

# Research Productivity Levels of Chinese TEFL Academics

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Li Bai and Peter Hudson

Queensland University of Technology

## Abstract

Since China's Economic Reform and its Open Door Policy, China has entered a new era of education (Adamson, 2002; Hu, 2005a). English has gained status as a language for international relations (Graddol, 1997) and international trade (Qu, 2007). Hence, in 2001, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) required universities to offer 5-10% of their course units in English, particularly in the fields of information technology, biotechnology, finance and law (Jen, 2001; MOE, 2001). However, "the upgrading of national English proficiency, then, is predicted largely on the professional competence of the teaching force" (Hu, 2005b, p. 655). For TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) academics, one component of this competence is the capacity to conduct research (Day, 1991; Shu, 2002). Indeed, research productivity has become essential for university success, and academics' employment and promotional prospects. This study aims to investigate 182 Chinese TEFL academics' research outputs across three Chinese higher education institutions through the research question: What are the research productivity levels of Chinese TEFL academics? A survey instrument was devised to gather TEFL academics' calculations of research productivity and, in particular, the quality and quantity of research outputs over a five-year period (2004-2008). Descriptive statistics through SPSS were used to analyse data across research output fields (e.g., journal articles, conference papers). Academic status varied ( $n=182$ ; teaching assistants 23.6%, lecturers 47.3%, associate professors 22.5%, and professors 6.6%) as did years of teaching (1-5 years 27.4%, 6-10 years 24.7%, 11-15 years 18.1%, 16-20 years 13.7%, > 21 years 15.9%). Results ( $n=182$ , male=27%, females=73%) indicated 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. An overwhelming majority of TEFL academics had zero productivity in 10 of the 12 categories. Nevertheless, there were highly-productive TEFL academics, who had produced five or more pieces of research across the 12 categories. In addition, there was not much difference between sole and co-authored research outputs, except non-core journal articles where sole authored work was 20% higher than co-authored work. China's desire for international competitiveness in education will require measures that facilitate higher levels of research productivity. These measures must include professional development, support and mentoring programs, and employment of personnel who can guide these processes. Research performance is an outcome, hence there is a need to understand Chinese TEFL

academics' perceptions about research, and experiences that may hinder and facilitate higher research productivity.

## **Literature Review**

English was officially recognised as the first foreign language in China in 1964 (Adamson & Morris, 1997). Although China's education suffered a severe setback during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when learning English was regarded as treason (Hertling, 1996), the reform and Open Door Policy in 1978 reinvigorated English education so that it not only has resumed its previous importance but far exceeded it (Adamson, 2002; Hu, 2002, 2005a). At the national level, English is viewed as an essential tool in China's drive for modernisation (Adamson, 2004; Hu, 2005b), as advanced science and technology mostly emanate from English speaking countries. As China increases contact with the world, there are more urgent needs for enlisting English-speaking personnel in international exchange (Boyle, 2000; Pang, Zhou, & Fu, 2002), particularly as English has gained status as a language for international relations (Graddol, 1997) and international trade (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Qu, 2007). China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and its successful bid for hosting 2008 Olympics in Beijing have created further enthusiasm for English learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Lam, 2002; Qu, 2007). At the individual level, English skills are often considered vital for receiving international education and procuring well-paid employment in a foreign firm or a joint venture (Adamson, 2004).

The Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) has made attempts to improve students' levels of English in higher education institutions. In 2001, MOE issued a directive that key universities in China should be able to offer 5-10% of their course units in English, particularly in the fields of information technology, biotechnology, finance and law (Jen, 2001; MOE, 2001). Hence, the College English Teaching Reform was launched in 2002 (MOE, 2006b). The reform integrates modern information technology with traditional English teaching and aims at building a new model of College English teaching (MOE, 2006b). Furthermore, amalgamation of colleges has facilitated management efficiency and integration of resources from various institutions to increase international competitiveness of Chinese universities (MOE, 1998). As a result, key national universities aspire to become world-class universities. Consequently, almost all higher education institutions have reoriented their goals and missions to incorporate research (Yuan, 2002).

The MOE initiatives, as well as increased proficiency level of entering college students (Cheng, 2002) have contributed to greater demands on TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) academics (MOE, 2004a). Yet, "the upgrading of national English proficiency, then, is predicted largely on the professional competence of the teaching force" (Hu, 2005b, p. 655). For TEFL academics, one component of this competence is the capacity to conduct research (Shu, 2002), which also reflects other changes in Chinese higher education. The aspirations of higher education institutions at all levels have led to more rigorous recruitment policies and promotion requirements (Che, 2004; Wang, 2007). Competition has started among higher education

institutions in attracting human capital—academics with PhD degrees, particularly those with international degrees, and university professors with research grants (MOE, 2006a; Lou, 2004). Accordingly, promotion policies have started to stress research as an important component of academics' performance (Pan, 2006; Shi, 2002). These changes highlight the role of research in higher education institutions' efforts to raise their national status and world ranking (Zhang, Wang, & He, 2006), and have exerted influence on faculty's academic role. Academics are obliged to engage in research activities, and this has posed challenges to teaching-oriented institutions and those disciplines that have a short history in higher education in particular (Che, 2004; Shu, 2002; Yuan, 2002).

There is a sense of urgency for Chinese TEFL academics to develop research profiles (Bai, 2009; Bai, Millwater, & Hudson, 2008). However, compared with the massive body of studies about academics' research performance in Western literature, there is a paucity of studies about Chinese TEFL academics. The studies that do exist are not current or are generalised (e.g., Song & Zhang, 2000; Yang, Zhang, & Xie, 2001). Some are theoretical speculations or suggestions on conducting research (Liu, 1998; Shu, 2002), whereas others were conducted on a small scale (Gao, 2006; Gao, Li, & Wu, 2002). Considering China's massive potential for research, there have been few enquiries into research performance of Chinese TEFL academics. Indeed, it is necessary to identify Chinese TEFL academics' research capacities in order to determine where to target research needs. This study aims to examine Chinese TEFL academics' research performances in terms of research productivity. Hence, the research question is: What are the research productivity levels of Chinese TEFL academics?

### **Context**

In China, there are two types of four-year institutes of higher education (i.e., universities and colleges) that offer Bachelor degrees. In the last two decades, a number of colleges were designated as universities in higher education reform (MOE, 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 and culture studies. 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.

Core journals are nationally-recognised journals in China. Every four years, a Catalogue of Chinese Core Journals is published by Peking University Library. This catalogue is usually adopted as the guideline in defining the status of academic journals in China. Individual institutes may have their own list of journals based on this catalogue. Publishing articles in core journals is highly

competitive, and as a result acceptance rate is much lower than provincial journals. Similarly the standards for publication of national books, and application and completion of national research projects are more stringent than their provincial counterparts.

### **Data collection methods and analysis**

The research question was: What is the research productivity of Chinese TEFL academics?

Research productivity in this study includes two measurements: research publications and research projects. Therefore, this 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)? Statistical information derived from quantitative research provided a broad-based depiction about Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity.

Two hundred forty five Chinese TEFL academics from three Chinese tertiary institutes were surveyed. 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 Jilin Province, China. Incomplete responses were deleted from the initial pool (Hittleman & Simon, 2006); hence there were 182 completed responses surveys from the three institutes (i.e., national university 36.3%, 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, Manion, & Morrison, 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. Academic status varied (teaching assistant 23.6%, lecturer 47.3%, associate professor 22.5%, and professor 6.6%) as did years of teaching (1-5 years 27.4%, 6-10 years 24.7%, 11-15 years 18.1%, 16-20 years 13.7%, > 21 years 15.9%). Out of the 182 participants (male=27%, females=73%), there were 19.8% with Bachelor's degrees as their highest qualification, 76.9% with a Master's degree, and only 3.3% with doctorates, who were also in professorial positions. Data showed that 59.9% had been promoted in the last 5 years (including entering the position at assistant teacher level), 30.2% claimed they had been promoted between 6-10 years ago, and 9.9% were promoted more than 10 years ago. It was found that 49% of the teaching assistants were from the provincial university, and more than 60% of the teaching assistants worked in the College English teaching departments. There were no professors among TEFL academics in the English language and literature department at the key provincial institute.

The survey investigated Chinese TEFL academics' research productivity such as articles, books, and research projects they had completed during 2004-2008. Results of research productivity of these TEFL academics ( $n=182$ ) indicated 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% who did not publish national academic books or national translated books. Participants' calculations of research outputs had a mean score of less than one except non-core journal articles and provincial projects, which had mean scores of 2.45 and 1.47, respectively. TEFL academics in the study seemed to be quite productive in non-core journal articles and provincial projects, but the significant gap between standard deviation and mean suggested that these research products were quite unevenly distributed. An overwhelming majority of TEFL academics had zero products in 10 of the 12 categories (Table 1); however, there were highly-productive TEFL academics who had produced five or more pieces of research across the 12 categories.

Table 1  
*TEFL Academics' Research Outputs (n=182)*

Category	0	1	2	3	4 or more	Sole %	Co-author %	Total output**
Core journal articles	70.9*	15.9	3.8	1.1	8.2	20.3	17	168
Non-core journal articles	35.7	15.4	9.3	11.0	28.6	53.8	30.2	445
International /national conference papers	81.9	11.0	1.6	3.3	2.2	15.4	2.7	61
Provincial conference papers	83.0	9.9	3.3	1.1	2.7	15.9	2.2	60
National academic books	95.6	2.2	1.1	1.1	0	3.3	2.2	14
Provincial academic books	80.2	9.9	3.3	3.3	3.3	7.7	12.6	80
National textbooks	87.4	8.2	4.4	0	0	4.9	8.2	31
Provincial textbooks	75.3	13.2	7.7	1.6	2.2	8.8	15.9	87
National translated books	95.6	3.3	0	0.5	0.5	2.2	2.2	15
Provincial translated books	91.8	6.0	1.1	0.5	0.5	3.8	4.4	23
National projects	81.3	11.5	3.8	1.6	1.6	4.4	6.5	59
Provincial projects	46.2	18.7	17.6	3.8	13.7	8.1	48.4	267

\* calculated as percentage of research outputs

\*\* number of research outputs

Only two categories of research (non-core journal articles and provincial research projects) showed that a majority of the TEFL academics had research outputs. Categories where the TEFL academics were least productive involved either research products at the national level or categories that were not required for promotion. According to promotion policies in the three institutes, compulsory research products required for promotion to lecturer, associate professor and professor included journal articles, research projects and books. However, some products were compulsory with stipulated levels, while others had no rigid requirement. For example, core journal articles may be compulsory for promotion in an institute, while either national or provincial books were

acceptable as long as they met the stipulated word count. Academics' research activity and products could be impacted on by the desire of promotion (Tien, 2007), so academics may be unproductive in those categories of products not required for promotion.

The status of conference papers was different from national books in that they did not count as research products in promotion in the three institutions while books were acceptable but not necessarily by national publishers. The surveyed TEFL academics were quite unproductive in conference papers. Another explanation may be that 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. The high percentage of TEFL academics who did not participate in national projects illustrated the similar point about the rigorous standards set for the application and completion of any research at the national level. These stringent criteria such as the academic status of team leaders and previous research by the team members may have prevented some TEFL academics from accessing them.

While most of the categories that TEFL academics were non productive in were expected, one broad category about which the findings were beyond expectation was books published by provincial publishers. Publishing books either as a sole author or co-author was part of the research requirement in promotion. However, the TEFL academics' publication of books at the provincial level was as low as national books. Provincial textbooks which should be easier than all other categories of books had 75% non production rate among TEFL academics.

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.

To find out specifics about TEFL academics' research productivity, more detailed information about sole and co-authorship of some categories of publications, and leadership and membership of research projects, was presented in the last three columns of table 1. These columns showed that with journal articles and conference papers, the percentages of sole authorship were higher than those of co-authorship, whereas almost the entirely opposite was true for percentages of remaining numbers of research products. While there was not much difference between sole and co-authorship of core journal articles, a significant gap divided sole and co-authorship of non-core journal articles. The TEFL academics who produced co-authored non-core journal articles were more than 20% less than those who were sole authors. This difference may suggest that TEFL academics preferred to work alone on non-core journal articles, and collaboration was much less frequent. Co-authorships of international/national and provincial conferences were less than 3%. The reasons for that could be: very small number of the TEFL academics in this study presented at conferences, and there was little collaboration in writing conference papers.

Different from article writing and conference papers, there seemed to be more cooperation than working alone in writing and publishing provincial academic books and textbooks. With regards to national academic books and translated books which TEFL academics were not productive in, there was not much difference between sole authorship and co-authorship: The percentages of zero items were all above 90. It seemed that TEFL academics collaborated with writing books. In addition, book writing was usually a larger enterprise than articles writing, and may be undertaken more effectively by collaboration.

All research projects had collaboration. The only difference between academics conducting a research project was their role in the project, that is, whether they worked as a leader or a member. The different roles that academics played in a project were significant indicator of their research capacity in addition to the level of the research projects (national or provincial). Working as a project leader usually made higher demand upon academic than working as a member. There were more TEFL academics who worked on both national and provincial research projects as members than as leaders. Only 4% TEFL academics in the study worked as national project leaders during the last five years. The difference between leadership and membership on provincial projects was larger (i.e., <10% led provincial projects; 48% worked as members with 4.3% completed five or more provincial research projects as members).

The last column of Table 1 provides the total number of research outputs by the 182 TEFL academics. The most productive categories of research products were journal articles and provincial research projects, whereas the two least productive categories were academic books and translated books published by national publishers. A total of 182 TEFL academics produced only 14 and 15 such books respectively in the last five years. The next least productive categories were provincial translated books and national textbooks. These findings about the number of productive and non-productive research products seemed to correspond well with findings presented previously with percentages. As formerly discussed, promotion policy seemed to have quite huge effects on research productivity of TEFL academics investigated in shaping their decision as to the category of research productivity they would put their efforts and time in.

As the survey findings would be used as the tool to screen two departments as the sites for an intensive study, it is useful to summarise the research outputs of six Chinese TEFL departments separately. The means of most products by the six departments were below one, which was in agreement with the previous findings when the productivity of the six departments was lumped together. Yet, a close examination found that the English Language and Literature Department of the national university seemed to have performed better in majority of the research products such as core and non-core journal articles, conference papers either international/national or provincial, national research projects, national and provincial translated books, and national academic books. The least well-performed department appeared to be the College English Teaching Department of the provincial university.

## **Conclusion**

This research investigated research productivity for Chinese TEFL academics across three institutes. 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 for promotion or with outputs 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% TEFL academics produced five or more core journal articles in the past five years. With regards to departmental comparison, the best performance was by the English Language and Literature Department of the national university. As the remaining five departments had a mean lower than one in all the research products except non-journal articles and provincial projects, the differences in their means did not seem to be substantial.

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. This seemed to suggest that a large percentage of TEFL academics of other academic status were non-productive as well.

Research productivity is important for universities and academics. National and international research presents opportunities for universities to advertise themselves, which can advance the institutes' agendas. Research productivity can progress academics' careers and present opportunities for national and international collaborations. Both Chinese institutes and the Chinese Government will have roles to play for enhancing research productivity towards positioning China on the world stage. This will necessitate collaboration with external universities for developing English-language teaching and research practices but will also require support and mentoring programs for less research-productive academics. China's capacity to conduct research on large scales will be unparalleled and its potential educational presence will have a significant impact on the world's knowledge economy.

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