EFL teacher research engagement: Towards a research-pedagogy nexus
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Abstract: Research has shown a wide range of benefits from teacher research engagement in the advancement of pedagogy, teacher’s personal growth and their professional development. Focusing on an Omani English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tertiary context, the present study explores EFL teachers’ views and perceptions about research engagement with the view of informing the practice as part of a transformative Continuing Professional Development (CPD) model. The investigation uncovers Omani teachers’ perceptions about the extent to which teachers engage in research, the lack of research engagement among teachers and their suggestions for increasing and sustaining teacher research engagement. The study adopted a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews being the main method of data collection. Twenty Omani EFL teachers took part in this research and face-to-face tape-recorded interviews were conducted with the participants. The interview data was transcribed and coded thematically and inductively. Results showed that there was no consensus as to what research engagement was, yielding no generalisable or conclusive data. However, the teachers did report several personal and institutional challenges, which enriched the data on their proportions on a range of ways whereby the level of teacher research engagement could be fostered and sustained. The interviews informed the recommendations of this research and are presented and discussed to advance the practice of research engagement as a transformative CPD model.

Subjects: Higher Education; Language & Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Teacher education and professional development for both novice and experienced language teachers has always been at the heart of the educational debate. While there are various models for teacher continuing professional development (CPD) in operation, but research engagement as a transformative CPD model seems to have received less attention in the literature. The present study investigated the views and perceptions of language teachers about the benefits and challenges of research engagement with the view of providing practical solutions for higher education institutions to foster and sustain this practice as a transformative CPD model, while also contributing to the overall language education quality assurance.
Keywords: CPD; EFL teachers; research engagement; research-pedagogy nexus; Oman; qualitative research

1. Introduction
This study primarily aims at investigating EFL teachers’ views and perceptions about research engagement with the view of informing the practice as part of a transformative Continuing Professional Development (CPD) model in the Omani English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tertiary context. The study looks at the extent to which EFL teachers carry out, read or use research findings to inform their own pedagogical decisions, improve their classroom practices and develop themselves professionally. The driving motivation behind this study was our own observation and experience regarding the complexity of the issue of teacher research engagement and the high expectations higher education institutions (HEIs) are placing on teachers to publish and connect research to their teaching. The significance of the study also stems from the centrality of research-informed practice for the entire educational process. Additionally, research is scarce on this topic within the Gulf region in general and more specifically on teacher research engagement, the focus of this study. Therefore, the study contributes to the advancement of research in this field by offering insights and motivating teachers to engage in more pedagogy-oriented research as well as enhance their professional development.

Teacher research engagement in its three forms—conducting, reading or using—has remained a debatable issue amongst academics (see Borg, 2010). Teacher research is defined as a “systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative conducted by teachers in their own contexts, individually or collaboratively which aims to enhance teachers’ understanding of some aspects of their work and has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly” (Borg, 2010, p. 395). Different terms are used interchangeably in the literature to refer to teacher research engagement: evidence-based practice, the research-pedagogy dialogue, research-informed practice, action research, practitioner research, collaborative inquiry, self-study and teacher research (Roulston et al., 2005, as cited in Borg, 2010). Previous studies have demonstrated a range of benefits for teacher research in developing teachers’ competences and informing their professional development (Borg, 2010; Burns, 2010; Sato & Loewen, 2018).

2. Literature review
2.1. The benefits of teacher research engagement
Many researchers have highlighted the benefits of teachers’ engagement in research and its impact on their professional development and pedagogical practices (see Anwaruddin, 2015; Borg, 2009; Borg & Alshmaineri, 2012; Burns, 2010; Ecclestone, 2000; Leat et al., 2015; Liu & Wang, 2018; Richards, 2010; Sato & Loewen, 2018; Tavakoli, 2015; Williams & Coles, 2007; Wyatt & Dikilitas, 2016). Educational research is underpinned by the assumptions that teachers who are engaged with research in their practice deliver a better quality teaching (Tavakoli, 2015; Wyatt & Dikilitas, 2016). For example, Williams and Coles (2007) argue that teachers who are able to seek out, evaluate and integrate appropriate evidence from innovative and rigorous research are more likely to become more effective in their teaching and professional development. Indeed, through engagement in research, teachers can use theory to inform their practice and reflect on it and this could in turn help them to understand the nature of both teaching and learning in a better way (Richards, 2010). Similarly, teachers’ research engagement could help them develop their own theories about pedagogy from their perspectives as classroom practitioners and this could, in turn, contribute to the production of knowledge about teaching and learning, and promote the research-informed practices and institutional research culture, promoting a positive impact on their research engagement (Borg & Alshmaineri, 2012; Burns, 2010). Indeed, research engagement has the potential to be a powerful transformative force in the practices and professional development of EFL teachers. Teacher research engagement not only contributes to individual teacher development, but also to broader
improvements to the school and classroom (Borg, 2010). Moreover, teacher research engagement allows teachers to become more reflective, critical and analytical about their teaching and classroom incidents (Atay, 2006). Additionally, it also fosters connections amongst teachers, practitioners and researchers, as well as promotes their autonomy (Crookes, 1993; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

2.2. The research-pedagogy nexus
Teacher research engagement as an approach to professional development creates inquisitive, reflective and innovative practitioners (Liu & Wang, 2018). Indeed, research-pedagogy dialogues could potentially provide teachers and practitioners with evidence-based pedagogical insights and aids to inform their pedagogical decisions and practices (Sato & Loewen, 2019). However, the success and extent of teacher research engagement in general and the connection between research and pedagogy, in particular, seem to be closely associated with teachers' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, towards research. Therefore, understanding teachers' conceptions and beliefs about research and the role that research plays in their work would provide valuable insights to help promote their research engagement (Borg, 2009). Teachers' sustained and in-depth engagement in research over years offers a greater opportunity for them to develop a more critical stance, proceeding from a procedural autonomy to critical autonomy (Ecclestone, 2000; Leat et al., 2015). In other words, teacher research engagement (Borg, 2010; Burns, 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2004; Sato & Loewen, 2018):

- Allows teachers to become more reflective, critical and analytical about their teaching and classroom interventions;
- Enhances teachers' pedagogical decisions with sound research evidence which makes teaching a more evidence-based profession;
- Has the potential to be a powerful transformative force by illuminating nature of teachers' classroom practices and processes as well as their CPD;

However, transforming research knowledge into pedagogical knowledge does not seem to be a straightforward process for teachers. Engagement in research and research knowledge can impact pedagogical knowledge through enlightenment and this can be achieved through three types of thinking: conceptual development, reflection on cases drawn from personal experience and the imaginative diffusion of research knowledge into areas beyond those originally researched (Cain, 2015). However, Hammersley (2002) points out that teachers selecting, interpreting and using research as cognitive resources can be a challenge for them. What teachers expect research to contribute to teaching depends on their views of research and teaching (Cain, 2015). Furthermore, some teachers are sceptical about the usefulness of educational research and its positive impact on their teaching and enhancing of the learning process (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015).

Similarly, Kennedy (1997) identified four reasons for research failure which could lead to a mismatch between research and pedagogy:

- The research itself is not sufficiently persuasive or authoritative; the quality of educational research has not been high enough to provide compelling results to practitioners.
- The research has not been relevant to practice. It has not been sufficiently practical, and it has not addressed teachers’ questions, nor has it adequately acknowledged their constraints.
- Ideas from research have not been accessible to teachers.
- The educational system itself is intractable to change, or it is conversely inherently unstable, overtly susceptible to fad and consequently unable to engage in systematic inquiry (p. 4).

2.3. Research engagement as a transformative CPD model
The underlying assumptions of educational research are that teachers who are engaged in research in their practice deliver better-quality teaching (Tavakoli, 2015). For example, Borg (2010, p. 391)
claims that “research engagement is commonly recommended to language teachers as a potentially productive form of professional development and a source of improved professional practice”. Teacher research can also foster teacher autonomy, improve teaching and learning processes, and empower teachers in their professional capacity (Allwright, 2005; Borg, 2010; Burns, 1999; McKay, 2009). Furthermore, teacher research engagement can foster more participatory democracy—to encourage the teacher to revisit their curriculum and teaching (Souto-Manning, 2012). Additionally, teacher research engagement promotes reflective practice and open up a new avenue for professional development. Classroom-oriented research is viewed “as an important means for in-service teachers to upgrade their professional knowledge, undertake pedagogical innovations and assert greater agency in their professional practice” (Gao et al., 2010, p. 62).

2.4. Challenges of teacher research engagement

Despite the wide range of reported benefits, teacher research engagement has potential challenges and barriers that hinder teachers from effectively engaging in research. The sources of the challenges can be broadly classified into three major types. First institutional factors which include lack of resources, support, an established and conducive research culture, mentoring and coaching for early career academics, and the mismatch between the policy and expectations of the institution with regards to teacher research engagement. Second, personal or teacher-related factors (see e.g., Farsani & Babii, 2019) that include lack of personal motivation, awareness about the importance of research in their teaching and CPD in general, and the lack of the necessary critical and reflective skills to understand, interpret and transform research into practical as well as pedagogical knowledge which in turn results in a general scepticism about the usefulness and relevance of research to their teaching and professional development (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015). Some of these challenges seem to be particularly of interest to teacher research training and education, for example, the challenges related to the cognitive demands of reading and interpreting research papers. These challenges vary from one teacher to another, but seem to be generally ascribed to the teachers' lack of grasp and familiarity with the epistemological and the specialised academic discourse in their relevant discipline or the related disciplines (Mehrani & Behzadnia, 2013). The teachers' educational and cultural backgrounds can also have some ramifications on the level and readiness of teachers for research engagement. Third, educational policy-related factors which often vary from one country to another can also affect the way research engagement is perceived and practised. In some countries, the educational policies tend to promote and emphasise research over teaching while in other countries teaching is prioritised over research. This situation creates different perceptions, beliefs and practices regarding teacher research engagement in different educational contexts.

Along the same lines, Ball (2012) highlights some similar reasons for research failure. First, research papers are inaccessible to many practitioners, there is a lack of professional norms for EFL teachers to engage in research, very few practitioners and policymakers carry out research, and there is a lack of collaboration amongst educational researchers, policymakers and EFL teachers. Finally, research findings are rarely used to formulate new policies.

2.4.1. The mismatch between institutional expectations and the reality

The drive for teachers to be research engaged seems to stem from the pedagogical arguments that call for the connection between research and teaching to produce more research-informed pedagogy. The following quote nicely sums up the argument: “teachers need to be encouraged to move out of their submissive position and to take a much more innovatory, as opposed to complementary, role in curriculum development. One way to do this is to adopt the perspective of the researcher” (Gurney, 1989, as cited in Borg, 2009, pp. 358–59). This expectation does not necessarily apply in all contexts. For example, as far as the present study is concerned, this expectation is neither explicitly articulated in the educational policies nor is it clearly and consistently required of teachers by their relevant institutions. Demand for teachers to be research active and produce research seems to be derived from the quest for national and international academic accreditation, which not all countries value the same.
Yet, various barriers related to teacher engagement in research have been attributed to reasons such as a lack of collaborative school culture, awareness about the value of research, practical skills and knowledge among teachers, resources, motivation and lack of time (Allison & Corey, 2007; Atay, 2006; Anwaruddin, 2015; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2010; Edwards, 2005; Denny, 2005; McKay, 2009).

Similarly, in their study, Mehrani and Behzadnia (2013) report many Iranian teacher research engagement barriers and challenges such as research use-related barriers, e.g., teachers’ time restrictions, inaccessibility of research and teachers’ lack of specialised knowledge of research. Further, ELT research production-related challenges such as the complexity of some research papers, difficulty in generalising research findings to other contexts, low quality of research papers and the practicality of research findings. Furthermore, there are also education system-related barriers such as lack of financial and intellectual support, teachers’ conceptions of research and teaching, and the negative views held by teachers about research and the inefficiency of teacher evaluation systems. Finally, collaboration-related challenges are the lack of collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

The mismatch between the teachers’ perceived institutional expectations about teacher research engagement and the actual support provided for teachers to meet those expectations has also been documented in the literature (see Borg & Alshmaimeri, 2012). This mismatch seems to have negative implications on teachers’ research engagement which suggests a need for explicit and realistic institutional expectations with concomitant support and training for teachers to help them meet the institutional goals and expectations about research and research production. Another issue worth considering is the systematic investigation into teachers’ conceptualisation and understanding of research, and the nature of teacher research engagement. Investigating such issue would help tease out the challenges the assumptions that research is something that is beyond the ability of teachers and it is solely conducted by outsider experts (Borg, 2007).

Having reviewed the relevant literature to inform our study, we set to address the following research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers in Oman perceive teacher engagement in research in relation to CPD?
2. To what extent do they engage in research and what are the reasons, if any, for their lack of engagement in research?
3. What could be done to increase EFL teacher research engagement?

3. Methodology
This study was based on data collected from two Omani English-medium HEIs. The current study was conducted in the Sultanate of Oman where English is spoken as a foreign language and is increasingly used as a language of instruction and communication in the Omani HEIs as well as in some of the other industry and business sectors.

Purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2011) was utilised because a small number of participants was selected deliberately and consciously to gain an in-depth and thorough understanding. Participants were chosen based on their experience to compare and contrast any differences that might emerge in their perspectives or perceptions.

Twenty EFL teachers were interviewed during the academic year 2018–2019. Participation in this investigation was completely voluntary and the participants were reassured that the data collected via the interviews would be used for research purposes only and that their identity would not be disclosed when reporting our findings. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. Participants have substantial EFL teaching experience in tertiary education (ranged between 10–27 years) both in and outside of Oman. The
participants included both Omani and non-Omani nationals, the non-Omani participants were multi-national, coming from various cultural and educational backgrounds.

The interview comprised open-ended questions that consisted of core and supporting questions to encourage in-depth and detailed elaboration. The open questions are “flexible, allow you to go into more depth and clear up any misunderstandings, encourage cooperation, and can produce unexpected and unanticipated answers” (Robson, 2011, p. 283). The questions that were asked to every interviewee were designed to address the research questions and the overarching aim of the study.

We believe that the responses obtained from the participants are valuable and informative enough to provide illuminating insights about the issues under investigation. While most of the cited previous studies seemed to have favoured surveys and quantitative methodologies for obtaining general trends and patterns, the methodology and research questions in the present study are, however, more focused and interconnected as they are intended to generate more coherent data and findings leading to practical implications and recommendations.

We believe that the qualitative methodology suits this study since the aim was to gain the insider participants’ perspectives and thereby lessening the outsider researcher’s outsider perspectives on the issues under investigation. Interviews were chosen for the present study because the study aimed at investigating several issues related to the teacher research engagement from the EFL teachers’ perspectives. So, this study adopted a qualitative research design which fits the purpose since the goal is to explore the views and perceptions of the participants with regard to teacher research engagement. Qualitative research helps the researcher gain the participants’ “views, understandings, interpretations [as well as] experiences” (Mason, 2002, p. 63) regarding the issues under investigation. Moreover, another advantage of interviews is their suitability to “elicit data from [participants] who are not comfortable in other modes. For example, some [participants] are more at ease speaking than writing and are more likely to provide extended answers in a conversational format” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 174).

The study adopted a qualitative interpretative method with semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) and some prompt cards (see Appendix B) were used in a discourse-based format to elicit more focused responses. Prompt cards were used during the interview with some questions and points taken from the literature reviewed previously in this paper, and participants were invited to react and comment on them with follow-up and probe questions being asked. These kinds of interviews are more likely to generate more focused and rich responses (Lillis, 2001; Odell et al., 1983) since they motivate participants to informatively engage in the discussion during the interviews because they have the opportunities to refer to specific documents when responding to the interview, follow-up and probe questions. They also allow them to talk about specific documents, texts and pieces of writing rather than talking about things in general without referring to actual artefacts, and it is argued that such a discourse-based approach is likely to enhance the validity of their accounts (see Harwood, 2006).

We are aware that interviews as a method of data collection have potential weaknesses and limitations. Given the nature of the interviews as dynamic and co-constructed dialogue as well as interviewer/interviewee power asymmetries (see Block, 2000; Kvale, 2006; Scheurich, 1995), some bias might occur. However, in our case, there is no power asymmetry involved. We also, as can be seen below, tried to minimise the risk as much as we can to ensure that the responses of the interviewees are as much natural and bias-free as possible. The interviews were conducted by the researchers but some measures were taken to minimise any potential bias. We adopted a semi-structured interview format whereby participants were given a lot of freedom to speak up their minds and to provide their thoughts and perspectives. We also performed some sort of member check (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with a few participants where we showed them samples from our data analysis including excerpts from the interview data and we asked for confirmation. Member check also served as a measure to ensure data analysis credibility and trustworthiness. The interview data was transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed thematically and inductively.
Data analysis was conducted manually and undertaken through the identification of themes and codes which provided an in-depth understanding of the issues being explored. The themes and codes were reviewed many times in a repeated manner throughout the research process. Thematic analysis was selected because it is flexible, and a generic approach that can be used with different descriptive and exploratory studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The final themes and categories generated from the data analysis were used to address the study research questions.

4. Findings and discussion
The findings were based on the main themes and categories generated from the data coding and analysis process. They were organised according to the study research questions and were discussed with the findings from the relevant studies in the literature. Below is a general, but not exhaustive, summary of the main findings to give the reader some sort of backdrop against which they can situate and interpret these study findings. A more detailed analysis is subsequently presented. As for the teachers’ perceptions about research engagement, participants believed that engagement in research helps in updating pedagogical knowledge, illuminates and supports classroom practices, helps in comparing classroom practices across different contexts, and offers practical tips and insights for addressing classroom problems. Participants also reported some challenges: lack of resources, lack of time balance to do teaching and research at the same time or in addition to admin work. This coupled with a lack of awareness among the staff about the importance of research as an important means for CPD. Research-related incentives, lack of funding and resources, for example, access to research databases were also among the reported challenges. In addition to the reported benefits and challenges, participants also suggested some ways to enhance research engagement: raising awareness, load reduction, training, creating research culture, funding and incentives.

4.1. Benefits of teacher research engagement
Participants reported a range of reasons for their engagement with research. The reasons are both pedagogically and professionally motivated. Teachers believe that reading and using research findings in their classrooms provide opportunities for teaching and learning experiences:

I always use research findings as case studies in my classes with my students. For example, one of the courses I teach my students is podcasting. So, in order to encourage them to use podcasting, I show them cases studies which are research-based case studies done in different parts of the world. I always refer to case studies in different areas and see what is related to us and get students to do some little discussion. I think getting involved in such case studies or in research, in general, is kind of putting us to consider different points regarding a particular topic and what is reacted to our context. I always use these case studies in my education technology course (T3).

This resonates with the findings reported in previous studies (e.g., Borg, 2010; Burns, 2010; McLaughlin et al., 2004; Sato & Loewen, 2018) in that teacher research engagement has a range of benefits regarding pedagogical practices and teacher professional development as a whole. However, the degree to which this dialogue between research and pedagogy may not always be systematic and consistent in all contexts since this largely depends on the priorities of HEIs concerning the place of research compared to teaching in the institutional policy and focus.

Engagement in research was also reported by the participants as beneficial for collaborative teaching CPD:

I use research about writing and speaking and they are relevant to my teaching. For example, last time I was reading an article about the effective ways for developing students’ listening, reading and writing skills and I shared the article with one of my colleagues who read it very seriously and leaned from it (T2).
Additionally, research engagement was also viewed by participants as a teacher refresher tool whereby teachers have the opportunity to critically challenge their assumptions and revisit and update their traditional approaches to language teaching and learning:

I read practical action research on skills and I want to know what people are doing. I want to discover and update my teaching after 27 years of teaching I need to update my knowledge maybe the way I’m teaching is wrong (T2).

In the same vein, research engagement is also viewed by some participants as key to high-quality research-informed pedagogy:

As we all know, today, we know that without research, teaching cannot be of a quality we can say, so our research should underpin our teaching and vice versa, our teaching should also inform the research. So, as part of professional development is to engage in research activities because it benefits teachers. It helps you in keeping updated with topics and when you are trying to provide something useful to your students (T7).

In line with previous relevant studies (e.g., Borg, 2009; Borg & Alshmaieri, 2012; Burns, 2010; Ecclestone, 2000; Leat et al., 2015; Williams & Coles, 2007), these findings suggest the potential benefits of teacher research engagement for both personal and professional development. Although the ideal situation is to engage in research by conducting research, the findings, however, suggest benefiting from research does not necessarily or solely entail that teachers must conduct research. They can still benefit if they read and/or use research for their CPD.

However, the levels of research engagement vary amongst teachers. While most of the participants seem to engage with research by reading and using it in their teaching, some reported engagement in research by conducting some small-scale action research projects to inform their teaching and resolve some teaching problems they encounter in their classrooms:

I always try to engage in research activities whenever I find the chance and time. For example, when I collect student exam papers, I use this corpus as data and I compare and contrast student writing in a format of action research. So, I notice things that I should focus on to address so it is an ongoing process (T2).

I read and use research findings a lot because sometimes you get new ideas and sometimes you want to see how this or that problem is addressed in certain contexts. So, my teaching interest is using technology in teaching so sometimes I want to see how this technology used in a certain context and what the results are, and sometimes you would want to know some innovations (T1).

Such findings raise an essential question as to what kind or level of research engagement that EFL teachers should be involved in and should be encouraged. Previous studies (e.g., Allwright, 2005; Borg, 2010; Tavakoli, 2015) did not seem to agree on or favour one level of engagement but rather treated all levels on an equal basis, while stressing the need for the connection between research and pedagogy. In the case of the present study, some participants reported engagement by conducting their own research. This is indeed a practice which we believe should be further explored by researchers. To promote and sustain such level of engagement among EFL teachers, several measures need to come into play. We will elaborate on this point further in our conclusions and recommendations section.

4.2. Challenges of teacher research engagement

Despite these perceived benefits, there were also some challenges reported by the participants that were claimed to be affecting teacher research engagement. Participants reported numerous challenges related to research engagement. For example, participants reported difficulties when trying to appropriate research findings to their own teaching context:
I need to be careful when I deal with the results of other people research in case the nature of the practices and experience of the research participants might be completely different (T1).

Lack of resources was also reported as another challenge negatively affecting engagement:

One of the challenges that you face is a subscription to the journal and encrypted articles. You may find a very interesting article, very catchy title, and when you want to get access to that article, they ask you to pay some dollars. So, I think the financial constraints may be a challenge. The problem is that the institution only subscribes to some selective databases that are related to the kinds of teaching but they don't provide you with access to what you want. So, if you want to access journals you have to do it personally which is a challenge (T7).

One of the most important challenges is the paid journals and the difficulty of getting access to these journals and sometimes they are expensive. Accessing up-to-date books in the library is also expensive and if you want to buy them, they are expensive (T2).

These findings may seem peculiar to the context of the study and they also suggest that the lack of resources as claimed by teachers could indeed be one of the barriers—albeit less challenging—which prevent teachers from engaging in research. This would indeed stress the role of institutions in making available, among other things, all necessary resources that can encourage teachers to engage in research.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the lack of institutional research culture as one of the challenges that hinder their engagement in and with research:

The college should also establish its own forums. We should have or establish some sort of research culture. It has to be circulated. One thing to do that is by encouraging both teachers and students to engage in reading research (T3).

Additionally, the lack of awareness among most teachers about the importance of teacher research engagement was reported as a major challenge:

I think there is a lack of awareness about the importance of research. I think it is the right time that we investigate this issue. What we can see is like some sporadic efforts here and there and not everyone is doing research although people are talking about research. So, we need to raise people’s awareness of the significance of research (T7).

Lack of time and heavy teaching loads and schedules were also reported among the factors that prevent teachers from engaging in research:

To have enough time is a real challenge for me. You know we are busy with university work such as accreditation and admin work and these kinds of things which eat up our time and prevent us from engaging in research (T2).

These findings support previous research (e.g., Borg & Alshmainer, 2012; Sato & Loewen, 2019) in that of HEIs have the paramount role in either make-or-break research promotion or sustainability among their academic members of staff. There is often a mismatch between the institutional goals and expectations of the teacher's role as a researcher and the level of support provided to them to achieve or meet such goals and expectations. The findings highlight the need for more defined and clearly articulated policies about teacher research engagement and the level of institutional support that can be provided.

4.3. Suggestions for increasing and sustaining teacher research engagement

Having presented results about both benefits and challenges, we can now address the third research question about the measures that can be taken to increase teachers' engagement in
research. When asked about how to increase the teacher research engagement, participants reported a range of suggestions, believing they were important to fostering and sustaining this engagement. Suggestions ranged from research awareness, training to research funding, teaching load reduction to incentives and rewards:

I think what we need to raise people's awareness about the importance of conducting research, especially classroom-related research that is oriented to address teaching and learning issues; and I think people need to know about the importance of evidence-based practice to address teaching and learning issues and improve students' learning experiences (T1).

Teachers' ability to evaluate the research relevance to their teaching was also highlighted as key for teachers to transform what they read into their classrooms:

It is important to tell if the research you are using is relevant to the extent that you or your students benefit from it. Sometimes you spend time reading research but it is not really that relevant. Yes, of course, you could benefit and add to your knowledge somehow by the fact that you are reading research but the question is always: is it relevant? It is not always necessary to add to your knowledge (T3).

Participants also called for teacher research to be more innovative, practical and classroom-oriented:

I think we need to look for more challenging topics that can help us improve the quality of teaching and not only theoretical things. I mean we know the problem or can anticipate the problem and the results can help us find new ways to improve and address such issues. We need to look for new things and new methods that can increase like motivation and I think we need both workshops and training to help create some research atmosphere which by itself. Training through workshops will create a research atmosphere to go deeper (T3).

Teachers also suggested a need for training in research methods and methodologies in order for them to effectively engage in research by conducting rather than just reading and using it:

It would be better if the university or where you work can organise workshops, maybe they can ask teachers to discuss this or that articles together (T6).

Additionally, teachers also highlighted the need for formalising and institutionalising research training to be more effective and sustainable:

We should have more like research groups. Like a reading club, setting a topic, set agenda, then organise a seminar for discussion to share ideas, we can do it as webinars. All good ideas if not supported or become policies they run the risk of being just good ideas. We always come down to the policy-making thing. Timetables should have one or two-hour slots per week for research activities. I think if things are not institutionalized, they wouldn't be effective otherwise things will just remain individual initiatives and goodwill (T5).

Participants also believed that institutions' seriousness regarding research is a motivating factor when research is taken seriously:

If we take it seriously and if the institution takes it seriously that I think will motivate or at least will push everyone to be research active. If research is taken seriously by the institution, I think everyone will be research active (T7).

These findings corroborate the findings of previous studies, such as those of Borg and Alshmaimeri (2012), in the centrality of the institutional role in promoting research and research training such as methodology training—be it quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. However, the preferred
research paradigm seems to be very much dependent on the circumstances of the context in which EFL teachers operate. In the context where positivist quantitative paradigms are dominant, teachers need to also be trained on constructivist qualitative paradigms and the possibility of mixing both in a mixed methods format.

Teachers also called for institutional support by reducing teaching load and allowing more time for research:

Time is another issue and I think the university should reduce the teaching load for the staff members who are interested in research so that they can focus more on research activities (T7).

Time is always an issue that prevents us from getting engaged in research. To us and to me personally, this is an issue. For example, until now I couldn’t finish my proposal. I always have research initiatives but I never find time to develop and take my research projects forwards. If they [institution] allocate us some time weekly, we’ll be able to engage in research. We have lots of admin work which really kills research. If I am allowed and given the time to only work on research, I will be much more engaged and much more involved. I have to tell you that we have to do a lot of admin work which kills the initiative to do any research (T3).

Research funding and rewards were also reported among the motivating factors for research engagement:

Another point is funding. Our institution should support and fund research. In most cases I do research and I go to conferences on my own self-funding (T2).

Furthermore, participants also highlighted the need for institutional research culture to be created to increase collaboration and research clusters:

We should also establish research forums. We should have or establish some sort of research culture. It has to be circulated. One thing to do that is by encouraging both teachers and students to engage in reading research (T3).

Such a culture can also be further reinforced by more collaboration and CPD activities:

We also need to organize workshops and get people together (T2).

In addition to the individual teacher motivation and initiatives, these findings suggest the importance of HEIs in providing the necessary support to help teachers engage in research, particularly by doing it to inform their CPD. This would, in turn, increase the promotion and sustainability of research and can also contribute to the boosting of the institutional profile as far as the internalisation and the quality assurance and accreditation are concerned.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The study was small-scale qualitative research conducted in an Omani higher education context to explore teachers’ views and perceptions about research engagement as a form of CPD. The overarching objective was to explore research engagement in a context where the topic is scarcely researched. This study has some limitations as is the case with any case study research. Being conducted in a single context with a limited number of participants, the study findings cannot be generalised. However, the implications and insights gained from this study can still be transferable and applicable in other contexts in general and in the context of the study in particular, with a range of potentials to motivate more research in the field. In light of the findings of the study, some recommendations can be offered:

First, teachers need to be made aware of the importance of research for their pedagogical practices and general professional development. Awareness-raising and training could be made by seniors and research-active peers as well as the HEIs with a clear focus on nexus between research and
pedagogy. Institutions should also encourage research by creating and promoting the culture for that. One way to do that is by establishing some research groups and forums where teachers can meet regularly to discuss research and share experiences and explore possibilities of collaborative research projects. These forums should be formalised and endorsed by the HEIs to maintain their status and continuity. The role of HEIs should not be ignored as it can be highly significant in providing systematic and sustainable institutional support to help teachers engage in research.

Second, the issue of teacher research training in research methods and methodologies is relevant to research culture. Teachers need to be provided with rigorous research training, particularly novice teachers. Seasoned teachers also need refresher training to keep them up to date with any developments in the field. Training should be more hands-on and continual, covering both the research process (conduct) and product (writing up) and it should be provided by expert individuals and/or highly recognised and accredited institutions. Research methods and methodologies training should cover both quantitative and qualitative paradigms as well as the potential of mixing both paradigms in a mixed-method format.

Third, funding is another important issue. HEIs should provide research funding to encourage teachers’ engagement in research. Incentives and rewards should also be given to research-active teachers as a gesture of recognition of their efforts. The research component should also be highly valued and rated in teacher appraisals. Teachers should be encouraged to connect their research to their practices by incorporating their research findings into their classrooms. Relevant to this is research resources. HEIs should endeavour to provide teachers with access to as wide and reliable external research resources and databases as possible. This could be done through active subscription and also improving and enhancing the local libraries’ acquisitions.

Fourth, HEIs also need to take research seriously and they should strike a good balance between teaching and research. Institutional policies should be revised and more policies should be oriented towards research development and promotion. The balance between research and teaching duties and responsibilities could be achieved by a clear statement of policies and contractual conditions. For example, some teachers might be recruited as teaching fellows only without any research responsibilities, while others can be recruited as either research fellows only without teaching responsibilities or fully teaching and research staff assuming both responsibilities. Time is also essential in this regard. HEIs should allocate adequate time for research. Teaching and administrative load reduction should be offered to teachers who are research-active and the load reduction, in general, should be given for teachers who wish to engage in research activities.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information
Cite this article as: EFL teacher research engagement: Towards a research-pedagogy nexus, Awd Alhassan & Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2020), 7: 1840732.

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Appendix A. Interview schedule

Can you please introduce yourself in a few words?

What is your area of speciality?

How do you perceive teacher engagement in research to continuing professional development?

To what extent are you personally engaged in conducting research and why?

Do you read or use research findings? If yes or no, why?

Are there any challenges do you experience with conducting, reading or using research findings for your CPD?

Can you describe these challenges?

What could be done to increase EFL teacher research engagement?

Do you have any comments or further suggestions which you would like to add?

Appendix B. Sample prompt card

Lack of resources

Lack of support

Lack of established and conducive research culture

Lack of mentoring and coaching for early career academics

The mismatch between the policy and expectations of the institution with regards to teacher research engagement and the actual level of support and recognition and incentives whether financial or moral

Lack of collaborative school culture

Lack of awareness about the value of research
Lack of practical skills and knowledge among teachers

Lack of resources, lack of motivation and lack of time (Allison & Carey, 2007; Anwaruddin, 2015; Atay, 2006; Borg, 2010; Borg & Alshmaimeri, 2012; Denny, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Farsani & Babii, 2019).