of benefits accrues to teachers if they try to solve educational problems based on the results of their own research instead of their subjective judgment and decisions that may be, consciously or unconsciously, derived from limited personal experience (Best & Kahn, 2006).

The new millennium has made many societies engage in serious and fundamental educational reforms, highlighting teacher professional development as an important aspect in the new educational programs. As teachers are both the subject and object of educational change within different societies, they possess a double role in the educational reforms. This fact has contributed in the popularity of the subject of teacher professional development and has made it successful in attracting much attention during the past decade (Benitt, 2014; Borg, 2015; Burns & Edwards, 2014; Cabaroglu, 2014; Smith et al., 2014).

The focus on the notion of teacher professional development has been a result of recent changes in the society, economy, technology, politics and globalization of communicative systems in the new millennium (Alibakhshi, 2019). The progressive and demanding nature of the modern world necessitates huge responsibilities and greater expectations from the teachers. Accordingly, teachers are required to effectively prepare the next generation to shoulder their duties in the challenging modern world through providing high quality instruction and education.

However, a number of researchers (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015; Borko et al., 2010; Özer, 2004; Uysal, 2012) have proved some of the traditional models of professional development to be ineffectual in terms of their impact on practice. Teachers require more effective means such as action research to assist them resolve problems and issues which are of significance to them

through active involvement in problems of their own classrooms (Andrew, 2017; Burns, 2010; Ferrance, 2000; Mills, 2007; Richards & Farrel, 2005; Yavuz, 2018). Through the use of action research teachers can set personal objectives, perceptions and definitions about their profession and to act as researchers (Burns, 2000). It is one of the various types of educational research methods, strongly suggested to teachers as it provides them with the ability to rethink and revise their teachings practices.

The early conceptualizations of action research highlighted its empowering and emancipatory nature which could be achieved by means of cycles of reform originated from reflection and action (McDonough, 2006). A multitude of action research models are currently in use including collaborative inquiry, participatory action research, classroom action research, teacher research, practical action research, etc. The common theme in all these models is simultaneously reflecting on practice, and trying to enhance and upgrade it.

Descending on to the field of language teaching, action research has been conceptualized and interpreted in various ways. Some believe in the mission of action research to change the existing socio-cultural and political power structures in education and contribute to empowering participants to improve their social and educational lives. This viewpoint is specifically located in the critical-emancipatory approach to action research (Crookes, 1993). Others take a less idealistic position arguing that action research concerns teachers focusing and reflecting on their classroom activities with an eye to enhancing and bettering their teaching skills. Such an interpretation of action research, which mainly lies within the teacher-researcher and classroom action research approach, emphasizes its power for making individual teachers' self-development instead of its contribution to stimulate fundamental nation-wide reforms. At the other end of the continuum, there are simplistic views of

action research which regard it as part of the normal daily reflective practice of many teachers (Wallace, 1991). A historical review of the action research studies published in ELT journals during the past two decades reveals that the second position has been advocated by most scholars in the field (Burns, 2005, 2011; Burton, 2000; Nassaji, 2012). Accordingly, classroom action research model is adopted for the purpose of the present study.

Conducting classroom action research (CAR), teachers make use of students, classrooms, and content area as the main sources of gathering data required to help them in making decisions about how to improve their practice. CAR can be done individually or in collaboration with other teachers. Solving issues and problems which are closely connected to the daily activities in the classroom is the most practical aim and focus of CAR. CAR is different from other realizations of action research (such as critical or participatory) in that its results are not usually used to change the social situations outside the classroom, rather, its findings focus on upgrading learning and performance of students, teaching instruction, classroom management, assessment, etc.

In view of the above discussion, the present study was designed with the purpose of exploring the potentials of AR as an important PD instrument for enhancing teachers' professional knowledge and skills in the Iranian ELT context. On the other hand, the conduction of the study was inspired by the significant advantages of action research reported in the literature. Taking into account the status of AR as a relatively new branch of research in the Iranian ELT context, it is hoped that the outcome of the present study would prove itself useful in generating an enlightened understanding of the actual implications of AR for language teaching and decreasing the notorious gap between research and practice in this area.

2. Literature Review

There is a sizable volume of research focusing on the examination of the potential benefits of action research for ELT teachers' practice and professionalism. Increasing teachers' critical thinking (Moreira et al., 1999), self-confidence (Burns, 1999), autonomy (Wang & Zhang, 2014), self-efficacy and awareness of students' needs (Cabaroglu, 2014), understanding of their own practices (Atay, 2008; Kincheloe, 2003), sensitivity about the classroom situation (Thorne & Qiang, 1996), closer harmony between teachers and researchers (Block, 2000; Crookes, 1993), obtaining the identity of a theorizer (Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015) are among the numerous valuable effects of research engagement for language teachers.

The subject of the relationship between action research and professional development of teachers has also been particularly investigated. In a study conducted by Bradley-Levine et al. (2009), for example, the effect of doing action research on the teachers' perspectives about their classroom practice and professionalism was explored. The results revealed that the action research process increased teachers' self-confidence to carry out research practices in their classrooms. This opportunity also caused them to grow more critical about their professional activities and motivate them to try to enhance their teaching practice. The researchers came to the conclusion that AR procedures encouraged teachers to evaluate their teaching practices, exchange views about their experiences, get positive feedback, and create useful modifications in their professional decision-making activities.

In another study, Chou (2010) investigated the effect of collaborative action research on the professional development of elementary English teachers during an in-service PD course. Twenty-one elementary recruited teachers took part in an English teacher certificate program at a university of education in Taiwan. The participants were asked to conduct a small-scale

action research project in one of the courses they were teaching. Findings indicated that the PD program increased teachers' professional knowledge. She concluded that conducting collaborative action research assisted the trainees to question their ideas about teaching, and review and discuss their findings. This finally led to the construction of the teachers' knowledge and improvement of their teaching practices and building up their sense of self-efficacy in their career.

Along the same lines, Brown and Macatangay (2002) evaluated the effect of teacher research on the PD of three teachers participating in an action research project. The three teachers performed AR in their immediate teaching contexts, being provided with help and assistance from the local education experts and university instructors. Semi-structured interviews with teachers were used as the instruments to collect the data about the AR processes, circumstances that influence the conduction of action research, and their perceptions about its influence on their PD. Results showed the favorable effect of AR on teachers' PD. As a result of the process, the teachers grew skillful in handling classroom issues and in planning and evaluating teaching activities. Furthermore, such an opportunity improved their sense of autonomy, relationships with students and colleagues, decision-making ability and self-confidence.

Some researchers maintain that research involvement is a beneficial venue that, contrary to the rest of professional development areas, is always at hand for teachers. Campbell and Jacques' (2004) exploratory study displayed teachers' belief that involvement in research affects their professional development from a number of perspectives. Among them are increasing the scope of the teaching plans, educational goals, teaching techniques, and teachers' content knowledge. Furthermore, teachers commented that reading research papers can make improvements in their

reflective thought, and helps them in assessing students' achievement (Campbell & Jacques, 2004).

In the Iranian context, action research is still a relatively new strand of inquiry. Though review studies and theoretical discussions of the capabilities and value of action research are traced back to 1990s (Bazargan, 1992; Guya, 1992; Mehr Mohammadi, 1997), empirical and systematic studies mainly appear in the recent years (Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015; Mehrani, 2015, 2016; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016; Zare-ee et al., 2015). For example, Iranian teachers' conceptions and understandings of action research were explored by Dehghan and Sahragard (2015) who found that although the majority of teachers appreciate the advantages of AR for their practice, they consider it as a professional pursuit which ought to be executed by university researchers and not by school teachers. In an exploratory study, Zare-ee et al. (2015) compared Iranian and Malaysian university instructors' conceptions of AR. The beliefs and conceptions of research in both groups were consistent with traditional views of research. Also, Mehrani (2015) explored Iranian teachers' motivations that can enhance their research engagement. He reported that teachers' professional development, instrumental incentives, institutional expectations and pedagogical concerns are among the main motivations of teachers for carrying out research projects. However, the literature searches for the present study could not spot systematic studies specifically focusing on the experiences of Iranian EFL teachers' research engagement. The lack of such studies forms a gap in our understanding which, in turn, prevents us from making enlightened decisions about establishing initiatives and educational policies for helping teachers to become more fully engaged in research. According to Borg (2009) in order to make informed decisions about involvement of teachers in research, we need to gain an authentic

comprehension of what teachers exactly think about research. To this end, the present study aims to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions about the experience of conducting action research and how it affects their professional development. It also attempts to provide an insider account of their perspectives on the opportunities as well as the challenges involved in conducting AR. More specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the effects of conducting classroom action research on their professional development?
2. What are the barriers to conducting action research in Iranian EFL classes?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 10 EFL teachers selected through snowball sampling by the researchers. They were teaching English at secondary and tertiary levels in different provinces in Iran. They were mainly females (80%) and their average age was 37 (range 28-48). Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 24 (M = 15). Most of them were high-school teachers teaching at public high schools (70%), two teachers were teaching at state universities and one was teaching at private language institutes. Their academic qualifications ranged from BA to Ph.D. Half of them had a master's degree, three had a bachelor's degree and two teachers held a Ph.D. in TEFL. In order to meet ethical exigencies of conducting qualitative research, the teachers who volunteered to take part in this study were provided with an informed consent form which gave them a concise description of the research purpose and data collection procedures. Furthermore, the Ethics Protocol Sheet was signed by the participant teachers which assured them of

confidentiality of the shared data, anonymity of the participants and voluntary participation.

3.2 Instrumentation

Data obtained from semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, diary journals and retrospective interviews were combined to answer the research questions.

1. Two questionnaires were used in the initial stage of the study to gather data about the participants' AR knowledge and professional development perceptions prior to the launching of their individual classroom action research projects. The Professional Development (PD) Questionnaire was adopted from Cook (1991) and was composed of 20 open-ended questions which were grouped into five main constructs: the definition and nature of professional development (4 items), planning and implementation of PD (4 items), PD and student achievement (3 items), effect of positive PD experience (4 items), difficulties of participating in PD programs (5 items). The second questionnaire, adapted from Rochsantiningsih (2004), comprised ten open-ended questions aimed at obtaining information about the teachers' action research knowledge and previous experiences. Both questionnaires were administered in English.
2. As the main source of data collection in this study, several rounds of semi-structured interviews were carried out with the participant teachers in order to access a depiction of the teachers' experience of conducting CAR with regard to their professional development process. The first round was held after finishing the workshop sessions and before starting teachers' AR projects and was aimed to see how the participants anticipate the process of doing research in their own classes and its possible impact on their PD. The second

round was conducted during implementation of AR projects and aimed to gain insight into the teachers' perceptions, beliefs, feelings, reactions and responses toward the experience of conducting CAR and achievements as well as challenges they encounter during this process. The final stage of interviews was held a couple of weeks after finishing teachers' AR projects to see how they evaluated the whole experience, what they learned from it, and whether they were willing to engage in more research projects in the future. All interviews were conducted in Persian in order to make sure that the participants are able to provide rich and detailed information. Furthermore, each interview session was audio-recorded for the purpose of later transcription and analysis.

3. In order to record the particulars of the experience, the participants were asked to keep open-ended diaries of their perceptions, thoughts and feelings about their AR experiences, reflections about their professional growth and development, and rewards and problems they are faced with while performing their action research projects. The most important function of keeping diaries was engaging teachers in reflection and critical thinking about the logical basis of their activities in the classroom. It helped teachers to examine the impacts of research actions on different aspects of their teaching, to decide about further steps in their research, and to plan their responses to the problems that arose during their projects. The diary provided five questions to provoke reflective thought: How did I handle the class today? Why did I choose this method for the lesson? What were the advantages and disadvantages of this technique? How could I make the lesson better? What did I know about my students?

4. In case there were gaps in the teachers' diary entries, they were filled in by follow-up retrospective interviews during which the teachers were asked to recall the events and elaborate on their recorded accounts. This helped the researchers in probing more details on their narratives and clarifying inconsistencies and ambiguities.
5. As a complementary source of data collection, document analysis was used in this study to further support the insights gained from the interviews, diaries and observations. Documents like lesson plans, student performance records, student attendance list, student answer sheets, official citations and certificates, and materials presented in the AR workshop were included in the analysis.

3.3 Procedure

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, the majority of the steps throughout the conduction of this study were taken within the virtual teaching and learning environments using different applications, online educational platforms and technological resources. In the initial part of the study, the participant teachers completed the two questionnaires to reveal their views and perceptions about PD and their prior knowledge of AR. To gain more detailed data, these questionnaires were followed by interviews with the teachers. During these follow-up interviews, the teachers were asked to further explain and elaborate on their answers to the items of the questionnaires. Most of the interviews during different stages of the study were conducted through a video call via WhatsApp and were audio recorded for the purpose of subsequent transcription and analysis. The findings from this initial stage yielded a database about the participants' PD and AR knowledge, experience and background which was used as a foundation for preparing the next stage, namely, the AR workshops.

A series of workshops were held during four successive weeks (one session per week) with the purpose of getting the participants familiar with principles and procedures of conducting classroom action research and to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skill for doing CAR in their classrooms. The workshops were held within the Skyroom application. Table 1 summarizes the content presented in the workshop sessions.

Table 1

Action Research Workshop Syllabus

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Session 1 | Introduction to action research |
| Session 2 | Research Problems/ Literature Review |
| Session 3 | Collecting and Analyzing Data |
| Session 4 | Action Research Proposal/ Action Research report |

In the first session, the participants were provided with an introduction to action research its history, definitions, principles and current models. The second session was devoted to teaching categories of action research problems, strategies for identifying research-worthy problems, formulating action research questions and techniques for narrowing down the research questions. In the third session, the participants get familiar with the techniques of action research data collection and analysis. The last session was dedicated to practical discussions on sharing findings of AR and identifying structural elements of AR proposal and AR report.

At the end of each session, the participants were given activities that were due to be completed by the next session in order to elaborate and practice the presented content. These activities were also reviewed and discussed in the next workshop. Upon the completion of workshop sessions, the teachers were asked to choose a topic related to their own teaching context and write a brief AR proposal as a demonstration of their understanding of AR. This proposal was the basis upon which the teachers undertook their actual CAR project. The workshops were held during the final weeks of the first school term and

the teachers performed their projects during the second semester which lasted for 12 weeks.

Teachers were asked to keep diaries during this period in order to get involved in reflective practice and critical thought on their own teaching activities, and to modify and improve their actions throughout the cycles of their research. Also, three meetings for group discussions were held during this period (one meeting per month) via Skyroom. The teachers reported orally on their progress, consulted about the difficulties they had experienced during the course of their CAR and shared helpful insights and fresh ideas in their projects with their peers. These discussions were also audiotaped and transcribed.

3.4 Data Analysis

Two general approaches to qualitative data analysis are distinguished. The first approach which includes various versions of Grounded Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis, reduces the complexity of large data pools by coding the data and formulating categories, while the second approach, such as the Documentary Method and hermeneutic approach, elaborates on the data sets by generating interpretative accounts (Flick, 2014). Considering the purpose and scope of the study, the focus of the research questions, the nature of the data, and the anticipated outcomes of the study, qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 1983) was used as the tool for data analysis in the present study.

First, the interviews' audio-files were transcribed. Then, the data obtained through all sources (interviews, questionnaires, diaries and documents) were pooled and prepared for the preliminary coding by repeated reading and rereading the textual data. Thematic analysis was used for the coding process which helped the researchers in identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, the inductive

approach to thematic analysis was used in which the identified themes are strongly linked to the data themselves and are not bound to pre-existing theoretical assumptions. In other words, this form of thematic analysis is data-driven. The thematic analysis was done through the following steps: reading and rereading the data pool, generating initial codes, searching for salient content categories among the related codes, labeling the related categories under major themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally defining and naming them.

This was done by highlighting particular features of pieces of data in order to group them under broader topics or concepts. In the next step, the data were revised so that the initial codes turned into salient content categories. Then closely related categories were identified across the data segments and were connected under more general labels. Further examining the codes and categories helped the researcher in writing memos and vignettes which eventually led to the emergence of the major themes in the results. Based on the examination and comparison of the main themes, analytical intuitions into the hidden meaning of the data were formed.

To reinforce the trustworthiness of the findings, strategies of data triangulation, member checking and peer checking were employed. The researchers relied on multiple sources for data collection. In addition, the findings were presented to participants in numerous cases for verification. Finally, to get the data peer-checked, a research colleague individually coded a randomly-selected set of the gathered data which resulted in 90.3% correspondence on data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The major findings of this study are presented and discussed in this part with regard to the respective research questions. First, the benefits of conducting action research for teachers' PD is described along with relevant references to

the existing literature. The second part addresses the barriers of conducting CAR and makes suggestions for finding facilitators needed to overcome them.

4.1 Teachers' perceptions about the effect of CAR on their professional development

The first research question concerned the teachers' perceptions about the possible effects of conducting classroom action research on their professional development. Through a meticulous analysis of the obtained data, five major themes were elicited, which can be categorized into two general categories of meta-cognitive development and affective development. Table 2 summarizes the categories and the relevant themes. In the following sections, attempts are made to illustrate and exemplify the main themes using relevant quotes from the participant teachers.

Table 2

Categories of PD as a result of Conducting CAR

| Categories of | Themes |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Professional Development | |
| Meta-cognitive development | -Increasing awareness-raising -Providing opportunities for self-reflection on practice |
| | -Increasing professional confidence -Developing a sense of leadership and autonomy -Improving relationship with the students and positive classroom atmosphere |
| Affective development | |

4.1.1 Meta-cognitive development

The systematic interpretation of the data obtained in this study suggests the presence of an element of 'meta-cognitive development' as a result of engagement in a period of classroom action research. This development and

learning involve various aspects of the teaching practice, from the methodological knowledge to classroom interactions. The thorough analysis of data also reveals that this learning occurred in different ways and amounts in the participant teachers. The most salient aspects of meta-cognitive growth and development reported by the teachers include an increase in their awareness of their own role as teachers and of their students' needs and preferences, and providing opportunities for self-reflection on practice.

Increasing awareness-raising

As a result of embarking on their CAR projects, teachers developed an awareness of, both their own role as teachers and of their students' needs and educational preferences. This awareness was gained through the cycles of AR which involved scrutinizing class shortcomings, interviewing pupils, systematic class observation and getting students' feedback. One of the teachers, for instance, explained how AR helped him "view his class and his students from a new perspective" through giving up his authoritative stance in the class for the first time and letting the students express their views, educational needs and preferences:

"... I could see that there was nothing wrong in letting them [the students] judge my teaching method. This way I could see the class from *their* eyes and detect my own weak and strong points" (teacher G, interview 2).

Some of the teachers also experienced changes in their self-perception of their part as teachers. They grew increasingly aware of the critical and leading role they can play in students' learning process. This particular point is elaborately stated in one of the teachers' comment:

"This opportunity [the implementation of her CAR project] reminded me once again of the central position I have in students' learning. It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration if I say that how and what I do and say in the classroom influences even their educational destiny" (teacher C, interview 3).

These results suggest the potentials of AR for assisting teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their students' needs and of their own responsibilities in the educational context. This consciousness may eventually lead to a more flexible and student-centered class environment and pave the way towards a more democratized approach to language education. Furthermore, it can give them a broader understanding of the nature of language education. Similar results were reported in previous studies (Burns & Rochsantiningsih, 2006; Cabaroglu, 2014; Gebhard, 2005; Thamrin, 2011). Teachers in Cabaroglu's (2014) study, for example, benefited from an enhanced awareness as a result of conducting AR which, in turn, helped them recognize their own and their students' potency for improvement.

Providing opportunities for self-reflection on practice

One of the benefits of AR repeatedly highlighted by the teachers throughout the diary and interview data, was the fact that the AR experience directed them toward a more analytical and reflective approach to their teaching practices. One of the teachers laid special emphasis on this point along the following lines:

“... I noticed that some of my teaching techniques have been fossilized, so I was encouraged to rethink and question the routine practices I do in the classroom every day and see whether they are effective enough or not” (teacher G, diary 2).

Also, one of the participants who used “processing instruction” to teach grammar, asserted: “I had never paid attention to my teaching in this way. After each session, I carefully examined the class activities for teaching grammar and the students' behaviors. I thought about ways to improve things in my class for the next session” (teacher F, interview 2).

As a consequence of this sharpening of reflexive sensitivity, teachers began to seek more productive alternatives to enlighten their professional

decisions and advance their level of expertise in the teaching practice. This beneficial feature of AR is considered important as one of the decisive factors of professionalism in teaching practice is the ability of reflective thinking (Rajaeenia et al., 2021). Similar results have been recorded in a number of previous studies (Atay, 2008; Banegas et al., 2013; Benitt, 2014; Burns & Edwards, 2014; Mehrani, 2017). Teachers in Benitt's (2014) study, for example, were reported to develop a deeper reflexivity which enabled them to handle the real challenges in the classroom more creatively and effectively.

4.1.2 Affective development

Affective development in this study refers to those dimensions of professional development which are related to change and improvement on an emotional and intrapersonal level. Many of the reported advantages of performing CAR by the participants were tied in with the positive feelings and emotional incidents they experienced during the conduction of their projects. The major themes reflecting this aspect of professional development include: Increasing professional confidence, developing a sense of leadership and autonomy, improving relationship with the students and creating a positive classroom atmosphere.

Increasing professional confidence

References to the concepts of professional confidence and a sense of self-efficacy were recurrently made in the teachers' comments. The majority of the teachers felt empowered professionally through undertaking AR and started viewing themselves as experts who can back up their practices in the classroom with scientifically-justifiable knowledge.

Some of the teachers with fewer years of experience felt particularly positive towards action research because it helped them overcome their sense of insecurity about their teaching competence and grew more confident in putting their choices into practice. As an example, teacher J who used

watching movie extracts to improve students' oral skills was criticized by the principal. The teacher, however, was able to defend this strategy which she considered the best for her lessons. She wrote in her diary:

“... The principal told me there are too much movie extracts on my class group and it is better for the students to analyze test items and get prepared for the final examinations. I could convince her of the legitimacy of my choice and how this technique could improve their language proficiency” (teacher J, diary 4).

Another teacher who taught reading comprehension strategies to improve students' reading skills reported experiencing a sense of confidence and satisfaction with her teaching style: “... every time I saw their [students'] scores in the mock exams, I felt more and more confident as it was obvious that they were doing better in reading” (teacher E, diary 6).

The statements quoted above illustrates how AR can act as an impetus to foster EFL teachers' sense of self-efficacy and professional confidence which have been considered as effective factors influencing professional development (Kalali Sani et al., 2021). Analysis of the data revealed that in some of the teachers, engagement in AR did not necessarily lead to gaining new theoretical knowledge, rather it caused them to discover positive aspects of their professional selves and feel secure about their internal capabilities. The same result is echoed in previous studies (Cabaroglu, 2014; Chacon, 2005; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Wyatt, 2011).

Developing a sense of leadership and autonomy

Another major theme that emerged from the analysis of the teachers' comments was related to a sense of leadership and autonomy. During the conduction of their CAR projects, the teachers underwent a gradual shift in their self-image of their position within the educational structures. As a result of this experience, they felt prepared to adopt a more active and leading role

in the educational settings and abandoned their view of research as an academic enterprise exclusive to university experts. This point is illustrated in the following quote from teacher H:

“I used to read ELT papers, mainly on the Roshd magazine wishing that I could do some research as well. But I thought it’s too idealistic for me and that I can only be the object of a research project. Now that I’ve learned AR, I feel I’ve gained more authority. I’m the boss of my own research who can do both the planning and implementation phases independently” (teacher H, interview 3).

Another interviewee explained how action research engagement can equip them with the power to take leadership in educational contexts:

“The confidence that action research gives teachers empowers us to practice our own choices and resist the practically-unjustifiable approaches and procedures which are sometimes imposed on us by the authorities. Our research-supported choices can actually turn into the orthodoxies in education” (teacher A, interview 3).

This sense of leadership and ownership of research encouraged the teachers to take control over the interventions they deemed necessary for bringing about change and improvement in whatever aspect of their own teaching. The notions of autonomy, choice and ownership in action research have been emphasized by a number of scholars (Borg, 2015; Burns, 2010; Rainey, 2000; Smith et al., 2014). The teachers in Rainey’s (2000) study, for example, came to realize that reform and improvement should not necessarily be dictated from above or from afar, rather it can be initiated and implemented in their own hands through conducting action research. It seems, therefore, that AR has the potential of empowering teachers to take leadership and initiate change in the educational system through altering their self-conception of their position in the educational context.

Improving relationship with the students and creating a positive classroom atmosphere

A further reward of involvement in AR articulated by almost all of the participants was its potency in changing classroom dynamics and promoting teacher-student relationships. Several of the participants particularly referred to a noticeable increase in students' motivation and enthusiasm to learn. Other teachers reported a renewed relationship with their students which led to a more positive and pleasant classroom atmosphere. This is evident in the following quotes provided by some of the participants:

“Negotiating lessons with the students and giving them choice in classroom procedures necessitated a friendlier and more open behavior on my part. As a result, the class was more fun” (teacher G, interview 3).

“The students were so interested in my new technique [watching movie extracts for improving oral skills] that they told their friends in other classes about it, and I heard from a colleague that her students had asked her to do the same in their class too” (teacher J, diary 3).

As the above assertions show, AR may be used as an effective tool for establishing favourable and productive classroom atmosphere which can, in turn, contribute to better learning in the long run. These findings are in line with those of several studies before (Atay, 2008; Burns & Edwards, 2014; Burns & Rochsantiningsih, 2006). Some of the participant teachers in Burns and Rochsantiningsih's (2006) study, for example, stated that AR enabled them to create and maintain happy and fruitful classroom situation through a process of emotion management and being more flexible with themselves and with their students.

4.2 The barriers of conducting action research and support structures needed to tackle them

The second and third research questions probed into the barriers that teachers encountered in the course of conducting their CAR and the type of support structures which are needed to deal with them. Various procedural, institutional and attitudinal impediments for doing research were pointed out

by the teachers which can be classified within three major themes: lack of time and heavy workload, lack of research expertise, and lack of support from school and authorities. The following sections discuss each of the problems along with exemplary quotes from the teachers and proposed solutions and support structures for tackling each problem.

Lack of time

Action research is, by nature, a demanding task which entails investing great amount of time and effort on the part of the practitioners who embark on doing it. In the light of such fact, many of the participants complained about a shortage of time which hindered their research activities within their already-tight schedule. They experienced difficulty finding time to fulfill different stages of the project such as designing their plan of action, searching and reading research articles, and attending group discussions. This issue was more challenging for female teachers who had greater family commitments. One of the high school teachers explained how the requirements of online teaching had overloaded their schedule:

“Working on Shaad [the students’ educational network] is definitely more time-consuming than face-to-face teaching. You have to produce all the educational materials by yourself. You have to video or audio-record your teaching, edit it, prepare online lessons, make online tests, ... and there is always the connection problem. All this stuff takes a lot of time. So you see, for keeping up with my AR, I had to put off some of my other responsibilities” (teacher D, interview 3).

The problem of time limitation as a predominant constraint hampering teachers’ AR activities has been mentioned in a bunch of previous studies (e.g., Burns et al., 2016; Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016; Sato & Loewen, 2019). This suggests the necessity of rearranging teachers’ schedule and accounting for the extra work and time

spent on doing research if AR is to be included in the curriculum as a regular component of teachers' professional development programs. As Borg (2007) stated "sustained and productive research engagement is not feasible unless the time it requires is acknowledged and built into institutional systems" (p.744). Reducing teaching hours, assigning teacher assistants for backing teachers in producing educational materials, developing tests, correcting papers and other activities, and allocating official "research hours" in the teachers' weekly schedule are among the strategies which can be employed to address the challenge of time limitation.

Lack of research expertise

The next theme which emerged from the data analysis was related to teachers' research abilities. Even though the participant teachers had attended the AR workshops in the first phase of the study, many of them reported having difficulties in putting their theoretical knowledge into practice. Furthermore, it is obvious that four workshops cannot do full justice to the details and delicacies involved in conducting AR. This challenge was more noticeable in the case of teachers with a B.A. degree and they regularly sought help and support from the researcher. The teachers particularly struggled with the phases of formulating research questions, literature review, designing the next cycle in their AR, data collection and data analysis. Some of them experienced a feeling of getting 'lost' during various stages of their research: "... Sometimes I really felt stuck . . . The most troublesome stage was planning the next cycle" (teacher E, interview 3). Another teacher commented: "... Your [the researcher's] help in formulating research questions and data analysis phase was so valuable to me. At first, I didn't know how to sort out my data ..." (teacher F, interview 3).

Overall, it is clear that teachers needed constant help and support while undertaking different procedures of AR. This situation seems to be prevalent

among EFL teachers who venture on doing AR in their workplaces (Atay, 2008; Borg & Alshmaimeri, 2012; Mesfin, 2003; Ozkan, 2011; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016). In order to overcome this obstacle, teachers' academic constitution and research expertise must be strengthened. The initial step to fulfill such goal is integrating more effective research courses in the B.A. and M.A. programs which can provide the students with detailed knowledge and practical skills required for conducting classroom-based action research. The research courses currently offered in the Iranian universities are often mere discussions of theoretical knowledge of research with a heavy emphasis on quantitative approaches to scientific inquiry and rarely, if ever, engage the students with genuine research activities (Mehrani, 2017). A further strategy to enrich the teachers' research proficiency is injecting regular, on-going and high-quality training and instruction on AR into teachers' in-service professional development programs by the educational authorities. Finally, facilitating opportunities for productive partnership and collaboration between teachers and university researchers may enhance teachers' research competence.

Lack of institutional support

Another impediment which was reported by the participants to restrict their research pursuits was related to lack of support and acknowledgement from the educational authorities and the institutions where they worked. The participants were specifically displeased with inhibitory factors such as fixed and inflexible syllabi, lack of freedom in choosing the content, materials and teaching methods, lack of easy and free access to high-quality academic papers and books, and lack of fund. Some of the teachers complained that the procedures involved in their projects were in some cases inconsistent with the school priorities. One of the teachers' chosen materials, for instance, was not compatible with the materials required for the final examinations and hence

provoked some protests from the principal and a few of parents. Other teachers referred to lack of a conducive research culture in their respective institutions as a demotivating factor which caused them lose willingness and enthusiasm to pursue their research interests.

Resonating with the results of previous relevant studies (Alhassan & Holi Ali, 2020; Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019; Anwaruddin, 2015; Cardona, 2020; Sato & Loewen, 2019), these findings highlight the significance of institutional and administrative support in promoting teachers' research engagement. As Cardona (2020) argued, "in order to convert teachers' motivation, commitment, and knowledge of research into an actual research output, a strong institutional support must be in place" (p.8). An effective strategy to achieve such goal is establishing 'action research units' in the educational institutions such as the bureaus of education in each province with the mission of fostering a positive research climate in the educational milieus. It could support volunteer teacher-researchers by freeing up more time to devote to their AR endeavors. Other incentives it may provide include financial aid or promotions to motivate teachers to undertake AR. Furthermore, to provide teachers with academic resources, the AR unit can supply free access to journal articles and books. The higher-order policy-makers in the Iranian educational system may contribute in improving this research climate by making the curriculum more flexible, shifting the focus from a product-oriented to a more process-oriented education, and granting a more decentralized system of education.

5. Conclusion

The study sought to explore the potentials and pitfalls of conducting action research as related to EFL teachers' professional development, and to identify the facilitators which are needed for promoting teachers' research engagement. Results revealed that undertaking action research bore

immediate and positive impacts on teachers' professional growth and development through increasing their awareness of their role as teachers and of their students' needs, providing opportunities for self-reflection on practice, increasing professional confidence, developing a sense of leadership and autonomy, and creating a positive classroom atmosphere. However, the participants were found to struggle with three major challenges during the conduction of their AR: lack of time, lack of academic research knowledge and lack of institutional support.

These findings hold implications for the field of language education. Keeping in mind the fact that the current in-service teacher PD programs in Iran are generally regarded as inefficient and low-quality (Jamshidi & Sadeghi, 2014; Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2019; Mohammadi & Moradi, 2017), in-service action research can be regarded as an economic, contextualized and efficient instrument of professional development which can be employed by the practicing teachers at their own convenient time tailored to their own specific teaching circumstances and classroom peculiarities. This signifies the imperativeness of providing ample opportunities for promoting AR engagement among EFL teachers and focusing attempts towards eliminating its barriers.

At the macro level, the responsibility is to be shouldered by educational policy-makers, tertiary-level curriculum developers and teacher educators. Action research should be awarded serious attention in the research courses in the BA and MA courses and in the teacher training programs so that prospective teachers would be adequately equipped with specialized knowledge and practical skills to confidently engage with undertaking AR in their own teaching contexts. Such need is further heightened regarding one of the noteworthy findings of the present study indicating the teachers' insufficient academic knowledge of research. At the micro level, AR must be

recognized and accepted as a legitimate form of inquiry by educational institutions and local bureaus of education, systematic and sustainable institutional support must be offered to teacher-researchers and every attempt should be made to provide them with inward-looking perspectives and internal motivation to do AR.

The study has made a modest contribution to understanding profits and problems of performing AR for EFL teachers' profession. Yet, we must acknowledge at this point, that it was limited in terms of scale and generalizability. First, the results were extracted from teachers' self-report data and hence, may have been subject to the social desirability bias. Second, the intervention in this study was conducted during one semester. Therefore, it fails to provide evidence about the long-term impact of teacher AR on PD. Further longitudinal measures are necessary to find out whether the results would be sustained and durable over time. Third, the obtained data mainly reflected perceptions and beliefs of high school teachers. Also, female participants outnumbered the male ones. These limitations justify the need for doing additional research studies with more representative samples and in diverse ELT contexts. Finally, it is recommended that replication studies be conducted addressing alternatives to tackle the obstacles and barriers of conducting AR by EFL teachers (discussed above) in order to see how action research would interact with professional development in more favorable and supportive educational situations.

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