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*Iranian Journal  
of  
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

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## A narrative study of Iranian EFL teachers' experiences of doing action research

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### ABSTRACT

The present narrative study examined the purposes that language teachers pursue in their research studies. The study also explored the opportunities and challenges that teachers experience while doing action research. Data were collected through a survey of narrative frames among 68 teachers, reflective essays written by 9 teachers and individual interviews with 12 other teachers. Analyzing the content of the data and sorting out the main themes showed that teachers are mainly concerned with practical aspects of their profession such as developing their teaching skills and improving students' knowledge in particular language areas. In addition, teachers believe that action research broadens their understanding of language education, provides them with a framework for reflecting on their practice, empowers them to play more important roles in educational systems and heightens their awareness of students' needs. The findings also point to teachers' consensus that their time limitations, their lack of specialized knowledge of research, administrative restrictions and lack of collaboration are among the main challenges they experience when undertaking action research. The study concludes with the discussion of the broader implications of the study for promoting action research in language teaching profession.

**Keywords:** action research; challenges; language teachers' perceptions; opportunities; teacher education

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

**Received:** 11 July 2016

**Revised version received:** 22 Oct. 2016

**Accepted:** 14 Dec. 2016

**Available online:** 1 Jan. 2017

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## Introduction

In the last few decades, numerous attempts have been made to alter traditional transmission-oriented methods of teacher professional development, so as to empower teachers and provide them with tools through which they take control of classroom decisions, analyze challenges and play a more active role in their own instructional improvement (Smith & Sela, 2005). One major theme in such attempts has been the promotion of action research (AR). In its educational sense, AR can be defined as a systematic inquiry conducted by practitioners in their own teaching context in order to improve their pedagogical practice (Creswell, 2012). It mainly emphasizes on discovering, conceptualizing and developing alternative perspectives on educational issues, through critically reflecting and appraising one's own and others' behaviors and beliefs (Mertler, 2012).

The literature suggests various reasons for promoting AR in education. One of the main reasons is anchored in recent critical reports that “vented serious doubts about the quality and relevance of educational research”, claiming that traditional paradigms of research failed to “provide educational professionals with clear guidance for their work” (Biesta, 2007, p. 2). They yielded only few conclusive and practical results (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007) and were often tendentious and socio-politically loaded (Pring, 2000).

A further thinking behind promoting AR is to make education an evidence-based profession (Davies, 1999; Hargreaves, 1997). The proponents of evidence-based teaching argue that if teachers involve in research activities, their pedagogical decisions and judgments will be informed by research evidence and this, in turn, will improve the quality of education (Hargreaves, 1996). This view suggests that teachers, by engaging in research, actively generate local knowledge of learning and teaching while they continuously address the pedagogical problems that they face in their profession (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

In light of these arguments, the Iranian educational system has recently made various encouraging initiatives in order to promote teachers' research engagement. There is a growing emphasis on research activities, and many educational centers have placed stringent requirements for publication by teachers. Teachers are specifically expected to embark on research projects and address their educational problems through AR (Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015). This is a challenging obligation for Iranian teachers, because the educational system has traditionally regarded conducting research as something luxurious, non-compelling, and voluntary (Mehrmohammadi, 1997). However, such an undertaking seems to be more challenging for language teachers, who have less research experience, and more language problems, when compared to teachers of other subjects. In this study, attempts are made to address the tension between the transformative potential of AR for language teachers' professional development and the challenges associated with the nature of doing AR. In doing so, the study first examines teachers' research priorities and the pedagogical purposes that they attempt to address in their AR projects. Then, to understand some of the complexities involved in doing AR, the study explores teachers' perceptions of the opportunities and the challenges of doing AR.

## Review of the literature

The initial conceptions of AR were characterized by an emphasis on its potential to authorize practitioners, emancipate individuals and initiate social reform (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). A historical examination of the literature, however, reveals a proliferation of conceptualizations, interpretations and uses of AR during the last few decades. Currently, multiple models of AR (e.g. participatory action research, practical action research, collaborative inquiry, teacher research) exist, with a common thread of concurrently reflecting on practice, and attempting to improve it.

Characteristically, the procedure is often an ongoing, systematic and recursive way to address the problem by planning and implanting actions. AR intends “to improve practice, the understanding of practitioners’ practice, and the context in which practice is located” (Pine, 2009, p. 30). At the heart of AR is reflective practice and practitioners are encouraged to critically evaluate what they are doing, why they are doing it and how it can influence their teaching and lead to wider professional and social changes (Mertler, 2012).

In language education, there are varying understandings of AR. Some maintain that AR intends to contribute to the quality of schools, communities, and social lives of the participants. In this approach which falls into the critical-emancipatory movement, AR refers to evaluation, examination and analysis of socio-cultural and political aspects of education and intends to empower individuals through problematizing fundamental conceptions and assumptions that overshadow the social and educational lives of individuals (Crookes, 1993). Taking a relatively conservative position, some others (Burns, 1999, 2005) argue that AR involves teachers examining their own classroom situation with the purpose of improving their teaching practice. They describe it as a “cycle of identifying research questions based on personal teaching experience, doing background reading on the subject identified, collecting and analysing data, drawing conclusions and then starting the entire process again” (Block, 2000, p. 138). Such a conception of AR lies mainly within the “teacher-researcher” movement (Crookes, 1993, p. 132) and it emphasizes on the transformative power of AR for improving teachers’ professional knowledge. Although there are further modest conceptions of AR which hold that it is “simply an extension of the normal reflective practice of many teachers” (Wallace, 1991, p. 57), an analysis of AR studies published in English language teaching (ELT) journals shows that AR is predominantly considered as an instrument for developing teacher professional knowledge and skills (Burns, 2005, 2011; Burton, 2000; Crookes, 1993; Nassaji, 2012). In this respect, Farrell (2008) discusses that AR in ELT is mainly portrayed as conducting inquiries into classroom activities rather than addressing social and political issues. Accordingly, for the purpose of this study, AR refers to a broad-based type of educational research which Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe as “Systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom settings” (1993, p. 27).

Inspection of the relevant literature provides an extensive list of significant potential benefits of AR. For instance, it has been argued that AR can enhance teachers’ understanding of their own practices (Kincheloe, 2003), and helps them to critically analyze their teaching context (Moreira, Vieira & Marques, 1999). It is hypothesized that carrying out AR increases teachers’ self-confidence and empowers them to play more important roles in education (Burns, 1999). Some have claimed that AR can potentially bring researchers and teachers into a closer harmony (Block, 2000; Crookes, 1993) and thus bridges the gap between research and practice. Others have speculated that through engagement in AR, teachers adopt an identity of theorizers (Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015) and become better equipped to practice their personal theories and articulate their practice (Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004). Moreover, AR is assumed to build teachers’ self-efficacy and to make them aware of their students’ needs (Cabaroglu, 2014).

There is, also a mounting body of empirical investigation that bears on AR. For example, a spate of studies has focused on the effects of teacher-researcher collaborations and collaborative AR on teachers’ professional development. Atay (2008) has found that partnership in AR increases teachers’ awareness of their teaching, develops their research skills, facilitates their critical thoughts and boosts their self-esteem. Other studies indicate that participation in collaborative AR promotes teacher autonomy (Wang & Zhang, 2014), increases their sensitivity about the classroom situation (Thorne & Qiang, 1996), and motivates them by improving their self-efficacy and increasing their self-awareness as professionals (Cabaroglu, 2014). However, many of the existing studies on collaborative AR have been weakened by ill-defined research agendas and lack of a

methodologically sound approach to conducting research (Barkhuizen & Borg, 2010). For example, an important shortcoming in these studies is that the effects of collaboration and AR are often pooled, and consequently, the impacts of collaboration are discussed as outcomes of AR. A further problem in much of the existing work is that studies were almost exclusively conducted as parts of teacher education programs where AR was not a voluntary activity but an institutional requirement, something that teachers had to do in order to, for example, complete a teacher education program or pass an assignment. This can lead to the problems of “faking it” (Hobbs, 2007, p. 405) or deviate teachers’ focus of attention from adequately addressing educational concerns to task completion.

In the Iranian context, the main strand of inquiry into AR has focused on teachers’ understanding of this genre of research. For example, Zare-ee, Moh Don, and Shu Sim (2015) have explored Iranian university instructors’ conceptions of AR and compared them against their Malaysian counterparts. They reported that the prevalent conceptions of research held by both groups of participants were in line with traditional views of research. In a similar investigation, Dehghan and Sahragard (2015) found that most Iranian teachers consider AR as a professional activity that should be conducted by expert researchers and not by typical teachers. These findings were mainly echoed in Mehrani’s study (2016) who argued that teachers’ narrow conceptions of research make alternative models of research such as AR remain obscure and unappealing to many language teachers. Further relevant studies in the Iranian local context include an exploration of teachers’ motivations for doing research (Mehrani, 2015), a comparative study of different models of AR (Nasrollahi, Krish & Mohd Noor, 2012), as well as an investigation of barriers that keep teachers away from engagement in AR (e.g. Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016). However, the literature searches for the current study failed to identify any systematic investigations exclusively exploring teachers’ experiences of engagement in AR. Lack of such empirical studies may lead to the conviction that much of the literature on the value of AR has been of a hypothetical nature. This is true to the extent that very few professionals would dispute the importance and potential value of AR. A further complicating issue is that in most of the accounts about teachers’ AR researchers have focused too one-sidedly on potentially positive aspects of AR. The challenge is, therefore, that the claimed benefits and the potential problems of AR remain unconfirmed and have yet to be investigated through detailed and systematic studies (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005 as cited in Xu, 2014). Such studies can provide an insider account of its nature and value, and elucidate the opportunities as well as challenges that teachers encounter while undertaking AR. Bearing this in mind, the current study attempts to gain insights into Iranian English teachers’ perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of AR. Therefore, the following three research questions are addressed in this study.

- 1- What purposes do language teachers pursue in their AR?
- 2- What are language teachers’ perceived opportunities while doing AR?
- 3- What are language teachers’ perceived challenges while doing AR?

An inquiry into the above issues is both necessary and useful, because it can inform policymakers and stakeholders of what is possible and desirable in relation to AR. Another reason behind the importance of this line of inquiry is that the voices of teachers, as the main stakeholders of AR, can be heard and hopefully incorporated into the processes of making and implementing educational policies in language teacher education programs.

## Method

### *Participants*

In order to recruit a research sample for this study, the researcher initially prepared a list of potential participants. In doing so, he first approached several colleagues and teachers to invite teacher researchers to participate in this study. In addition, through collaboration with the authorities of an Iranian professional ELT journal, teachers who had submitted their AR studies for publication during the last three years were contacted and shortlisted. Several other potential participants who had presented their AR studies in some of the national and local conferences during the last three years were also identified and added to the list. The potential participants (N = 132) were asked if they were interested in participating in the study.

Narrative frames were then sent out to 73 teachers who accepted to participate in the study. Overall, 68 teachers (94%) completed and returned the narrative frames. Inspections of the demographic information of the teachers revealed that their teaching experience varied from 2 to 29 years, though most teachers (65%) had less than 10 years of experience. A total of 41% had Bachelors' degree, 48% had postgraduate qualifications (i.e. Masters' or Doctorate), and 11% either had teaching certificates or did not specify their academic qualifications. In addition, of the 68 returns, 24 came from teachers working in private language institutes, 29 from high school teachers, and a further 15 from English teachers working in universities.

### *Instruments*

The study relied on multiple sources of data, including narrative frames, semi-structured interviews, AR reports and reflective essays. However, these bodies of data were not analyzed fragmentarily, rather they were considered complementarily. That is, the narrative frames were initially used to collect substantial amount of data so as to make broader generalizations possible. The interviews and reflective essays were, then, used to further investigate the issue, while also helping the researcher to minimize the potential risk of "eliciting a set of factual statements" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 383) through teachers' narratives.

### *Narrative frames*

According to Barkhuizen (2011), a narrative frame is "a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths" (p. 402). Well-designed narrative frames help respondents to talk about their experiences in narrative form, with an outcome which reflects "a coherent snapshot" (Barkhuizen, 2014, p. 13) of their experiences in narrative form. In the present study, following Xu's (2014) study, a template of narrative frames with 13 statement starters was designed. It aimed to help teachers reflect on their AR experiences by framing the following four broad themes into a coherent whole.

1. teachers' demographic information,
2. teachers' areas of research interest and level of research engagement,
3. teachers' perceived challenges and opportunities while doing AR, and
4. teachers' perceived relationship between their AR and teaching practice.

The choice of these four themes as the focus of this study was based on the research questions, and was mainly informed by the relevant literature concerning language teachers' research engagement (e.g. Borg, 2009; Xu, 2014).

#### *AR reports and reflective essays*

Teachers completing the narrative frames were also asked to send a copy of their most recent AR report to the researcher. A total of 45 teachers shared their research reports. The majority of these research papers ( $N = 29$ ) were already published in accredited journals or were presented in local and national conferences. In addition, teachers were invited to make a further contribution by writing a reflective essay. In particular, they were asked to reflect on their experiences as an action researcher and explain how conducting AR influenced their professional development. Only 9 teachers volunteered to make a follow-up writing contribution. Although they were free to write in English, if they wished, all of their reflective essays were in Persian, and ranged from one to three pages in length.

#### *Individual interviews*

To broaden the scope of the exploration, a proportional sample of teachers were asked to participate in an individual, semi-structured interview session. Mindful of the contextual limitations and the geographical proximity of the researcher to the participants, 30 teachers were contacted to make an interview appointment. From among these, 12 agreed to make an interview contribution. During the interview sessions teachers were initially prompted to give details on their research background and their areas of research interests. They were then invited to expand on their responses to the narrative prompts concerning the challenges and opportunities they encountered while doing research. In addition, they were asked to explain their perceived influence of their research activities on their teaching practice. Within this structure, however, room was left for further flexible communication through which participants could elaborate on any issues relevant to their views and experiences about AR. The interviews were conducted in Persian and lasted, on average, about 40 minutes. All the interview sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English.

#### *Research design*

In the present study, a particular version of narrative research approach was followed. This research design reflects what Creswell calls "a personal experience story" and is characterized by gathering "data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences" (Creswell, 2012, p. 504). It is a popular research method for presenting the experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2012), and is particularly suitable for the current study because it can provide a macro-analytic picture of teachers' experiences of doing AR "in all its complexity and richness" (Bell, 2002, p. 209).

To enhance the quality of the study, various strategies were employed. First, the research instruments, the data collection procedures, and the systematic process of data analysis were carefully designed. In addition, attempts were made to maximize the transparency of the research procedure so as to ensure that the conclusions are well grounded in evidence. Creswell (2012) refers to triangulation as a further technique for improving the quality of research. To triangulate the findings in the present study, the researcher relied on multiple sources to collect data and to "build a coherent justification for the themes" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). In addition, the findings were presented to two teachers for verification. Thus, the findings that are presented in the following reflect the conclusions derived from the integration of various sources. Attempts are made to

extract original data excerpts from teachers' essays, interviews and narrative frames to convey key themes and findings, and to facilitate communication of those findings.

## Results and discussion

### *Teachers' research priorities and pedagogical concerns*

The first research question addressed the pedagogical concerns that teachers choose to focus on in their AR studies. Analysis of teachers' research reports yielded four main themes across the inquiries conducted by the participants including various teaching techniques, students' engagement and classroom interactions, motivation, and educational materials. Table 1 summarizes the primary concerns of teachers along with instances of teachers' pedagogical purposes.

Table 1  
*Areas of Action Research Projects*

| Primary themes of research                         | Instances of teachers' pedagogical concerns  | Frequency |
|--|--|-----------|
| Teaching techniques and particular language areas  | Teaching and evaluating through games; Using brainstorming as a useful strategy for teaching writing; Improving students' test scores through active methods like mnemonics, mime and rough guess; Finding out and tackling problematic vowels and consonants.   | 24        |
| Students' participation and classroom interactions | Increasing students' interactions through playing roles; Using Multiple Intelligence theory to create a more lively atmosphere in the classroom; Designing group work activities for classroom practice; Grouping students with different levels of proficiency. | 11        |
| Motivation   | Potential strategies to motivate students; Using mailing lists to increase students' motivation; Students' lack of motivation and their reasons.   | 8         |
| Educational materials                              | How can I integrate culture into Iranian high school textbooks; Colleagues' opinions about "Right Paths to English" series.  | 5         |

Note: Since some AR studies pertained to multiple coding categories, the total does not add up to 45.

The findings suggest that most teachers are not particularly concerned with socio-cultural and political issues of their profession such as the quality of institutes, overall policies of education, social lives of individuals; rather, the majority focus more on technical issues related to their own pedagogical activities. This adds to the existing knowledge about teachers' pedagogical concerns and reflects their research priorities in the Iranian context. A comparison across studies in other contexts reveals similar findings reported in the literature. For instance, in a study on the effect of AR on teachers' self-efficacy Cabaroglu (2014), found that prospective language teachers were mainly concerned with issues related to classroom management, and increasing students' motivation and interactions. Other studies have also reported that language teachers often want to focus their research efforts on issues related to students' motivation, language skills, educational materials and classroom participation (e.g. Atay, 2008; Barkhuizen, 2009). This implies that language teachers are mainly concerned with the *technical value* of AR (De Vries, 1990) and it reflects what Crookes (1993) refers to as *practical model* of AR. This model is characterized by an emphasis on local problems and involves practitioners examining their own classroom context for a provision of technical and instrumental knowledge. This finding confirms that much AR in ELT

has taken a practical rather than a critical form (Burns, 2005). In other words, teachers tend to focus on pedagogical problems rather than socio-political and cultural issues.

### *Teachers' perceived opportunities*

The second research question focused on the opportunities that engagement in AR provides for teachers. In order to answer this question, the researcher initially scrutinized teachers' narratives for any emerging themes and patterns in relation to the research question. This was followed by tallying the frequency of recurring themes. Then, multiple passes were made through other sources of data (i.e. reflective essays and interviews) and themes that were triangulated across different bodies of data were documented in a checklist matrix. This procedure was followed in an inductive fashion, without any pre-determined theoretical assumptions in order to ensure that the emerging themes can best answer the research question.

As Table 2 shows, the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the narrative frames were that doing AR provides teachers with a framework for reflecting on their practice, helps them develop a broader understanding of language education, increases their awareness of students' needs and individual differences, and empowers them to take leadership in educational changes.

Table 2  
*Teachers' Perceived Opportunities as Stated in Their Responses to Narrative Prompts*

| Opportunities  | Instances from teachers' narratives   | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|---|-----------|------------|
| Providing a framework for reflecting on practice                             | I feel like a professional teacher; Makes me aware of my own strengths and weak points; Helps me think deeply on what I did and how I can do it better; become analytical about my teaching behaviors.                        | 31        | 46%        |
| Developing a broader understanding of language education                     | I can gain new perspectives in education; I can see my own potentials; It helps to test out our own theories; can develop an outsider's standpoint; I gain a sort of ongoing professional growth.                             | 28        | 41%        |
| Increasing teachers' awareness of students' needs and individual differences | I improve my understanding of how to meet the needs of my students; We can develop insights about students' educational needs through talking with them and conducting interviews; It helps me to accept learner differences. | 19        | 28%        |
| Empowering teachers to take leadership in educational changes                | It increases our self-confidence; I develop my social networks with university professors; I feel that my innovative ideas are backed by research; I can present my findings in conferences.                                  | 14        | 21%        |

Note: Since teachers could mention multiple opportunities, the total in the table does not add up to 68.

### *A framework for reflecting on practice*

As summarized in Table 2, the analysis of teachers' narratives revealed that 46% of the participants (N = 31) felt positive about doing AR because it helped them "feel like a professional teacher" and be aware of their "strengths and weak points". The analysis of the reflective essays and interviews similarly showed that teachers reported that their AR experiences made them more analytical and reflective about their profession. In particular, it helped them to develop a critical view toward their own "standard and routine" teaching style, and motivated them to "houseclean their teaching repertoire". For example, one of the interviewees stated that, throughout a research project, he started to design "better vocabulary instruction techniques" and "constantly revised and modified" his techniques. Another interviewee explained that AR made him "more aware of students' relationships" and forced him to "continuously think of alternative possibilities for increasing



students' classroom interactions". This, as the following interview extract illustrates, led him to change his classroom management skills as well as his ideas about teaching.

I used to be very strict for grouping my students. I enforced them to do their listening activities individually, so as to ensure that everybody is engaged. For speaking [activities] I determined who works with whom, in groups of two... Later, I understood, it is simply not possible to regulate their behavior with strict rules, so I started to keep a list of my grouping rules to a minimum. Now, they have got more chances of interactions, with four or five classmates. I modeled this [liberal grouping policy] after my colleague who had used it in a private institute.

As a result of his research project, and through the provision of various understanding and interpretations, he became aware of alternative grouping possibilities, and more reflective of his own classroom management.

Several studies have reported an increase in teachers' level of reflectivity as a result of engagement in research. For example, the participants in Linder's (1991) study considered research as a valuable opportunity to systematically monitor their teaching practice. They assumed that involvement in research activities provides a systematic record of teaching practice which can be used for further analysis and reflection (Linder, 1991). Sowa (2009) observed that conducting AR made teachers "more reflective and critical about their teaching" and "led to a change in their teaching, as well as their ideas" about language teaching (p. 1030). It seems therefore, that AR should be considered more seriously as a framework for promoting reflective teaching.

#### *Developing an overall understanding of language education*

The next theme that emerged from the analysis of narrative frames was that 41% of the participants (N = 19) credited doing research for it allowed them develop their overall understanding of the process of language teaching. This was variously articulated in the narrative frames through phrases like AR can "help me to see things differently", "AR gives you an outsider's standpoint", and through AR "teachers wear a telescopic lens". Throughout the interview sessions, one of the teachers also mentioned that through carrying out research, she could develop her "monitoring skills" and "evaluating abilities". Two other teachers explained that research "broadened" their understanding of language education and changed their "perception as a teacher". This perceived transformative power of research reflects what Korthagen (2007) refers to as *formal knowledge* of education. It characterizes a kind of systematic, abstract and propositional body of knowledge that enables teachers to answer fundamental questions such as 'what makes a language teacher effective?'

Studies have also explored how classroom-based inquiries can heighten teachers' self-awareness. For instance, in a graduate program Sowa (2009) found that conducting research projects, made teachers more aware of "how and what they were teaching" (p.1030). Teachers specifically mentioned that as a result of embarking on projects, they became more thoughtful about their teaching and assessment. Likewise, McDonough's study showed that teachers who participated in collaborative AR "gained greater understanding of their L2 classes and used that new understanding to improve their L2 teaching practices" (McDonough, 2006, p. 42). Other studies have also reported that teachers often use AR as an effective instrument, for developing their professional skills (e.g. Atay, 2008). On this basis, one of the important advantages of undertaking AR is that it can help teachers to rethink their assumptions and initiate changes in their teaching practice.

Investigations show that Iranian English teachers may hold strong assumptions about different aspects of their profession due to various cultural, political and social reasons particular to their

teaching context (Mirhosseini & Samar, 2015). Teachers in this study, however, reported that conducting AR created an opportunity for them to “gain new perspectives”, see their “own potentials” and sharpen their “perceptions”. It seems, therefore, that teachers’ reluctance to alter their assumptions about language education can be overcome through involvement in AR.

#### *An awareness of students’ needs and individual differences*

The next theme that emerged from the data was about the insights that teachers gained about students’ educational needs through conducting interviews, seeking students’ feedback, and systematically observing classes. As Table 2 shows, about 28% of the teachers (N = 19) had a consensus on this particular advantage of AR. This was also mirrored in teachers’ reflective essays and their responses to the interview questions. For example, one of teachers explained that doing AR provided her with an opportunity to see her “students as research participants”, and to pay more attention to their educational preferences, learning styles, and idiosyncratic circumstances. Another teacher wrote that she, through students’ feedback, realized that her students were not particularly content with her grammar instruction because they felt that she “was teaching grammatical points too fast, and only in English”. She then, “talked this issue over with a few colleagues” and based on their suggestions “started to teach grammatical points in English then briefly explain them in Persian”. Another teacher wrote the following in his reflective essay.

I had to systematically record the students’ performance, progress, and behavior, and regularly seek their opinion on what is going on in the class. This took me a lot of time but gave me a chance to see the class from their points of view.

This seems to suggest that AR can serve as a potent tool for teachers to realize students’ needs and how to meet those needs. This interesting benefit can open up an avenue for student-centered and more democratic forms of language instruction in the traditional education system in the Iranian context.

#### *Empowering teachers*

Some scholars (e.g. Chacon, 2005; Henson, 2001; Wyatt, 2011) have highlighted potential effects of involvement in research on practitioners’ self-image of their positions in educational systems. In particular, taking an inquiry stance helps teachers to avoid labeling academic researchers as the only experts (Worrall, 2004), to heighten their awareness of external factors impinging on their classrooms (Burns, 1999), and “to move out of their submissive position” in educational systems (Gurney, 1989, p. 15). In the present study, 21% of the teachers (N = 14) indicated that, as a result of undertaking AR their “self-confidence” increased and that they felt their “innovative ideas are backed by research”. Throughout the interviews, the participants also made recurrent references to their leading roles in “decision making” processes, and explained that they felt positive about doing research because it helped them “own theoretically justifiable knowledge”, “lead professional meetings”, “advise the principal and other colleagues” and “critically evaluate educational materials”. In addition, one teacher, in her reflective essay, explained that her engagement in research helped her “to resist the manager’s insistence” on modifying her “language evaluation technique”. On this basis, it seems conducting AR can be an important impetus for empowering teachers to take leadership in educational changes.

Mention must be made that in analyzing the data a total of 9 additional opportunities were also identified. However, these opportunities seemed to reflect the idiosyncratic conditions of teachers, as they were not supported by any other respondent. As an example, one of the participants mentioned that through doing and publishing an AR he could “convince the educational authorities

and move from a deprived educational district to a more developed school". Therefore, these unique statements are not discussed here.

### *Teachers' perceived challenges*

Apart from teachers' perceived opportunities, the study also explored various challenges that teachers experience while carrying out AR. In doing so, a qualitative data analysis procedure, similar to the one used in the previous section, was followed. That is, first the researcher carefully examined teachers' narratives, seeking for any responses related to teachers' perceived challenges. Then, responses were categorized and the frequency of each category was counted. Next, relevant contents were extracted and documented from reflective essays and interview transcripts so as to augment the narrative data. In the following section, the main themes that emerged from the data are presented under thematic headings that intend to name teachers' perceived challenges. In each section attempts are made to discuss the results of the narratives along with direct quotes from individual interviews and reflective essays used to illustrate and exemplify teachers' key points.

Table 3

*Teachers' Perceived Challenges as Stated in Their Responses to Narrative Prompts*

| Challenges                                    | Instances from teachers' narratives  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|--|-----------|------------|
| Teachers' heavy workload and time limitations | We should be given some time off to do research; It is very time consuming; My schedule makes me too busy and leaves no room for doing research; I have to teach 36 hours every week, and I have got no time for research.   | 49        | 72%        |
| Lack of collaboration                         | Colleagues' lack of interest; Some colleagues easily refuse to help me collect data; The most important one is the inertia and sometimes the envy that I feel among other teachers; Those people who cooperate but are not willing to tell the truth or do not take the study seriously.   | 37        | 54%        |
| Lack of specialized knowledge of research     | Doing statistical analysis, and using SPSS; Lack of teachers who are experienced in conducting research studies; Lack of easy access to the updated and useful sources (e.g. journals and books).  | 15        | 22%        |
| Administrative restrictions                   | At schools they give permission, but it (getting permission) is very hard; There are many restrictive rules and regulations; The overall atmosphere of the English teaching system is not encouraging in conducting research studies; The principals' reluctance to cooperate with the researcher; Teachers do not have enough freedom in their classes. | 21        | 31%        |

Note: Since teachers could mention multiple challenges, the total in the table does not add up to 68.

### *Teachers' heavy workload and time limitations*

As shown in Table 3, one of the most recurring themes that emerged from the analysis of the narratives was teachers' time restrictions. A total of 49 teachers (72%) indicated that their heavy workloads and uncompromising schedules were among the major obstacles in conducting further research. This challenge was also triangulated in interviews where some of the teachers maintained that they can manage their own "spare time" and spend more time on their projects out of the school, but "school regulations" and "curricular limitations" do not allow them to focus on their studies in the classroom context. One of the teachers specifically argued that, as part of an AR project, he intended to "take an oral test and evaluate students' oral performance" but due to time restrictions he had to "rely on students' final marks as a criterion". In a reflective essay, another

teacher asserted that sometimes he had to make “extra efforts” and “putt off avocations” to keep up with his AR.

Existing research also confirms that time limitation is a “predominant reason” for preventing teachers from doing research (Borg, 2009, p. 370; Burns, Westmacott & Hidalgo Ferrer, 2016). Therefore, simply by adding ‘research hours’ into teachers’ busy schedules, AR is not likely to be promoted in educational centers. Conducting research requires great work and time. Without accounting for such extra work and time, teachers will not be genuinely encouraged to do research (Gore & Giltin, 2004). As Borg (2007) argues, “sustained and productive research engagement is not feasible unless the time it requires is acknowledged and built into institutional systems” (p. 744).

#### *Lack of collaboration*

As Table 3 shows, 54% of the participants (N = 37) expressed reservations about the collaborative nature of AR. For example, through their responses to the narrative prompts, 18 respondents variously complained about “colleagues’ lack of interest” and three others held that they received a “negative response” once they asked for collaboration. There were two additional cases of referring to “students’ lack of interest and collaboration”. A more elaborate mention of such complaints was also made in one of the teachers’ reflective essay.

Now I think if I worked [on the project] alone, I would have wrapped up the final report much earlier. Because, when I asked them [two colleagues] to write the techniques they use to motivate their students, it took them about a month [to answer]... It’s not that I don’t want to collaborate, but in collaboration deadlocks are quite probable and you always have to wait for them to do something.

During the interviews, one of the teachers also equated collaborative research with “further work” and another participant found it “unhelpful”. In addition, some teachers challenged policy makers and school principals for not being collaborative. Generally, in teachers’ statements, negative feelings toward collaboration in research are invoked. Comments of this type imply that although teachers may acknowledge the importance of collaborative activities in conducting AR, it seems that the material conditions in educational contexts and the discursive formation of values and expectations in teachers’ workplace are not currently conducive to collaboration among colleagues. If AR is to be used as an educational strategy for enhancing teachers’ professional development, one possible strategy is that teachers along with educational policy makers explore ways to achieve more cooperative types of relationship with colleagues and other researchers. To be effective, however, such collaborative activities require greater humility from teachers and researchers as well as policy makers (Author, 2015).

#### *Lack of specialized knowledge of research*

The next theme that emerged from the analysis of the data had to do with the knowledge, skills and qualities needed to conduct research autonomously. Although a few participants reported that carrying out AR provided them with “an opportunity to learn” and “to develop research skills”, about 22% of the teachers (N = 15) maintained that lack of such research skills as “analyzing data” and “observing the standards” were among the main challenges that they experienced. This was also reflected in teachers’ essays. For instance, one of the teachers explained her struggles as follows.

Analyzing the data was a real headache. I didn't really know how to calculate [the statistics]. They had told us that we have to use SPSS, but I didn't know how to work with it... I asked a friend to do it [the inferential statistics] for me... But later I understood that I didn't have to do that. Only tabulating the final scores and a simple comparison of means would have been enough.

Another teacher specifically stated that he had not been able to “find a qualified research paper to follow as a model” in his studies. It seems that teachers' lack of research knowledge is perhaps due to the scarcity of AR studies published in top-tier journals, and the absence of such studies on the reading lists of teachers' research courses (McDonough, 2006). However, this problem is, at least partially, located in research methodology courses where teachers acquire the necessary academic and professional qualifications required for doing research. Studies show that the research courses are often replete with theoretical discussions and provide solid introductions only to quantitative research methods; there is little, if any, explanation about alternative research designs (Author, 2016).

It seems, therefore, that regular instructions about classroom-based inquiry should be integrated into teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Policy makers and educational institutes can also facilitate opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge of research, “by sponsoring and developing in-house professional development programs focused on the theory and practice of research” (Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 124).

#### *Administrative restrictions*

Another consistent concern expressed by the participants had to do with the administrative constraints that they experienced both prior to and while conducting research. As Table 3 shows, about 31% of the teachers (N = 21) voiced dissatisfaction and frustration with “restrictive rules and regulations” such as “pre-determined syllabi”, “lack of enough freedom”, and “obtaining school principal's written agreement” for doing AR. Similarly, implicit in teachers' responses to the interview questions was a concern that AR is often “treated dismissively” and “not considered earnestly” by local administrations. Of course, these limitations are not uncommon in other educational contexts. Burns (1999) has observed that “institutional circumstances and conditions in many schools make it very difficult for teachers to carry out any form of classroom research” (pp. 45-46). However, there were three other teachers who were discontented with a “preventive” climate of educational policies that restricts teachers' “freedom for change” and diminishes the effects of their action inquiries on their professional knowledge and practice. These comments pointed to teachers' desire for “an authoritative position” in their classrooms where they could have enough freedom to implement their own “innovative ideas” and “practical techniques”.

[As part of an abandoned action research] I formed a group on *Telegram* [an online social network] and invited my students to post their writing assignments to the group, so that others could make comments. After a couple of weeks, the school principal called me and explained that students are not allowed to use smart phones at school, and that playing on *Telegram* is forbidden altogether.

We just have to follow the steps in the syllabus which are set at the beginning of the semester... For any changes in the classroom procedure, course contents, and even your own teaching method you have to ask for the permission of the supervisor.

These statements suggest that prior conditions such as administrative support, regular teacher-directed meetings and decentralized decision making are required for teachers to be able to conduct AR in their school settings.

## Conclusions

This narrative study sought to identify the pedagogical concerns that language teachers' attempt to address in their AR, and to explore the challenges and opportunities of conducting AR. Results revealed that, teachers in their action inquiries are mainly concerned with the practical aspects of their profession such as developing their own teaching skills and improving students' knowledge in particular language areas. In addition, the participants were found to consider AR to bear great potential to help them develop an overall understanding about language education, become aware of their students' individual needs, reflect on their teaching practice, and take leadership in educational change. However, they believed that their heavy workloads and time limitations, lack of specialized knowledge of research, as well as the administrative restrictions are among the challenges that make AR a demanding undertaking.

Although this study is limited in terms of scale and generalizability, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, it is the only analysis available of teachers' experiences of doing AR in the Iranian ELT context. As Borg and Liu (2013) argue, and as mentioned at the outset of this study, examinations of this type can potentially inform our understanding of how teachers perceive classroom research and what constraints they experience in undertaking AR projects. Regarding the findings, the major overall contribution of the study is empirical evidence in support of the argument that AR can be used a valuable instrument for teachers' professional development. It is thus recommended that teacher educators add AR as an academic course onto teacher education programs, or at least integrate it as a component into the existing research methodology courses. Making AR compulsory in teacher education programs will create a systematic framework for developing teachers' specialized knowledge and skills of research (McDonough, 2006). Alternatively, further opportunities for teachers to learn about AR can be provided in educational workshops, seminars or in-service job training programs (McDonough, 2006).

As the findings of this study illustrated, there are various factors that may restrict the productive effects of teachers' research attempts. One such factor is the largely negative view toward AR in the Iranian ELT context. While in the last few years AR has received resurgent interest in academic debates, there seems to be a suspicion in the Iranian ELT community that AR often leads to poor quality research studies which are not publishable nor desirable (Author, 2015). In the Iranian education system, there seems a long way to go before it is fully accepted as a legitimate form of professional development. On this basis, it seems that simply making AR a criterion for teacher evaluation will not easily result in the development of productive research culture, nor will it improve teachers' professional development. On the contrary, it may discourage collaboration among teachers and make AR an instrumental activity for promotion (Liu & Borg, 2013). In other words, prior conditions are required for AR to lead to change in education.

One of the motivations behind embarking on this study was to reflect teachers' own experiences regarding the opportunities and challenges in carrying out AR independently. This is a distinctive feature of this study because all ideas which culminated in the findings reported here were generated by the teachers themselves. However, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study, because the opportunities and challenges of AR can best be understood in a contextualized situation. Teachers often begin their classroom research with wide ranges of differences in terms of experiences, priorities, expectations and purposes. Contributing and confounding factors can widely vary according to social and cultural norms, the overall educational policies, teachers' relations with colleagues, and so on (Roberts, 1993). It is, therefore, suggested that future researchers investigate teachers' experiences of doing research in various social, cultural and educational contexts.

The present study was limited in that it only explored the challenges and opportunities that teachers are likely to encounter when they undertake an AR project. Further research can effectively focus on how conducting AR can contribute to various pedagogical improvements such as teachers' professional excellence, students' achievement and wider changes in the educational system. In addition, through exploratory studies, future researchers can provide insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions of other forms of professional development such as journal writing and reflective teaching. Such inquiries can make it possible to draw meaningful comparisons among various forms of professional development in terms of how effectively they can contribute to educational improvement.

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**Appendix****The survey of narrative frames**

I am an English teacher working ..... hours per week in ..... (School/Institute)

I have..... years of experience in teaching at ..... (level of language proficiency)

My latest academic degree is ..... in .....

I am interested in doing research on (research areas) .....

So far I have conducted (how many) ..... studies about (research focus) .....

In the future, I may also do studies on (research areas) .....

Doing research provides me with opportunities for .....

The challenges that I confront while doing research are .....

My opinion toward the relationship between my research activities and my teaching job can be summarized as.....