

## **Examining research productivity of Chinese TEFL academics across departments and institutes**

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**Abstract** *This study aims to benchmark Chinese TEFL academics' research productivities, as a way to identify and, subsequently, address research productivity issues. This study investigated 182 Chinese TEFL academics' research outputs and perceptions about research across three Chinese higher education institutions using a literature-based survey. ANOVA, t-tests and descriptive statistics were used to analyse data from and between the three institutions. Findings indicated that more than 70% of the TEFL academics had produced no research in 10 of the 12 research output fields during 2004-2008. The English Language and Literature Department in the national university outperformed all other departments at the three institutes for most of the research output categories. While a majority of the participants seemed to hold positive perceptions about research, t-tests and ANOVA indicated that their research perceptions were significantly different across institutes and departments. Developing TEFL research capacity requires tertiary institutions to provide research-learning opportunities.*

### **Introduction**

English is noted as the most learnt foreign language in China (Wang 2007). Hence, the effectiveness of English learning and teaching in China at all educational levels is of high interest. Over the last decade, there are concerns that college students have fallen short of employers' expectations, which focus on fluent communication in English, orally and in written form (Dai 2001). Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has become a focus, particularly at the academic level. Indeed, there are calls for academics to conduct research in order to improve teaching practices (e.g., Huang 2006; Shu 2002), which has occurred in Western countries through government funding policies for research (Abbott and Doucouliagos 2004).

Promoting research performance and striving for research excellence are not only being pursued in Western universities but has become a prominent goal for many Asian institutions (Ho 1998; Tien 2000, 2007; Yuan 2002). Essential to facilitating research productivity is an understanding of academic work. Studies on academics' research performance, associated influences, and their perceptions about research are prevalent. However, many studies are concerned with university academic staff in advanced English-speaking countries like Australia (e.g., Hemmings et al. 2007), the U.S (e.g., Love et al. 2007), Canada (Ito and Brotheridge 2007), and the U.K

(Deem, 2006). Yet few studies have been conducted about TEFL academics' work in China. This study aimed to fill in the gap in the literature by reporting on Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity and their perceptions about research across three Chinese higher education institutions.

## **Literature Review**

There is a paucity of empirical studies specifically investigating Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity although it was widely recognised that their research performance was rather limited and the quality of research in the TEFL field needed substantial improvement (Dai and Zhang 2004). Among the few studies, Yang et al. (2001) examined and compared the research productivity of TEFL academics teaching English majors and non-majors from 1997 to 2000 in two Chinese universities. They found that the average research outputs were below one except for articles published in journals of the foreign language discipline and provincial journals. There was a considerable gap in both annual publication average and high-level scholarly research (research articles in high-ranking journals, academic books, and research projects) between these two groups of academics, with non-English major teaching academics lagging far behind. Gao (2006) surveyed self-reported research productivity of 40 TEFL academics in a provincial higher education institution in the academic year of 2002. The findings showed that the total number of provincial journal articles was only 14, and none in core journals. The number of textbook publication and research project was only three. In contrast, translated books and exercise books were 11 and nine respectively.

The findings about Chinese TEFL academics' research performance were supported by survey studies investigating Chinese TEFL academics' overall quality. An extensive survey (Xia 2002) of 476 TEFL academics teaching non-English majors indicated that over half of the respondents never led a research project. Twenty-four percent never wrote and did not know how to write an educational research paper. Dai and Zhang (2004) found that the average number of journal articles published by the 1194 TEFL academics (teaching both English majors and non-majors) until the time of the study was 5.7 per academic, whereas the average for core journal articles was only 1.46. The authors suggested that the real situation might be worse as academics with no or few research publications might not have returned the questionnaires. They also found that TEFL academics teaching English majors outperformed those teaching non-English majors in average number of both published journal articles and textbooks, which seems to be slightly different from findings by Zhang et al. (2001).

Research is considered as an important part in academics' role performance in both developed and developing countries. There has been much rhetoric particularly in the TEFL field promoting practitioner research both in the West and in China (eg., Borg 2003a, 2003b; Huang 2006; McDonough and McDonough 1990; Shu 2002). In the world of TEFL, teaching and research are recognised as being equally important (Hao and Zhang 2007; Wu 2005) where teaching informs the research and vice versa.

However, some TEFL academics may think that teaching should take priority over research (Yang et al. 2001), and believe that teaching effectively can readily occur without reading research or doing research (Zhou 2005). Some may consider it a waste of time and an extra burden on academics (Yang et al. 2001). Nevertheless, there is an abundance of empirical research (e.g., Robertson and Bond 2001; Wei, Cheng and Zhao. 2006) highlighting that research and teaching can enhance each other. In particular, it can enable TEFL professionals to reflect on and improve teaching (Borg 2007; Hiep, 2006). It is argued that research can also keep the TEFL academic informed of the most current theories and practices in the field (Dai and Zhang, 2004; Zhou 2005). Despite TEFL researchers' call for TEFL professionals to engage in research and the widely recognized significance of research, few empirical data was collected of Chinese TEFL academics' perceptions about research. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by examining the way Chinese TEFL academics perceive research.

Research provides numerous advantages for the practitioner. The teaching and research nexus has been argued as a way to develop the TEFL academic's research and teaching practices. On a personal level, conducting research was found to be able to satisfy an academic's curiosity and creativity (Åkerlind 2008). It can also provide job satisfaction for some academics (Metcalf et al. 2005). TEFL academics need to be up-to-date with pedagogical practices and with knowledge of the field. Research can contribute to knowledge of foreign language teaching (Shu 2002). On a professional level, it can increase professional status (Åkerlind 2008; Borg 2003b), including being useful for promotion (Yang, Liu and Jin 2002). Some TEFL academics want to make an impact in a wider arena. This impact may come in the form of conference presentations, journals at national and international levels, authoring books and other publications or being involved in transcription or project work. These types of endeavours may also present opportunities for influencing and informing policy makers (Brindley 1991; Liu 1999). Hence, this research aims to investigate Chinese TEFL academics' levels of research productivity and their perceptions about research for the purposes of understanding and possibly benchmarking research outputs.

## **Context**

In China, there are two types of four-year institutes of higher education (i.e., universities and colleges) that offer Bachelor and higher degrees. Universities are usually operated at the national level, whereas colleges at the provincial level. In the last two decades, a number of colleges have been designated as universities in higher education reform (Ministry of Education 2007). English teaching staff members in most Chinese universities and colleges are recruited into two departments. One is the College English Department with the mission of teaching general English skills to non-English majors. The other is the English Language and Literature Department teaching English majors. Apart from teaching the four English skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), academics in English Language and Literature

Departments teach English linguistics, literature, translation, culture studies and English for specific purposes. Therefore, academics in this department may have a specific field of research focus. In some institutes, the two departments are independent from each other with separate administration and academic tasks, whereas in other institutes, the two departments are integrated within the same School of Foreign Languages, sharing the same administration but having independent academic tasks. The three institutes chosen for this study have two departments. In this study, the two departments will be called collectively as TEFL departments.

## **Data collection methods and analysis**

The questions on the survey were framed around these issues: Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity, and their perceptions about research. To provide clarity of purpose, some of the general questions are divided into sub-questions. Research productivity in this study includes two measurements: research publications and research projects. Therefore, the first question had two sub-questions: (1) What are the quantity and quality of their scholarly publications over the past five years (2004-2008)? (2) What are the quantity and quality of the research projects they completed over the past five years (2004-2008)? The second research question also included two sub-questions: (1) What are their perceptions about teaching-research relationship? (2) What are their perceptions about the benefits of research? Statistical information derived from quantitative research provided a broad-based depiction about Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity, and perceptions about research.

Quantitative data was gathered using a literature-based survey to determine the quantity and quality of Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity, and their research perceptions. Participants were required to self-report their outputs in 12 research categories during 2004-2008, and to rate the statements on a five-point Likert scale that best describe their concerning their perceptions about research. Data were analysed within pre-determined categories that signified research productivity (e.g., articles, conferences, books, research projects completed during 2004-2008), and their perceptions about research. Data from the survey describes aggregated patterns instead of building causal relations (Creswell 2008; Yin 2003). It also identified group characteristics and distinguished between groups.

There were 245 Chinese TEFL academics from the three Chinese tertiary institutes that were surveyed. The three institutions were purposefully selected as they were located at three different levels on the institutional hierarchy in China. From the top to the bottom were a national university, a key provincial university, and a provincial university. Each of the three Chinese higher education institutions has two TEFL departments, so the participants were from six TEFL departments. The institutions were located in a north province, China. Incomplete responses were deleted from the initial pool (Hittleman and Simon 2006), hence, there were 182 completed responses from the three institutes (i.e., the national university 36.3%, the key

provincial institute 26.9%, and provincial university 36.8%). Before administering the survey, consent was sought from the chair of each of the six departments from the three institutes and all participants received an information sheet about the voluntary nature of the study with anonymity assured (Cohen et al. 2007). To ensure that participants understood the survey items, the first-named researcher was present at the sites to offer assistance.

## Results and discussion

The survey investigated Chinese TEFL academics' demographics (i.e.,  $n=182$ : gender, academic status, years of English teaching, years before the present academic status, and degree), research productivity, and their research perceptions. Figure 1 presents a summary of their demographic backgrounds.

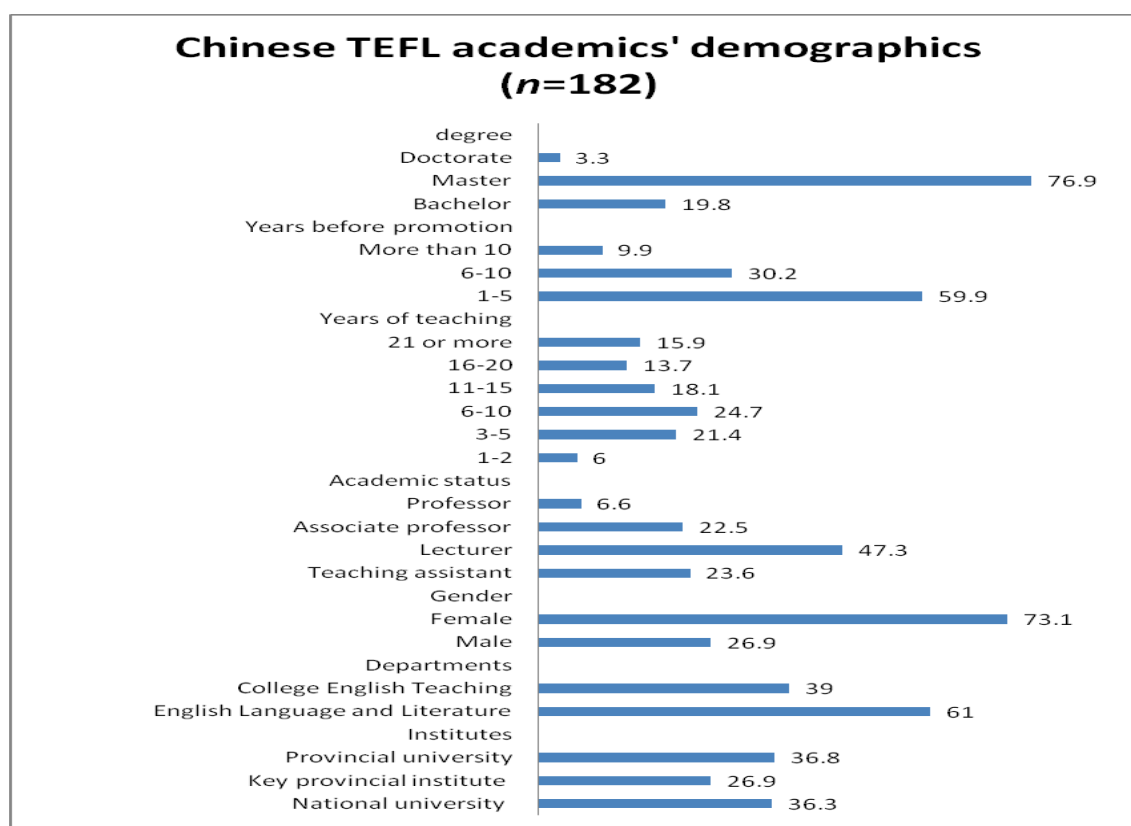


Figure 1. Chinese TEFL academics' demographics ( $n=182$ )

Data from the survey of 182 Chinese TEFL academics were analysed according to research productivity such as articles, conference papers, books, and research projects they had completed during 2004-2008. SPSS generated percentages, means and standard deviations (*SD*) of each category of productivity. It was found that the mean scores of most categories of research products were below one except non-core journal articles and provincial research projects. In total ( $n=182$ ), 18% had not produced any research in the five-year period. Indeed, more than 70% had produced no research in all categories except non-core journal articles and provincial

projects. There were 95.6% percent who did not publish national academic books or national translated books. However, there were highly-productive TEFL academics who produced five or more pieces of research across the 12 categories. Nineteen percent of the TEFL academics published more than five non-core journal articles, and two published 10 in the five-year period. With regards to provincial projects, among those who participated in one or more, 9.7% worked on five projects or more, and the most productive academics completed 10 of them in the five-year period.

Analysing data from the two departments (College English Teaching Department [CETD] and English Language and Literature Department [ELLD]) in each of the three universities provided further insight into research productivity at very local levels. Table 1 presents the percentages of TELL academics in each department who produced one or more research across 12 research output field over 2004-2008. Research productivity with non-core journal articles was the only research category with 50% or more TEFL academics (Table 1). This would be the same for provincial research projects; however both departments at the key provincial institute only had 47% in their CETD and 31% in the ELLD.

Findings indicated that the ELLD in the national university outperformed all other departments for all categories other than provincial textbooks, however only 6% behind the ELLD in the key provincial institute (31%). It was also interesting to note that the CETD in the key provincial institute outperformed the national university's CETD with national and provincial academic books and textbooks, conference papers, and provincial translated books (Table 1). Although it was expected that the ELLDs would have performed better than the CETDs in all categories of research products, in 8 out of 12 categories, the CETD of the key provincial institute outperformed its counterpart (ELLD) in the same institute. However, this comparison may not be valid enough considering the fact that the former is almost three times the number of the latter. Additionally the ELLD department of the key provincial institute was founded recently and 4 of the 13 academics providing valid data were teaching assistants. All the above may have resulted in the lower research productivity of the ELLD staff in the key provincial institute.

Table 1.  
*Percentage of Chinese TEFL Academics with One or More Research Products (2004-2008)*

Research product	National university		Key provincial institute		Provincial university	
	ELLD <sup>a</sup> (n=36)	CETD <sup>b</sup> (n=31)	ELLD (n=13)	CETD (n=36)	ELLD (n=22)	CETD (n=44)
Core journal articles	52.8 <sup>c</sup>	32.6	38.5	25	27.3	15.9
Non-core journal articles	80.6	74.2	69.2	55.6	54.5	54.5
International /national conference	58.3	6.5	15.4	8.3	13.6	4.5

papers						
Provincial conference papers	38.9	16.1	7.7	11.1	8.2	6.8
National academic books	13.9	0	0	5.6	4.5	0
Provincial academic books	37.8	0	7.7	30.6	4.5	19.5
National textbooks	25	3.2	0	8.3	22.7	11.4
Provincial textbooks	25	12.9	30.8	25	9.1	38.6
National translated books	22.2	0	0	0	0	0
Provincial translated books	19.4	0	7.7	19.4	0	0
National projects	52.8	22.6	7.7	5.6	9.1	6.8
Provincial projects	63.9	58.1	30.8	47.2	63.6	50

<sup>a</sup> stands for English Language and literature department. <sup>b</sup> stands for College English teaching department. <sup>c</sup> stands for percentage of TEFL academics in that particular department.

The literature-based survey gathered data about the participants' perceptions about research. Specifically, it investigated their perceived teaching-research nexus and benefits of research ( $n=182$ ). The results showed that an overwhelming majority of the TEFL academics held positive views about teaching-research nexus and the benefits of research. There was no significant difference between male and female TEFL academics in their perceptions about research. The only statement that divided TEFL academics holding different degrees was "Research and teaching are equally important", that is,  $t$ -test indicated the mean score of those with Master's or higher degrees ( $M= 3.84$ ,  $SD= 1.226$ ) was statistically higher ( $t=-2.260$ ,  $df=180$ , two tailed  $p<.05$ ) than those with a Bachelor's degree ( $M=3.31$ ,  $SD=1.323$ ) on the same statement. After collapsing professors and associate professors into one category (senior academics), ANOVA found that there were no statistically significant differences in research perceptions between senior academics, lecturers and teaching assistants. Similarly, none of the 14 variables divided TEFL academics with different years before their promotion to the present status.

ANOVA found that there were statistically significant differences ( $p<.05$ ) among institutions in 6 of the total 14 statements. However, the Tukey test found that most differences were between the national university and the other two provincial institutes (Table 2). Four items regarding the benefits of research divided TEFL academics from the national university and those from the provincial university: perceptions of research in allowing them to reflect on their practice, in meeting their curiosity, in giving them job satisfaction, and in seeing research as an extra burden. TEFL academics from the provincial university were not as likely to regard research in those favourable terms, but viewed it more as an extra burden. The only response that distinguished TEFL academics of the national university from those of the key provincial

institute was regarding research-teaching equality. The former group gave more endorsement to the statement that research and teaching are equally important. The statement “Research can contribute to knowledge in foreign language field” divided the national university from both provincial institutes.

Table 2  
ANOVA Results for Institutions with Items of Statistical Significance

Survey items	Institute <sup>a</sup>	M	p value
Teaching and research are equally important.	KPI	3.39	.012
	NU	4.07	
Research allows me to reflect on and improve my teaching.	PU	3.91	.031
	NU	4.34	
Research satisfies my curiosity and creativity.	PU	3.41	.002
	NU	4.00	
Research gives me job satisfaction.	PU	3.47	.014
	NU	3.96	
Research can contribute to knowledge in foreign language field.	PU	3.86	.016
	KPI	3.89	
	NU	4.25	
Research is an extra burden on TEFL academics.	PU	3.39	.045
	NU	3.93	

<sup>a</sup> PU is an abbreviation for provincial university, KPI for key provincial institute, and NU for national university

The results from *t*-tests comparing the two departments (CETD and ELLD) showed statistical significance with six items (Table 3). Specifically, TEFL academics working in the ELLDs held more positive views about the benefits of research in keeping them informed of the latest development in the field, in increasing their professional status, in meeting their curiosity, in promotion, and in contributing knowledge to the field than their counterparts in the CETDs. Conversely, their view about research as a waste of time was more negative than their counterparts teaching non English majors. The findings revealed no difference between the two departments in viewing the relationship between research and teaching.

Table 3



*T-test Results of the Two Departments*

Survey Items	Dept <sup>a</sup>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> value
Research keeps me informed of the latest theories and practices in the field.	CETD	4.14	.801	-	.035
	ELLD	4.39	.803	2.126	
Research increases my professional status.	CETD	4.04	.835	-	.038
	ELLD	4.30	.808	2.088	
Research satisfies my curiosity and creativity.	CETD	3.49	.861	-	.000
	ELLD	4.03	1.008	3.869	
Research is useful for promotion.	CETD	3.95	.844	-	.019
	ELLD	4.27	.888	2.361	
Research can contribute to knowledge in foreign language field.	CETD	3.86	.670	-	.003
	ELLD	4.25	.929	3.052	
Research is a waste of time.	CETD	4.02	1.018	-	.011
	ELLD	4.38	.763	2.571	

<sup>a</sup>CETD is an abbreviation for College English teaching departments ( $n=111$ ), and ELLD is an abbreviation for English language and literature departments ( $n=71$ ).

ANOVA and *t*-test results indicated that TEFL academics with different gender, degrees, academic status, and years of promotion did not seem to have statistically significant differences in their perceptions of research-teaching relationship and research benefits. What distinguished them in their perceptions were institutes and departments where they belonged. It was possible that TEFL academics' research perceptions were influenced by the institutes and departments where they worked. TEFL academics from the national university appeared to have more favourable views about benefits of research than TEFL academics from the two provincial institutes. TEFL academics from the ELLDs seemed more positive about the research benefits. They did not seem to differ much from TEFL academics from the CETDs about their perceptions about the teaching-research annex.

This research investigated research productivity for Chinese TEFL academics across three institutes. The findings indicated that a large majority of them did not produce anything in most of the investigated research output categories. They were especially not productive in those research products that were not compulsory in promotion or at the national level. This formed a sharp contrast with their relative productiveness in research at the local level such as non-core journal articles and provincial research projects. Although TEFL academics were not productive at national level research, there were productive and highly-productive cases. For example, 6% of TEFL academics produced five or more core journal articles in the past five years. The English Language and Literature Department at the national university was more productive than other five departments.

There may be some external reasons to explain TEFL academics' low research productivity. One could be the large number of teaching assistants which accounted for 24% of the total number. Teaching assistants were usually academics who worked less than five or six years, so it was likely that they were busy with teaching in the beginning years of their career, and less attention was given to research. Another possibility may be that promotion was not a pressure in the early years. As a result motivation to conduct research may not be strong enough for them. However, the high percentages of non-producing academics far exceeded that of teaching assistants. For example, there were 71% academics who did not publish any core journal articles in the five years. This seemed to suggest that a large percentage of TEFL academics of other academic status were non-productive as well.

As suggested previously, those categories where the TEFL academics were least productive indicated that they were either research products at the national level, or not required for promotion. Publishing articles in nationally-recognised core journals was highly competitive, and as a result acceptance rate was much lower than provincial non-core journals. Rigorous standards set for the application, completion and publication of any research at the national level may have prevented some TEFL academics from accessing national research. However, national books were different from core journal articles in that despite their usefulness as indicators of the quality of a piece of research, national books were not compulsory requirements in promotion. Compulsory research products required for promotion to lecturer, associate professor and professor in the three institutes included journal articles, research projects and books. Academics' research activity and products were impacted on by the desire for promotion (Tien 2000, 2007), so academics in this study may be unproductive in those categories of products not required for promotion. This also provided an explanation for their particularly low productivity of conference papers. Additionally, presenting at a conference involved travel and registration cost. At a department with a large number of academics and little grants, funding conference attendance would be difficult.

In contrast, non-core journal articles, for their localness, less influence and lower reputation, and larger number, become the dominant ground where TEFL academics could publish their articles. A further reason why non-core journal articles became so popular was that they were predominantly required in promotion at all levels of academic status. Provincial projects were another category of research that TEFL academics participated in more actively, as they were in a similar situation to non-core journal articles. They were required in promotion, and relative to national projects, they were easier to apply and complete. The requirements about team leaders and participants were not as stringent as national projects.

The TEFL academics' gender, academic status, degree, and years of promotion did not contribute to differences in their perceptions about research. A reason could be that PhD degree holders and professors were mixed up with other categories respectively as the numbers for them were too small to run the statistics. In contrast, their immediate work environment – departments and institutions seemed to have played a more significant role in distinguishing them from each other. TEFL academics from the ELLDs and

the national university appeared to be more positive about the benefits of research and their research competence than those from the CETDs and the two provincial institutes respectively. Such a finding may explain the relative high research productivity that ELLDs and the national university had in the study. However, correlation needs to be performed to validate such a speculation.

## **Conclusion**

This study aims to benchmark Chinese Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) academics' research productivities, as a way to identify and, subsequently, address research productivity issues. Findings showed that a large percent of the investigated Chinese TEFL academics in the study did not produce any research except non-core journal articles and provincial research projects. However, they seemed to hold positive perceptions about research. It was possible that their positive perceptions about research came from rhetoric rather than their own experience. More likely, personal factors such as their research competence and institutional support played a more important role in their poor research performance.

Developing research capacity within an institution is an ongoing process, particularly with TEFL academics who drift in and out of institutions as they advance their careers. Although researchers can be internally driven to conduct research (Bland et al. 2005; Brocato and Mavis 2005) and continuously devise research plans (Brocato and Mavis 2005; Ito and Brotheridge 2007), many TEFL academics require further support or mentoring in the field. For example, research training in TEFL education is considered pivotal for developing research capacity in this area (Dai and Zhang, 2004; Gao 2006; Hiep 2006; Yang et al. 2001). The researcher needs to engage interactively with colleagues to develop an in-depth knowledge of their research area (Brocato and Mavis 2005; Ito and Brotheridge 2007; Yang et al. 2001). Forming and expanding a communication network of like-minded TEFL academic researchers can present opportunities for conducting research (Bland et al. 2005; Ito and Brotheridge, 2007). Hence, this research aims to investigate Chinese TEFL academics' levels of research productivity for the purposes of understanding and possibly benchmarking research outputs.

Developing TEFL research capacity requires tertiary institutions to provide research-learning opportunities. Management needs to encourage TEFL academics to do research and publish (Gao 2006). Research training workshops (Borg 2007; Liu 1999) with leaders who themselves are research active may help this process (Hao and Zhang, 2007; Yang et al. 2002). TEFL academics need to feel that research is an important part of their employment (Hao and Zhang 2007; Yang et al. 2001). Resources that inspire and stimulate TEFL academics to publish must be available, as academics require ready access to research books and journals if they are to be research active (Gao 2006; Hiep 2006; Zhu 2002). They also require ways to conduct research individually and collaboratively (Borg 2007; Gao 2006). Financial support for research can aid academics, particularly support for presenting

refereed papers at conferences (Hiep 2006), and inviting scholars to discuss research (Borg 2007). Admittedly, many TEFL academics have heavy teaching workloads (Dai and Zhang, 2004; Gao 2006; Hiep 2006; Yang et al. 2001) and as such require support or funding to reduce these loads in order to conduct research. Indeed, high-level support for academics can instill confidence for conducting research (Bazeley 2003; Kotrlik et al. 2002). Yet, to understand the level of required support necessitates understanding research productivity outputs and constraints. For China to advance its status on the educational world market will require taking measures to facilitate, scaffold and activate research productivity within its institutions and departments after understanding these constraints.

As indicated earlier in this article, this quantitative study only presented a snapshot of the 182 Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity over a five-year period, and their perceptions about research. The aim of this initial research was to establish aggregated patterns and identify potential problems in Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity and their perceptions about research. Further in-depth qualitative studies are needed to elicit reasons for these TEFL academics' perceptions about conducting research that lead to research outputs. Future research can adopt the case study design focusing on some TEFL departments that can provide rich information. Interview data from TEFL academics and institutional research documents and archival records need to be collected to reach a comprehensive understanding of their level of research productivity.

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