Research and reflective practice in the EFL classroom: Voices from Armenia

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Abstract

A sociocultural perspective of teacher development honours the rich knowledge base that teachers work from as they strive to connect theory ("expert" knowledge) to practice ("experiential" knowledge). The present paper explores classroom research and reflective practice as forms of teacher-led inquiry for the EFL context. In particular, this study explores the extent to which Armenian EFL teachers engage in classroom research, the challenges they face therein, and whether or not they consider themselves to be reflective practitioners. The findings are presented against the backdrop of the Armenian context with recommendations for cultivating teacher-led inquiry to promote teacher development in a range of EFL settings.

1. Introduction

It is the information age and it is vital that education keeps pace with the rapid changes taking place in the global economy. Simultaneously, the roles of teachers and teaching strategies are constantly being modified to deal with the increasingly complex conditions of classrooms and the specific needs of learners. Most recently, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in its various iterations has spread across the globe and become heralded as an effective model for teaching languages (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Spada, 2007). Complimentary approaches, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task Based Teaching (TBT), have also gained wider renown globally (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). Adopting these approaches requires a shift in teaching practices, which may result in tensions and contradictions within the activity of teaching for practitioners in some parts of the world.

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From a sociocultural perspective, all human activity is situated within and mediated by context, culture, language and social interactions (Johnson, 2009). The implementation of current approaches for English language teaching in parts of the world where traditional approaches (e.g., Grammar Translation, Audiolingual Method) have prevailed demands that teachers are supported with opportunities to grapple with the changing expectations placed upon them. Teacher learning in this case, as Johnson points out, requires a reconstruction of existing knowledge, skills and attitudes about teaching and learning, such that teachers can respond to the local needs and expectations of students, administrators and parents while integrating global approaches.

The history of the education system in Armenia is complex for various historical, cultural and political reasons. The whole picture cannot be painted within the scope of this article, but two important factors must be highlighted: (1) Armenia is a former member of the Soviet Union and (2) Armenia became an independent nation in 1991. While under the Soviet Union, classes were teacher-centred and the teacher was an all-knowing figure in the classroom. It was generally unacceptable to question the teacher or the textbook. There was heavy emphasis on reproduction – memorising and reciting facts from the texts and teachers. As a country with newfound national autonomy, post-Soviet Armenia underwent an overhaul of the education system, which resulted in a brief vacuum in education (Terzian, 2010). In the push to fill the vacuum, Armenia turned to other countries for solutions. The resulting national curriculum incorporated new approaches and methods that most teachers were not trained to implement. To this day, many teachers continue in the tradition of their Soviet schooling days, despite insistence to innovate and implement new classroom practices.

Factors that impact the capacity for Armenian teachers to implement newer methods in the class include inadequate teacher training, lack of support for novice teachers, conditions at schools (e.g., class size, lack of materials) and low motivation (Khachatryan, Petrosyan, & Terzyan, 2013). The quality of teaching suffered in post-Soviet, earthquake devastated Armenia as the numbers of students decreased, and therein did the funding, thus reducing teacher salaries as well as funds allocated to teacher training and materials (Tadevosyan, 2008). During the reform of the education system, as Khachatryan et al. assert, most decisions were top-down, proving to be ineffective as they failed to incorporate the experiential knowledge and needs of the teachers. Training sessions that were provided were mandatory, but did not consider the teachers' context, causing discontent with new teaching methods. Teachers in more remote regions viewed the new methods to be difficult to implement given limited local resources ("Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis", 2012).

Top-down decision making within educational systems is not unique to Armenia. Teachers across disciplines worldwide are often challenged to find ways to make the demands of the curriculum, the administration and the Ministry of Education fit their teaching reality (e.g., Kim, 2011). The importance of teachers having a voice was recently given more attention and was thoroughly discussed by educational

researchers (Hopkins, 2008; Kincheloe, 2003; Pappas & Raymond, 2011). As a result, the liberating concepts of "teacher-researcher" and "reflective practitioner" came into existence. Teachers are now considered to be active agents that contribute immensely to the development of school curricula, course and materials design as well as classroom-based research (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).

Johnson (2009) acknowledges that teachers need tools for analysing their practice against the relevant historical, cultural, political and social backdrops of their context. Embracing the roles of "reflective practitioner" and "teacher-researcher" offers ways for teachers to systematically gather data from the immediate context and theorise practice – continually connecting theory to experience and experience to theory. Reflective tools empower teachers to make sense of their practice and better understand themselves, their students and their respective roles and responsibilities in the classroom in light of policies, curriculum, materials, methods and peers.

While reflective teaching has been systematically promoted by teacher educators for some time now (e.g., Adey, Hewitt, Hewitt, & Landau, 2004; Cirocki, Tennekoon, & Peña Calvo, 2014; Farrell, 2007, 2015), traditional, top-down models of professional development still exist in many teaching contexts, including Armenia. With this in mind, the present study aims to:

1. investigate whether Armenian EFL teachers conduct research in their classrooms and consider themselves reflective practitioners;

2. find out whether conducting classroom research is a difficult task for Armenian EFL teachers, and if so, what causes this difficulty;

3. identify various reasons why Armenian EFL teachers do or do not conduct research in their classrooms and how they utilise the data they gather from their research.

2. Language teachers as reflective inquirers

The idea of teachers as researchers is not a new concept, with theoretical arguments dating back to the 1970s. Stenhouse (1975) states, "a research tradition which is accessible to teachers and which feeds teaching must be created if education is to be significantly improved" (p. 165). At the start of the new millennium, practitioner research began to flourish, resulting in some valuable outputs in the literature. Classroom-based research, "systematic, rigorous enquiry (…) which is made public" (Borg 2009, p. 377), became a facet of teacher professionalism. The modern model of teacher professionalism is grounded in critical self-reflection, professional autonomy and recognition for the role. For this reason, language teachers are expected to engage in reflective practice, promote innovation and participate in classroom-based research.

Anderson (1990) defines classroom-based research as "a disciplined attempt to address questions or solve problems through the collection and analysis of primary data for the purpose of description, explanation, generalization and prediction" (p. 4). Hopkins (2008) later clarifies that classroom-based research is shaped by a teacher's

ability to systematically reflect on practice and attach meaning to classroom experience. Hopkins highlights that classroom-based research is a well-planned inquiry process involving developing contextualised research questions, devising approaches and tools for gathering data, and ultimately producing new insights about practice and theory related to the teaching and learning processes. Classroom research engages teachers in an on-going process of self-examination and continuing professional development.

Action research is an approach to classroom-based research that connects classroom research and action towards change. Its importance in the domain of teacher-led inquiry is highlighted by its prominence in the literature (e.g., Burns, 2009; Mertler, 2012). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research consists of four overarching stages: *Planning*, *Action*, *Observation* and *Reflection*. In the Planning stage, teachers explore their teaching context with the aim of identifying a problem to resolve and devising a plan of action to find a suitable resolution. The Action phase introduces interventions into the teaching-learning process, which often include new ways of doing things in the classroom that can be adopted if successful. During the observation stage, teachers systematically collect data about the efficacy of the intervention. Finally, the Reflection stage involves thinking about, analysing and discussing the outcomes of the action taken. To further improve a particular classroom area, this stage could be the beginning of a new cycle.

The notions of reflection and reflective practice are critical to classroom-based research and a teacher's professional development. Reflection is defined in various ways. According to educational psychologists (e.g., O'Donnell, Reeve, & Smith, 2012), reflection is a complex phenomenon; experts in the field still have not come to an agreement as to whether reflection is an ability, activity or process. For example, Pisapia (2009, p. 67) defines reflection as an "ability to use perceptions, experience and information" to be able to form conclusions about what occurred in the past or is taking place now to assist in guiding future actions. According to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), reflection is a cognitive activity in which people have a chance to relive, analyse and evaluate their experiences. Kemmis (1985) perceives reflection as a socio-political process, in which humans recreate social life through communication, decision-making and social action.

Rather than come to consensus on a definition of reflection, it may be more useful to consider different types of reflection. Schön (1983) discusses *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The former is embedded in the action itself and captures the role of reflection in guiding a particular experience as it unfolds. Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, happens when a practitioner thinks through a particular event after it has taken place. Mezirow (1990), in turn, lists *content reflection (what)*, *process reflection (how)* and *premise reflection (why)*. Senge (1990) presents a typology for reflection at three levels: *technical reflection*, *practical reflection* and *critical reflection*. In education, technical reflection considers the effectiveness of teaching techniques, strategies and skills. Practical reflection aims to make deeper connections between an action and an outcome within the scope of professional practice. Critical reflection

builds on the first two levels of reflection as well as frames teaching through the lens of social, political, financial and ethical implications.

Killion and Todnem (1991) expand on Schön's (1983) model to include *reflection-for-action*, also referred to as anticipatory reflection. After engaging in reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, a teacher reflects on the next steps – identifying expectations, setting goals, and deciding on useful guidelines for future successful classroom situations.

Reflective practice is a dynamic and spiralling process (Pollard, with Collins, Maddock, Simco, Swaffield, Warin, & Warwick, 2005). It comprises different activities, ranging from lesson planning through lesson and materials evaluation to pedagogical research. In the latter, teacher-researchers systematically collect data, critically analyse and discuss the data and, finally, share the research outcomes with other colleagues. When teachers share their findings, informed and evidence-based decisions related to language curriculum and pedagogy can be made.

While most teachers do regularly reflect on their lessons and consider what works best in their context, it must be emphasised that classroom-based inquiry requires intentional reflection. Cirocki, Tennekoon and Peña Calvo (2014) point out that intentional reflection "differs from daily reflection in that it is planned, active, persistent, and heightens a teacher's focus on problem-posing in their classrooms" (p. 27). Bullough and Gitlin (2001) argue that issues explored by teacher-researchers are specific to their own classroom practice, and thus enable teacher-researchers to relate practice to theories of teaching and learning. In this way, teacher research can fill the gap between the theories developed by external researchers and the actual experiences that teachers encounter in their respective classrooms.

Through reflective inquiry teacher-researchers are given the opportunity to contribute to educational reform and grow professionally. Their contributions to the field through publications, presentations and professional development shape the teaching profession. Reflective inquiry provides teacher-researchers the opportunity to engage in reflection as a means of development and adaptation through careful study of their own professional practice. Through careful examination, teacher-researchers become more reflective, critical and analytical of their own teaching, encouraging them to embrace the life-long activity of a commitment to professional development (Çelik & Dikilitaş, 2015; Keyes, 2000; Rust, 2007; Zeichner, 2003).

3. Method

The empirical part of this article presents a small-scale research project - a replication of a study that had been conducted in Sri Lanka with ESL teacher participants. (For more details on the original study, see Cirocki, Tennekoon, & Peña Calvo, 2014). Findings from the study in Sri Lanka reflected the situation in Armenia; thus the impetus arose to conduct an investigation and explore the Armenian context in greater detail. The main aim of the study was to investigate to what extent

Armenian EFL teachers engage in classroom research, and thus reflect on their practice.

3.1. Participants

The research population consisted of eighty EFL Armenian teachers. There were six male and seventy four female participants. Ages ranged from twenty two to sixty, with the average age being 31. The participants represented different types of schools: public and private primary and secondary schools, as well as private language programmes for adults and children. The majority of the participants came from secondary schools. Participant qualifications were as follows: MA ($n = 56$), BA ($n = 13$) and teaching certificates and diplomas ($n = 11$). Simple random sampling was used to select the research population for the quantitative part and convenience sampling was used in the qualitative part. This means that in the former part all the participants were selected at random, with an equal chance of being chosen. In the latter part, the participants were chosen on the basis of availability (Weathington, Cunningham, & Pittenger, 2010). Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of all participants.

3.2. Research tools and procedure

The present study followed a mixed-methods approach. It combined quantitative and qualitative methods to draw on the strengths of each (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), validate the results (Klassen, Creswell, Plano Clark, Clegg Smith, & Meissner, 2012) and develop a more complete understanding of reflective practice in Armenia. Accordingly, two instruments were used to collect the data: a questionnaire (Appendix A) and a semi-structured interview (Appendix B). The questionnaire consisted of thirteen closed-ended questions with pre-defined options. The questionnaire was completed by eighty ($N = 80$) participants. Questionnaires were used because they are easy to analyse compared to other research techniques such as face-to-face interviews or telephone surveys. Additionally, most people are familiar with questionnaires (Berdie, Anderson, & Niebuhr, 1986).

Once all the questionnaires had been collected, they underwent statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics such as mean values, frequencies, percentages, standard deviations and medians were calculated. Finally, whenever appropriate, the results were presented on charts.

The semi-structured interview, on the other hand, was used with twenty participants. The interview was based on seven open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were deliberately used as they allowed participants to supply detailed answers to the presented questions, and participants could also clarify their responses (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Another reason for using open-ended questions was that they offered participants the possibility of giving unlimited answers, thereby providing additional information on the thinking processes, creativity and resourcefulness of the participants.

As soon as the interview stage came to an end, the textual data underwent qualitative analysis. Thematic coding was employed. The textual data were reviewed and label-based codes were developed. Finally, themes were identified, analysed and discussed.

3.3. Research limitations

Before analysing and discussing the outcomes of the present study, it is important to state the study's main shortcomings. The first limitation was that the research population was rather small; it consisted of eighty teachers. Quantitative measures require large populations to be regarded as representations of groups of subjects to whom research outcomes can be transferred (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The second limitation was that only two instruments were used. More specifically, the semi-structured interview could have been supported with other qualitative data collection methods such as focus groups, written self-reports or participant notes. Also, the self-reported data may have contained different sources of bias, which tend to result from participants' selective memory (Fayolle, 2010). Furthermore, the survey data sometimes reflected a different response profile than that reflected in the corresponding interview data. For example, survey data indicated that the majority of Armenian EFL teachers believe they are well prepared to conduct classroom research. However, this finding was in contradiction with the majority of the responses to the same item during interviews. It is unclear if participants were overestimating their research skills on the anonymous surveys, or if they were being modest during the personal interviews. To clarify this inconsistency, it would have been useful to interview some school principals or look more closely at the research methods of the teachers. Also, a thorough analysis of documents such as course descriptions and syllabi would have strengthened the discussion and given the researchers license to expect that Armenian teachers should be involved in classroom research. Additionally, the majority of the interview data are from teachers based in the capital city of Yerevan. Many of them had some training with research methods, which may not be the case for most teachers in other regions of Armenia. Finally, absence of a precise definition of *reflective practice* in the literature contributed to accepting participants' subjective perceptions of the concept under study.

4. Results and discussion

The purpose of this section is to analyse and discuss the gathered data. For the sake of clarity, the analysis and discussion are presented in three sections. These sections are related to the research questions listed above. The focus of these sections is as follows: (1) teacher engagement in classroom research, (2) complexity of classroom research and its causes and (3) reasons for conducting/not conducting classroom research.

4.1. Teacher engagement in classroom research

Two questions on the questionnaire were related to the participants' engagement in classroom research and their wish to be involved in this kind of professional activity. In the former question, three participants (*n* = 3, 3.75%) were always involved in classroom research, eighteen (*n* = 18, 22.5%) were very often involved in research and thirty three (*n* = 33, 41.25%) were sometimes involved. The other two options were: rarely (*n* = 22, 27.5%) and never (*n* = 4, 5%). According to the latter question, ten participants (*n* = 10, 12.5%) would like to always be involved in research projects, twenty four (*n* = 24, 30%) very often, twenty three (*n* = 23, 28.75%) sometimes, fourteen (*n* = 14, 17.5%) rarely and nine (*n* = 9, 11.25%) never.

There were seventy six participants (*n* = 76, 95%) who stated that they do research in the classroom at different levels of frequency. These participants said they took part in quantitative (*n* = 29, 38.15%), qualitative (*n* = 12, 15.78%) and mixed-methods (*n* = 35, 46.05%) projects. They also added that they used a number of instruments. In descending order, the instruments used were: questionnaires (*n* = 45, 59.21%), tests (*n* = 42, 55.26%), observation sheets (*n* = 27, 35.52%), interview guides/question lists (*n* = 23, 30.26%), checklists (*n* = 14, 18.42%), portfolios (*n* = 9, 11.84%) and diaries/journals (*n* = 8, 10.52%).

The questionnaire revealed that the majority of the participants believed that classroom research is important. The participants' opinions were as follows: very important (*n* = 47, 58.75%), important (*n* = 25, 31.25%), moderately important (*n* = 7, 8.75%) and of little importance (*n* = 1, 1.25%). The interview data also support that Armenian teachers do value classroom research. When asked whether they believed conducting classroom research is important, two participants stated:

> *Well of course it is important. Before MA TEFL I didn't think so, but after doing the research, especially the action research, … I think it is really important; it changes lots of things. [...] For example, things that you don't see or you don't realise - you do it unconsciously, and then after doing the research you pay attention to things. So I think it is really important. (Tatev)*

> *Well, I think research in the classroom is important because it enables you to understand what are the needs for your students and to what extent to enhance the activities to be given to them to develop their language skills later. (Tanya)*

Likewise, the participants felt that EFL teachers should be required to do classroom research. In this question, however, the frequency distribution was reversed for the first two items: 47 and 25 vs. 10 and 51. The distribution of opinions in the second question was as follows: ten of the participants (*n* = 10, 12.5%) strongly agreed, fifty one (*n* = 51, 63.75%) agreed, thirteen (*n* = 13, 16.25%) were undecided and six (*n* = 6, 7.5%) strongly disagreed.

The participants were also asked whether or not they agreed that classroom research should be made compulsory for all EFL teachers. According to the gathered data, twenty three participants (n = 23, 28.75%) were undecided about this statement,

whereas thirteen participants (n = 13, 16.25%) disagreed that language teachers should be teacher-researchers.

The questionnaire subsequently showed that forty six participants (n = 46, 57.5%) had attended a Research Methods module/course while being trained to be a teacher. There were four participants (n = 4, 5%) that had had a chance to attend such a module but selected a different one. The rest of the population (n = 30, 37.5%) stated that such a module was not offered during their course of study or training. Regarding overall preparation to do classroom research, forty five participants (n = 45, 56.25%) agreed that they were well-prepared to conduct classroom research. In all the other cases, twenty four participants (n = 24, 30%) were undecided and eleven (n = 11, 13.75%) disagreed with this statement.

Additionally, participants discussed their experiences with courses or training seminars that had prepared them to do classroom research. Their comments reflect the variance in preparation among teachers in Armenia, from none at all to some:

> *Mostly we learnt the methods and ethics of research. This was the main source for me to understand the nature of research and to conduct it in frames of the classroom and outside of it. (Tanya)*

> *To tell frankly, I didn't know anything about classroom research until you told us about it and I went to the Internet and tried to find some information about it. (Liliana)*

Participants who reported taking a Research Methods module/course, remembered its content to varying degrees.

> *I don't quite remember the name of the course but it was … "Research Methods", if I am not mistaken. It was basics of research, like how to develop a questionnaire, do an interview, a structured interview and semi-structured interview. We did small projects… I don't quite remember. Yeah, it was a small project based on each questionnaire, like to develop a small questionnaire, do an interview… and use a... this… the test… I don't quite remember. (Gayane)*

> *Well, you can do research on different things. For example, we studied how to do article research. […] But how important is classroom research and how we should do classroom research as ESL teachers - I don't remember such a thing. (Maral)*

Some participants noted that while they may or may not have been professionally trained to do research; the act of doing research became reality during their teaching practice:

> *The work experience gave me this ability to do research in terms of the classroom. For example, as you said this pre-teaching experience was based on observations before teaching. I was asked to observe the classroom in order to get knowledge how to teach them, what methods to use, how to implement this teaching process correctly, to target their goals correctly… (Tanya)*

I haven't actually attended a course which was aimed at how to conduct classroom research. […] As far as the actual research is concerned, I came upon it during my teaching practice. I used to pass different papers in order to question my students and then analyse the results. It was an independent work and not a conducted plan. (Meline)

A final discussion point in the interviews probed teachers' thoughts about being reflective practitioners. The concept of a reflective practitioner turned out to be perceived in different ways. Some of the participants' comments were as follows:

It's very easy not to be reflective - just teaching automatically. But it's important to just stop yourself for some time and then think what you have achieved, what your targets are, where you are currently. (Alana)

I am doing all these things, but in my mind. I am thinking, really, during the class, or after the class or whenever I am discussing or sharing my opinions with my colleagues or peers. I do think and try to do something better, try to come up with better ideas, by sharing my experience with my colleagues, but I am not writing about this anywhere. (Maral)

Reflection I do, even during lessons. Sometimes I do something and that moment I understand it. It was right or it was wrong - especially if it is the first time I do it. And later, after the lesson or even at that moment, an idea comes to me. I can even change just at that moment. If I understand it doesn't go well, I do change it. If it is not possible at that moment, I will experiment the same thing in another class - but an improved version. (Sela)

As the present study showed, the significance of reflective inquiry is acknowledged in the Armenian context. The majority of the teachers involved in the current study stated that they are involved in classroom research. The teachers do quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods studies, plus the teachers use a wide range of instruments. It should be borne in mind, however, that only 28 percent of these teachers ($n = 21$) admitted to being involved in classroom research on a regular basis.

In addition to questionnaires and interview question lists, Armenian teachers also employed portfolios. Portfolios may fulfil different functions in the classroom (Bernhardt, 2013; Calfee & Perfumo, 1996). For example, they can be useful research tools. As research instruments, portfolios provide teacher-researchers with relevant information about students' achievements and students' personal growth. Portfolios additionally offer qualitative data about the extent of student learning and progress. Portfolios document student behaviour and skills, plus reveal how students integrate in- and out-of-class experiences.

According to the present study, Armenian EFL teachers consider classroom research and reflective practice as important elements of a teacher's career. The teachers stressed that both components exert a substantial impact on teaching performance and professional development. Similar results have also been thoroughly discussed in the literature (e.g., Farrell, 2007, 2015; Shulman, 1988). Reflective

practice is believed to guide teachers towards improving their teaching experience and enhancing their students' learning experience. More specifically, reflective teaching moves teachers through a learning process by reviewing teaching practices, and the context in which they occur, to see whether the intended outcomes have been achieved. Additionally, reflective practice encourages teachers to evaluate their situation, become responsible for their future actions and provide explicit responses to such questions as: "How do I know what I know? [D]o I know the reasons for what I do? [and] Why do I ask my students to perform or think in particular ways?" (Shulman, 1988, p. 33).

As the outcomes of the current study further showed, the teachers generally agree that classroom research should be both the duty of language teachers and a compulsory ingredient of teaching. One participant said, "Sometimes teachers think that it is not for them to research. They think it is difficult. But I think that it is for teachers. They know their work better than the others, and they really should do research, even once or twice during the year." This mature attitude is in agreement with Lyons' (2010) perspective on reflective practice. According to Lyons, teachers must be regularly committed to reflection and reflective inquiry. Such a commitment seeks to contribute to both reforming and enhancing education.

It was good to see that over 50 percent of the research population ($n = 46$) attended a Research Methods module while being trained to be teachers. In this group, nearly 72 percent of the teachers ($n = 33$) felt well-prepared to conduct classroom research. Despite the fact that these two results are much better than those observed in a research project conducted among ESL teachers in Sri Lanka (see Cirocki, Tennekoon, & Peña Calvo, 2014), there is still considerable scope for improvement. Many Armenian teachers who were trained to be teacher-researchers had vague recollections of those Research Methods modules, which speaks to the need for ongoing professional development. In addition, many of them were not presently engaged in classroom research due to lack of time, support from the administration to experiment in their classrooms and both declarative and procedural knowledge with regard to classroom-based research, just like in the case of Sri Lankan teachers (Cirocki, Tennekoon, & Peña Calvo). It is vital to be competent in conducting classroom research. Teacher-researchers must be able to properly deal with confidentiality, anonymity, cultural sensitivity and the appropriate choice of research instruments (Cirocki, 2013a, 2013b; Gregory, 2003; Mackey & Gass, 2005). Otherwise, research results may be distorted, participants may be put at risk (e.g., a psychological trauma) and racial, cultural and gender issues may arise (Cirocki, 2013a).

The foregoing discussion indicates that the system of education in Armenia seems to suffer from various drawbacks. According to the gathered data, some of the EFL teachers thought that they demonstrate superficial knowledge about research methods and about conducting classroom research. Some of the participants also clarified that not all Armenian institutions offering teaching qualifications provide modules on research methods. Those that do may not always deliver high-quality

sessions. For example, one of the participants commented, "I would like to do [classroom research, but] before I didn't have any knowledge of that field, because I didn't have the chance to learn about it, not in school, not in university. They had nothing related to research and I [now] start to understand what is going to be research in the classroom. I would like to do it." Such a state of affairs calls for immediate action. It is essential that all teacher training institutions or centres offer modules on research methods so that reflective inquiry is not only instilled in teachers from the very beginning, but is also made enjoyable for teachers.

At the interview stage, teachers were asked if they considered themselves to be reflective practitioners. Every one of them responded affirmatively, however, when asked to elaborate on their responses, it became clear that the construct of reflective practitioner is not the same for all of them. The lack of precision in defining the concept under study has also been indicated by Gardner (2014) and Farrell (2015).

For some of the teachers, being a reflective practitioner means documenting and sharing what is happening in the classroom. One teacher shared, "I have a notebook. After each class, especially if I am teaching the same level or if it is the first time I am teaching this level, […] I write whatever I did in the classroom and during that process I understand the things that worked well and I write the things that didn't work well." For some teachers, reflective practice entails discussing classroom practice with others, including colleagues and students.

> *Yes, I do because after every lesson I always reflect. If there are any problems, any things that are new to me, I always share with my colleagues; I reflect on this and I always try to think about how to target the issues. (Tanya)*

The various approaches the teachers associated with reflective practice varied in sophistication but were nonetheless grounded in reflection-in-action and/or reflection-on-action (Farrell, 2015; Schön, 1983). One teacher acknowledged "I don't write any or I don't blog, but definitely, I always [consider] what did I do, how did it result, how can I change. If I had more time I [would] put it into writing; it might help - but no time." Several teachers noted that they rely on observations and student tracking during class to guide future decision-making and lesson planning.

> *I observe from the side. I mostly [get] feedback from the students - what works, what doesn't work, what they would like to work on and improve. (Astghik)*

4.2. Complexity of classroom research and its causes

In general, the participants admitted that classroom research is difficult. Forty five participants ($n = 45$, 56.25%) agreed with this statement, whereas thirteen ($n = 13$, 16.25%) were undecided, twenty one ($n = 21$, 26.25%) disagreed and one ($n = 1$, 1.25%) strongly disagreed. The participants also clarified what makes classroom research difficult for them. The most common issues were: designing research tools ($n = 33$, 41.25%), handling ethical issues ($n = 29$, 36.25%), formulating proper research

questions (*n* = 27, 33.75%), analysing data (*n* = 25, 31.25%) and collecting data (*n* = 13, 16.25%). The results are presented in Figure 1 below.
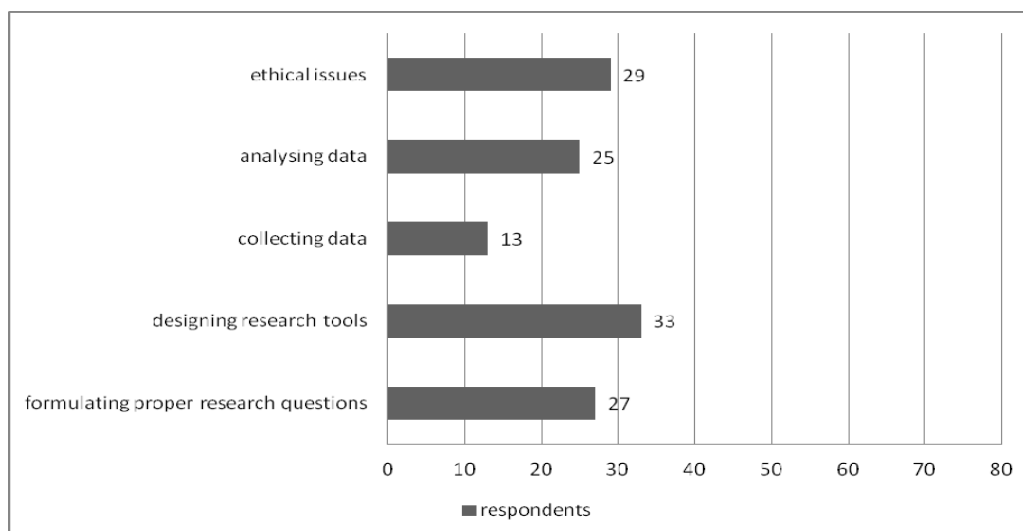

Figure 1. Areas that make classroom research a complex task

Interestingly, several participants noted that doing research was neither difficult nor easy. They offered some unique perspectives about the act of doing research and highlighted a few challenges.

> *Well, I find it interesting actually, neither difficult nor easy…. Every teacher's motivation is to know their target audience and what are their expectations. So, it's difficult if you have very different ideas and you are going to research individual students during the course; it makes things hard. And it also makes your work easy because you know exactly what to do during the course and how to work with every single student to satisfy them. (Meline)*

> *I wouldn't say it is difficult or easy. It depends on your knowledge of how to conduct research. If you are aware of what are the things you need, how you need to, for example, write the research questions, use instruments, and then collect data and analyse it, it is not going to be so difficult. But the real difficulty that I had was analysing the data. I think, and I have also heard it from my peers, that it is the worst part because you deal with numbers, especially if you are doing quantitative research. Then to analyse them, and sometimes also generalise them. (Gohar)*

One participant noted an advantage of classroom research from her experience:

> *No, no [classroom research] is easier actually, because sometimes when you go and do research on others, for example with other teachers it's hard. Maybe teachers are busy or some of them are not very open. In Armenia, especially, I think the research idea is not really working well, because teachers are very*

closed and they don't want you or anyone to go to their classroom. But the action research was great. I would do action research in the future. (Tatev)

Overall, Armenian teachers consider classroom research to be a difficult part of their practice. In particular, the teachers reported that they have problems with basic elements of pedagogical research, including formulating proper research questions, designing research tools or analysing data. Another interesting finding was that Armenian teachers had difficulty in collecting data in the classroom. In reality, an active search for data is not necessary as classrooms abound in data. However, teachers rarely regard their students' tests or written assignments as research data that can be examined both qualitatively and quantitatively. On the other hand, some teachers considered the simple act of collecting test scores, student feedback and student assignments to be research, without any organised approach to analysis of the data. Hence, it is advisable that teachers be informed that systematic data collection in the classroom, with appropriate analysis, performs a pivotal role in boosting learning and keeping track of student progress as well as in "identify[ing] patterns through which a holistic image of teaching can be created" (Stahmer, Suhrheinrich, Reed, Schreibman, & Bolduc, 2011, p. 109).

4.3. Reasons for conducting/not conducting classroom research

The present study showed that a considerable number of Armenian EFL teachers are involved in classroom research. Those who stated that they do so did it for nine reasons. The reasons they stated were: to make changes in the teaching-learning process (n = 36, 47.36%), to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching (n = 35, 46.05%), to understand what happens in their classrooms (n = 25, 32.89%), to increase professionalism (n = 25, 32.89%), to introduce innovations in the teaching learning process (n = 22, 28.94%), to interconnect theory, practice and research (n = 22, 28.94%), to formulate problems that exist in their classrooms (n = 15, 19.73%), to solve practical problems (n = 15, 19.73%) and to contribute to curriculum development (n = 11, 14.47%).

The following excerpts from the interview data reflect the various types of research in which Armenian EFL teachers engage and why.

I introduced Twitter to my students […]For example, I give them a topic and […] they have five days to write. Every day they need to add one sentence. They were beginners, so it was easy for them. For example, about the simple past, they would write: "Yesterday I went…" "Yesterday I did…" And then, at the end of three months, I gave them a survey and I interviewed some of them. And all of the students were happy. And this research, it was amazing. (Tatev)

Usually, it is the job of our head of department and she is [distributing] some questionnaires for the students to fill in and then to analyse together with the teacher. […] I don't very actively participate in the research process. I am more interested in the reflective feedback - like I have the results and then I communicate it to the students. It aims to identify what the students liked

> *during the program, to check their motivation, to find out what they would like to add to the course, maybe also they would like to remove something. (Meline)*

Regarding the final stage of a research project, the participants were asked what happens to the research results when they finalise their data analysis. As the questionnaire showed, the research outcomes were utilised in five ways: thirty five participants ($n = 35$, 46.05%) shared the results with their colleagues with the overall view of improving language education, twenty seven participants ($n = 27$, 35.52%) kept them for themselves to be used for improving their own teaching practice, twelve participants ($n = 12$, 15.78%) presented the results at workshops/conferences to enhance their professional development and ten participants ($n = 10$, 13.15%) shared the results with the parents of their students, expecting parental involvement in the teaching-learning process. Only eight participants ($n = 8$, 10.52%) published the results to distribute important information among other colleagues.

The interviewees appeared to share a number of these points. Here are some of their comments about what they do with research results upon completion:

> *Overall, I use them, first of all, for myself - to see whether they worked or not. And later, whether there is a need to implement them again, or not, in my classroom. If they are effective, I continue using them; if not I stop. I usually share [results] with my colleagues whenever we are together. I tell them what I have done. I share with my colleagues but not with other teachers. But it would be a good idea to share with them as well. (Gohar)*

> *I usually make a Power Point presentation and then take it to the classroom: "See, you wrote something like this and I want you to know that this is a very good idea and I am going to bring more grammar activities to your classroom. As far as my speaking only in English is concerned, I am sorry, but I am not going to eliminate it because that is the procedure of our classes". Like this, giving them both positive feedback and explaining some points that maybe they don't understand thoroughly and explaining why we do and why we don't do this and that. (Meline)*

As the questionnaire further revealed, four participants ($n = 4$, 5%) had never conducted classroom research and twenty two participants ($n = 22$, 27.5%) rarely did classroom research in their teaching practice. The reasons for not doing research varied. For example, thirteen participants ($n = 13$, 16.25%) said they have not been trained to conduct research, whereas eleven participants ($n = 11$, 13.75%) admitted that they were not interested in classroom research. Nine participants ($n = 9$, 11.25%) believed that teachers should teach and not be involved in research. Seven participants ($n = 7$, 8.75%) complained about the lack of time and insufficient encouragement from their superiors to do research. Six participants ($n = 6$, 7.5%) believed that they had insufficient knowledge of statistical measures, whereas five participants ($n = 5$, 6.25%) reported difficulty designing research tools. Finally, two participants ($n = 2$, 2.5%) expected to be rewarded for doing research.

Time and demands of the curriculum were noted as obstacles during the interviews.

I don't have the time to do [research]. I wish wherever I teach I had separate time where I could reflect and do this. But as I don't, and I am not paid for that part, I do nothing. But I do believe that I will be more effective and it will make me a better teacher. (Maral)

Most of the time we are so focused on how to manage the curriculum because the curriculum is - if we can say - overabundant, over-stuffed, and we have so much to cover. I don't think many will think about whether or not the research is necessary to do. (Astghik)

The culture and habit of research, or lack thereof was also noted by interviewees.

You know I think it is a cultural thing; so even if the teacher is trained to do research, if it's not a universally accepted thing that everyone should do, people may not care to do it themselves. It takes extra effort, extra energy, extra time. It should be a unified thing and that unification should come from the Ministry probably or at least the university administration. I think periodic trainings will be very useful and helpful because if the teacher understands the value of it, he'll still try it. And once you get used to doing things, it's hard to go back and do the ways you used to because you see the benefits of it, and the positive effects of it. (Astghik)

As shown above, there were a number of reasons why Armenian teachers engage or do not engage in classroom inquiry. Teachers who conduct research in their classrooms do so for specific purposes, including the improvement of teaching-learning process, evaluation of effectiveness of their teaching and understanding of what happens in their classrooms. The findings clarified that in the majority of cases EFL teachers get involved in research to improve classroom processes so that the primary focus was on the students (Burns, 2009; Norton, 2009). Similar observations were made in Borg and Liu's (2013) research conducted among Chinese college English language teachers. Their participants engaged in pedagogical inquiry to discover better ways of teaching and contribute to knowledge in the area of language education.

The current project disclosed that some of the teacher-researchers share the results with their colleagues, whereas others keep the results for themselves to be used to improve their own teaching practice. It is essential that close attention to the importance of disseminating research outcomes be paid in the latter group. As Winslow (1996, p. 171) argues, the very act of not sharing research findings "is an aching nothingness in a part of one's professional soul" or "a scientific misconduct". Cottrell and McKenzie (2011, p. 113) add that "researchers have an implicit contract with […] colleagues in the scientific community […] to promote the knowledge base of their respective disciplines".

Likewise, another group of Armenian teacher-researchers shares the results with their students' parents, expecting active involvement on the parents' part in the teaching-learning process. As the literature shows, inviting parents to be actively involved in the education process is extremely important. Parental involvement in

school life contributes to improving student attitude and behaviour, reducing school absences and motivating students to aim for higher results (Mistretta, 2008).

Additionally, by communicating research outcomes to parents, teachers engage them in a constructive dialogue; parents are eager to find out to what extent research will benefit their children and the educational programme their children are part of (Castle, 2012).

A number of the Armenian teachers also present their results at conferences or publish the results to share them with a wider audience. The last two findings are in agreement with Anderson (2003), who underscores that both publishing and presenting results at conferences are perfect ways for teachers to enhance their professional development. Conferences additionally promote networking, which appears to have a greater impact on teacher practice than traditional staff development (Anderson, 2002; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). The conference-based networking is often continued through social media such as Facebook or Twitter. These outlets enable teachers to connect with other teachers, discuss education related issues, share teaching experiences, exchange materials and support one another, all of which contribute to advancing teacher career.

Important though conference-based networking appears to be, it is not always recognised by school management as a productive source of professional development. For example, Borg's (2009) participants complained that they did not receive support with regard to workload reduction or conference attendance while doing research. Likewise, a lack of encouragement from school administrators to conduct classroom research was also reported by teachers in New Zealand (Denny, 2006), Canada (Allison & Carey, 2007) and Chile (Smith, Connelly, & Rebolledo, 2014). However, in their study, Gao and Chow (2012) made a contradictory observation. Their research participants from Guangdong province in China were not only encouraged by the school management to engage in classroom inquiry, but were also offered access to empirical literature and given opportunities to deepen their knowledge about ongoing research.

Those teachers who decided not to conduct classroom research also provided a list of reasons. The most common reasons were ascribed to a lack of proper training in research methods and lack of time. The least common reason was related to the participants' expectations of being rewarded for this type of activity. The former reasons do not seem to be unusual and specific only to Armenia. The same reasons were provided in other teaching contexts and reported in research projects by Barkhuizen (2009) and Borg and Liu (2013).

5. Conclusion and implications

This article argues that engagement in reflective practice and classroom research provides tools through which teachers can mediate their teaching activity and respond to the needs of their learners and the demands of their teaching context. The findings of the study confirm that the majority of participating Armenian EFL teachers are

engaged in classroom research and reflection. The present study also highlights the challenges faced by Armenian teachers when conducting or planning to conduct research. However, the study also reveals the need to further explore Armenian teachers' understanding of the constructs of research and reflection. In some instances, teachers are underestimating their research activity while in other cases, they qualify everyday instructional practices as research endeavours.

As teachers move into their career, they draw from their experiences as learners to make sense of their teaching practice. However, in the context of Armenia, much of the learning experience has been grounded in traditional approaches. Teachers who are urged to employ current teaching methods, either by the Ministry of Education or teacher educators, must learn to grapple with what they should be doing. Classroom research and reflection may provide the creative space to do just that. Ultimately, the present study indicates that reflective practice exists and is gaining traction in the EFL context in Armenia. However, in order to continue strengthening this new trend, three key implications for EFL teacher education and professional development are offered below.

Firstly, it is vital that reflective practice is thoroughly promoted through high-quality teacher education programmes. EFL teachers would be better supported to engage in reflective practice and classroom research if they had access to Research Methods courses/sessions during their training. These sessions provide essential background knowledge and understanding about classroom research, which teachers can tap into for future classroom-based research projects. Such a course, with ongoing research experience exists in the MA TEFL Programme at the American University of Armenia. However, other institutions that prepare teachers should consider providing modules/sessions, which not only introduce the nature of research, but also provide extensive practice in identifying and defining research questions and hypotheses. Teachers should also be familiar with qualitative and quantitative approaches and the data collection and analysis procedures appropriate to each.

Secondly, greater efforts are needed to ensure that reflective practice is further developed through interactions with colleagues in the workplace. Support for teacher research within schools would add to teachers' motivation to explore issues related to their contexts. One approach would be to establish communities of practice, supported by school administrators, which would facilitate teacher collaboration in research. These communities of practice can function within one educational institution or across institutions and at regional or national levels. The aim should be to promote classroom-based research projects and encourage collaborative, inquiry-based research among teachers working in similar contexts.

Finally, it is advisable that teacher-researchers are encouraged to become active members of professional communities. In Armenia, there is increasing involvement of EFL teachers in workshops and conferences locally (e.g., Armenian universities), regionally (e.g., Turkey, Georgia), and abroad (e.g., TESOL Arabia). However, EFL teacher-trainees and qualified teachers should continually be encouraged to attend

conferences or professional development workshops. At these professional meetings, teachers deepen their knowledge of key issues in the field, connect the knowledge back to practice in their local context (e.g., reflective practice) and find inspiration for their own research endeavours. Socialising with active researchers, which takes place during a conference or a workshop, will allow for building relationships, and possibly, for future research collaboration. In addition, locally, well-established organisations that exist to boost the professional development of EFL teachers in Armenia, such as the Association of English Teachers in Armenia (AELTA) and the British Council, should consider offering workshops and training courses that seek to develop teachers' emerging classroom research and reflection skills.

In addition to the implications for teacher education and professional development, this study has generated some questions for future research: What constitutes classroom research? What does it actually mean to be a reflective practitioner? The interview data show that an understanding of classroom research may vary greatly from one teacher to the next. Also, conceptions of what characterises reflective practice vary from teacher to teacher, scholar to scholar, discipline to discipline. What set of criteria should determine whether or not someone is a teacher-researcher or reflective practitioner? It is hoped that future research will address these issues.

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Appendix A. EFL teacher questionnaire

Thank you for taking time to respond to this questionnaire. All information is anonymous. We hope to learn more about if, when, how teachers conduct research and reflect on their teaching in Armenia. Your responses will be very useful for a better understanding of teachers' professional expertise, practice and needs.

I. Questions

1. How important, in your opinion, is conducting research in the EFL classroom? (Please choose one.)
   a. Very important
   b. Important
   c. Moderately important
   d. Of little importance
   e. Unimportant
2. To what extent do you agree that conducting research is a duty of an EFL teacher? (Please choose one.)
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Undecided
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree
3. To what extent do you agree that conducting classroom research should be made compulsory to all EFL teachers? (Please choose one.)
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Undecided
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree
4. Did you attend a Research Module/Course while being trained to be a teacher? (Please choose one.)
   a. Yes
   b. No, because it was not on offer
   c. No, as I decided to attend a different module
   d. Other:_____
5. To what extent do you agree that you are well prepared to do classroom research? (Please choose one.)
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Undecided
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree
6. To what extent do you agree that conducting classroom research is difficult? (Please choose one.)
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Undecided
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree
7. What makes classroom research difficult for you? (Please choose all that apply to you.)
   a. Formulating proper research questions
   b. Designing research tools (e.g. Questionnaires)

  c. Collecting data
  d. Analysing data
  e. Ethical issues
  f. Other:_____
8. How often are you involved in classroom research? (Please choose one.)
  a. Always
  b. Very often
  c. Sometimes
  d. Rarely
  e. Never
9. How often would you like to be involved in classroom research? (Please choose one.)
  a. Always
  b. Very often
  c. Sometimes
  d. Rarely
  e. Never
10. What type of research do you do? (Please choose all that apply to you.)
  a. Quantitative (e.g. experiments, surveys, etc.)
  b. Qualitative (e.g. case studies, diary studies, observations, etc.)
  c. Mixed methods (quantitative + qualitative)
11. What type of research tools do you use in your research? (Please circle the appropriate letters below.)
  a. Questionnaires
  b. Observation sheets
  c. Diaries/journals
  d. Portfolios
  e. Observation sheets/schedules
  f. Interview guides/question lists
  g. Checklists
  h. Tests
  i. Other:_____

12. Why do/don't you conduct classroom research? (Choose **one option below**, A or B, and **circle the appropriate answers in the selected box**.)

A. Why do you conduct classroom research?
a) to understand what happens in my classroom
b) to formulate problems that exist in my classroom
c) to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching
d) to make changes to the teaching-learning process
e) to contribute to curriculum development
f) to increase professionalism
g) to introduce innovations in the teaching-learning process
h) to solve practical problems
i) to interconnect theory, practice and research
j) other (please specify)

B. Why don't you conduct classroom research?
a) I have no time.
b) I'm not interested in it.
c) I haven't been trained to conduct research.
d) Teachers should teach and not be involved in research.
e) I have insufficient knowledge of statistical measures.
f) I have insufficient knowledge of designing research tools.
g) There is no need to connect teaching with doing research.
h) I am not encouraged by my superiors.
i) I am not rewarded for doing research.
j) other (please specify)

13. On completion of your investigations, what happens to the research results when you have analysed them? (Please choose all that apply.)
    a. I keep the results for myself with a view to improving my own teaching practice.
    b. I share the results with my colleagues with a view to improving language education.
    c. I share the results with my students' parents, expecting their involvement in the teaching-learning process.
    d. I publish the results to share important information with other colleagues.
    e. I present the results at workshops/conferences to enhance my professional development.
    f. Other: _____

II. Profile of the Respondent

1. How old are you? _____
2. What is your gender? (Please circle one letter below.)
   a. Male
   b. Female
3. What type of school do you teach in? (Please circle one letter below.)
   a. Primary school
   b. Middle school
   c. Secondary school
   d. Higher education
   e. Non-academic adult EFL (e.g., community-based, language institute)
   f. Non-academic youth EFL (e.g., after school program, small private classes)
   g. Other _____

4. What is your highest teaching qualification (e.g., CELTA or TESOL certificate, BA TEFL, MA TEFL)? (Please put the name in the space provided below.)
   _____

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire!

Appendix B: EFL teacher interview questions

1. What is your opinion on conducting research in the classroom? Do you think it is important or unimportant? Why?

2. Have you been trained to be a teacher-researcher? Did you attend any courses/modules on classroom research/research methods? Describe them please.

3. Is conducting classroom research difficult for you? If so, what makes it difficult?

4. What is your involvement in classroom research? How often do you do it? Who with? What do/did you investigate? What instruments do/did you use?

5. Why do/don't you do research in your teaching practice?

6. If you are involved in classroom research, what do you do with the collected data?

7. Do you consider yourself a reflective practitioner? Why/Why not?