Exploring the Practice of Action Research among English Language Teachers in Omani Public Schools and Factors Affecting its Implementation

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Abstract

The present study explored the extent to which action research is practiced by English language teachers and the factors that affect action research implementation in the Omani ELT context. Additionally, it sought to identify different solutions that could be implemented to strengthen action research practices from the point of view of English language teachers. Data was collected through a questionnaire that was distributed among 366 English language teachers, followed by semi-structured interviews with 8 English language teachers who were actively engaged in conducting action research. There was a low level of practice of action research among English language teachers in the Omani public schools. The study also showed that insufficient time, heavy workload, lack of colleagues' assistance and support, and lack of motivation were the main factors that hindered action research practices in the Omani ELT context. Participants suggested that providing training, support and incentives as well as encouraging collaboration with experts and publications could strengthen the practice of action research in ELT.

Keywords: action research, ELT teachers, research culture, research practices

1. Introduction

There is general agreement regarding the crucial role that teachers play to enhance the overall quality of education. Teachers in educational institutions ought to be equipped with the adequate knowledge, skill and awareness to effectively contribute to the quality of education more than ever since learning how to teach is a lifelong process (Atay, 2006). Various attempts have been made to empower teachers and provide them with tools and methods to enhance their teaching practices, make decisions, analyze their contexts and play a more active role in their own teaching environment (Smith & Sela, 2005). Consequently, teachers are encouraged to take an initiative to examine these numerous methods and tools and critically reflect on their own practices considering their own experiences and accumulated theoretical knowledge from different resources (Farrell, 2008). Action research has been acknowledged to be a useful tool to help accomplish this goal.

Since the emergence of action research in the 1940s (Lewin, 1946), several research studies have investigated the impact of action research on teaching and learning processes. Action research was found to be an effective tool for enhancing the quality of education. Action research empowers teachers and provides them with a tool to diagnose problems in their own classrooms and identify suitable solutions to address them, thus improving their teaching practices (Richards & Farrell, 2005). As a result, teachers engaged in action research play a more active role in their own instructional processes and become both researchers and knowledge creators (Mehrani, 2017). Additionally, action research makes teaching an evidence-based profession. Once teachers are involved in research activities, their pedagogical decisions will be based on research evidence which in turn improves the quality of education (Hargreaves, 1997). Action research is perceived to be one of the most effective professional development tools (, 2003) therefore, it is highly recommended that all educational organizations develop research culture Zeichner, 2003).

In Oman, research courses are claimed to be a compulsory part of pre-service teacher training programs in different colleges and universities. Therefore, teachers are conversant with research practices. During teachers' pre-service programs in Oman, teachers practice research in different courses. They are also required to conduct a full action research project in their last year of training during their field experience course (Al Ghattami & Al Husseini, 2014).

After completing their education and joining the field, the Ministry of Education continuously improves teachers' research skills and builds an action research culture in schools by motivating teachers through educational symposiums, training programs and annual research contests established to improve teacher research production (Elsayed, 2019).

Yet, limited attempts have been made to shed light on the current research culture in Omani schools (Al Ghattami and Al Husseini, 2014; Al Husseini et al., 2018; Al Ghattami, et al., 2018). The aforementioned studies assessed Omani teachers of different subjects as pertains to their engagement in reading and research, the areas of research that teachers focused on, and the extent to which this research conformed to action-research criteria. These studies also investigated the main challenges these teachers faced and the support they needed to address these challenges. The results of these studies indicated that the research culture in the Omani context was still in its infancy and that teacher research practices were suboptimal; moreover, research studies in the area of teachers' practices of research did not receive adequate attention.

In the field of ELT, there is a paucity of research studies that explore English language teachers' conceptions and practices of action research (Borg, 2009; Rahimi & Weisi, 2018). On the contrary, there is a much wider body of work on how English language teachers can conduct their own action research (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Brown & Rodgers, 2002). A research gap is also evident in Oman where there are only two research studies were conducted in the area of action research practices in the ELT context. The study on exploring English language teachers' attitudes towards action research revealed that English language teachers had a positive attitude towards action research and its impacts on the field of education Al Farsi (2006). However, English language teachers were found to rely on other means to address their teaching and learning problems, such as turning to their colleagues, rather than conducting a full action research project Al Farsi (2006). In addition, in the other study, Al Abri (2011) reported that although English language teachers had in-service extensive training on experience of conducting research, they did not continue conducting action research after finishing the training course.

Such findings clearly highlight a lacuna in English language teachers' practices of action research, a gap that necessitates further investigation for more in-depth understanding of Omani English language teachers' current practices of action research. Furthermore, the Technical Office for Studies and Development has no record or formal registration requirement for action research conducted by English language teachers in Omani public schools. Therefore, the extent to which action research is practiced by English language teachers in Omani public schools remains unknown. This study aims to fill the research gap in the area of ELT action research studies with a view to align with the goals of the Ministry of Education to improve education quality through strengthening the current research culture among English language teachers in Omani public schools. The present study intends to do this by answering the following questions:

1. To what extent is action research practiced by English language teachers in Omani public schools based on the teachers' perceptions?

2. What are English language teachers' perceptions about the factors that affect action research practices in the Omani English language teaching context?

3. What are English language teachers' perceptions about the possible solutions to strengthen action research practices in the Omani English language teaching context?

2. Literature Review

Practitioners, including teachers, who are engaged in action research inevitably find it an empowering activity (Sagor, 2000). When teachers make a personal commitment to conduct an action research project on their own practices, they are embarking on a systematic process to foster their professional growth and development. During the past few decades, the world has witnessed a teacher research movement in English language teaching contexts (Yuan et al., 2016); a movement that has placed more emphasis on action research as a methodology to be practiced by language teachers.

2.1 The Practice of Action Research

Globally, as action research in schools began gaining the attention of educators and became a common practice by teachers, implementing action research took different shapes based on different ideologies and beliefs about teachers' roles, and the nature of teaching and learning in each context (McTaggart, 1991; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Lesha (2014) classified teachers' action research practices into three distinct categories: individual action research, collaborative action research and school wide action research. During individual action research projects, a teacher focuses on a specific issue within his or her own classroom. The same teacher can seek support from his or her

colleagues or the school administration, but retains control and direction of the whole action research project. During collaborative action research, more than one teacher is involved in the action research process to identify an issue or a problem and study it from different angles in one or more classrooms. In this category, cooperative effort, commitment, communication, and teamwork skills are fostered. School-wide action research is concerned with school reform initiatives and requires a great deal of collaboration among different members of the school system to identify an issue based on school data. School-wide research is usually considered as part of a school's improvement plan that leads to a change at the school level.

The need to explore teachers' practice of action research in the EFL context was highlighted by Rainey (2000), who showed that despite the great progress in different EFL strategies and methodologies, there is no clarity as regards the English language teachers' perceptions concerning the gravity of the practice of action research. The status quo of action research in EFL contexts is unknown, implying that either English language teachers are not actively engaged in action research practice, or they are not sharing the findings of their action research. The results of the action research conducted by teachers can enhance teaching and learning experiences in EFL contexts since these findings and the recommendations that stem from them are generated by the teachers themselves.

2.2 Factors that Affect the Practice of Action Research

Contextual and optimal action research by English language teachers can be facilitated by different factors. These factors can be classified into different categories. For example, Borg (2010) classified these factors into three categories, those related to teachers themselves, to the workplace and to the action research focus or topic. In his 'recipe for success' for conducting action research in the EFL context, Gould (2008) asserted three main factors including time given for action research design, careful implementation, and the written report to share the findings. Despite the different categories, in the literature, the factors listed subsequently are the most influential factors that enhance the production of action research.

2.2.1 Teachers' Beliefs

One of the main conditions related to conducting action research is the existence of the positive beliefs and attitudes of teachers towards the importance of action research in their context and the real need for its implementation. Gallas (1998) asserted the importance of action research to be a fully voluntary activity conducted by practitioners who truly value the knowledge that action research brings to their practices. As a result, believing in the effectiveness of action research and holding positive perceptions towards it strengthen the chances of practicing it. Elliot (1999) also reported that action research is not an activity to be imposed from above and that teachers must not be forced to conduct action research. It has to be a bottom-up, self-initiated and directed activity that is built upon teachers' real problems and practices. This condition is crucial to ensure the consistency of action research, as it is a cyclical practice that requires active involvement; in addition, it is assumed that self-initiated practices that teachers themselves opt to are more likely to be sustainable and more impactful to the educational context.

2.2.2 Teachers' Training and Skills

Teachers need to fully understand what action research is and how it is conducted. Such knowledge and skills ought to be obtained by English language teachers during their pre-service training program and continuously during their in-service teaching through professional development programs. Language teacher education programs must include compulsory action research to help pre-service English language teachers understand all the aspects of action research and acquire the skills needed to conduct action research (Nakata, 2015; Phipps, 2015). Furthermore, in-service teacher training programs should complement the pre-service training programs by offering English language teachers more and updated training on conducting research and use it as a tool for examining and improving their practices as well as a professional development tool. In addition, reading published scholarship conducted by academic experts and professional organizations increases teachers' exposure to research. Such practices encourage teachers to improve their teaching practices and implement research as part of their routine practices (Ball, 2012). Teachers must be aware of the potential risks and the opportunities involved in engaging in action research, be confident and willing to address them and collaborate with others if need be.

2.2.3 Institutional Support

Borg (2010) identified several conditions related to the workplace and institution support that led to more action research engagement; these include the establishment of an open trusting culture of inquiry in which teachers conduct their research in a supportive environment that values their efforts and provides genuine interest in teachers' action research findings. The availability of resources needed to conduct research and providing teachers with a sufficient time allocated for the research process are also essential to engage in action research. Zeichner (2003)

emphasized the importance of time and collaboration among colleagues in conducting research. Action research should take place in a safe environment with mutual respect among colleagues and willingness to collaborate. Zeichner (2003) also emphasized the importance of authentic and informative communication among colleagues to promote research culture in a specific setting and elaborated on the need for sponsorship to conduct research, either from teachers themselves, the school's administration, teachers' unions, or even colleges and universities.

2.2.4 Logistical Support

Gould (2008) highlighted the importance of the logistical support and financial fund, if needed, to sustain conducting action research in schools. He asserted the crucial role of the external experts to provide teachers with guidance and feedback throughout the action research process. Consulting experts is necessary in improving the quality of teachers' action research and enhancing their confidence and motivation especially during the research implementation phase. In addition, facilitating the process of sharing the research finding is important to benefit not only other teachers, school administration, or any interested parties, but also the learners who might have been involved in the action research. Through such an exposure, a culture of academia could be developed in which action research is more impactful on different parties in the field of ELT.

3. Method

This section provides a detailed description of the research design, the study participants, the study instruments, and the processes that were carried out to collect and analyze the data.

3.1 Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was adopted to address the three research questions. This approach provides researchers with a general picture of the research problem through an analysis of quantitative data and further refines, extends, or explains the same picture through the qualitative data (Gay et al., 2009). A questionnaire was first developed and distributed among English language teachers from different governorates, as questionnaires have been acknowledged as effective tools for providing an accurate picture or description of the characteristics or the status of a situation or phenomenon in a certain context (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with English language teachers who were engaged in action research. The qualitative findings from the semi-structured interviews were then used to explain and refine the quantitative findings from the questionnaire.

3.2 Participants

The study population was comprised of English language teachers teaching in the Omani public schools. Based on the most recent Ministry of Education's Annual Educational Statistics Book (2020), the number of the English language teachers in the Omani public schools was 7,600, of whom 5,381 were females and 2,219 were males. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a representative sample of a population of 7,300 people ranges from 364 and 367; a convenient sample of 366 English language teachers was selected to respond to the questionnaire. In addition, a purposively selected sample of four female and two male English language teachers, who were actively engaged in conducting action research in public schools, was selected to participate in the semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire aiming to explore the practice of action research among English language teachers in Omani public schools was designed by the researchers after a review of the literature, including the works of Rainey (2000), Zeichner (2003), Gould (2008) Borg (2010), and Rahimi and Weisi (2018). The questionnaire had two main sections. The first section examined English language teachers practices of action research during their in-service teaching. The second section investigated the factors that might strengthen or hinder action research implementation in the Omani context. The second section was divided into seven subsections that focused on factors related to perceptions (teachers beliefs), preservice training programs, in-service training programs, teachers' skills, logistics, and macro and micro institutional factors. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to measure the degree of agreement. An optional open-ended question was placed at the end of the first and the second sections for the participants to include additional information.

Both validity and reliability of the questionnaire were established. The questionnaire was validated by a panel of 10 experts and practitioners in the filed of education and their feedback was used to help improve the final version of the tool. As for reliability, the questionnaire was piloted among 40 English language teachers who were not included in the actual study sample. The piloting sample consisted of five male and 35 female English language teachers. The data

gathered from the piloting sample was then analyzed using SPSS version 21, and Cronbach Alpha was calculated for each section in the questionnaire to ensure the internal consistency. The computed Cronbach Alpha results were 0.819 for the first section and 0.935 for the second section, which indicated a high level of internal consistency.

3.3.2 The Semi-structured Interviews

After analyzing quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, semi-structured interview questions were developed to explain and refine the quantitative findings. This type of interview allows flexibility and accords researchers with an opportunity to seek clarification and delve into issues raised by interviewees (Ryan et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2016). The semi-structured interview questions were initially developed and validated by the same panel that validated the study questionnaire. Following validation, some of the questions were modified and additional questions were included. The semi-structured interview was piloted before administering it to interviewees to check its logical flow and clarity.

3.4 Research Procedures

After the study instruments were developed, a consent letter to start data collection was obtained from the Ministry of Education. An online version of the questionnaire was sent by the Technical Office for Studies and Development to the Directorates General of Education to distribute it among English language teachers in Omani public schools. After obtaining a suitable number of responses, the data was analyzed using SPSS software version 21 to compute the means and the standard deviations of the responses. The findings from the questionnaire were used to modify the semi structured interview questions. Semi-structured interviews were virtually conducted with eight English language teachers using the Google Meet application. The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews was then analyzed and used to explain and refine the quantitative findings from the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Practice of Action Research in the ELT Context

The first question explored the extent to which action research was practiced by English language teachers in the Omani public schools based on the teachers' perceptions. The first section of the questionnaire was focused on action research engagement among English language teachers. This section examined the engagement level in the action research phases, the patterns of practicing action research, and the activities that enriched action research practices.

A five-point Likert scale of frequency (Always – Often – Sometimes - Rarely – Never) was used to measure the extent to which teachers practiced action research. During analysis, the scale was equated to digits where always was equal to 5 and mever was equalt to 1. There was a narrow range in variability of the calculated means. Thus, the following criteria was used to interpret the results. The ranges below describe the practices of action research among English language teachers:

       3.68 - 5.00   High level of practice

       2.34 - 3.67   Moderate level of practice

       1.00 – 2.33   Low level of practice

The first section of the questionnaire was divided into three subsections focused on, (i) English language teachers' engagement with the different phases of conducting action research, (ii) practicing the different types of action research (individually, in pairs, in teams) and (iii) English language teachers' engagement in the activities that enrich action research practices.

4.1.1 Phases of Action Research

Table 1. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' frequency of Engagement in the Phases of Conducting Action Research

Statement During my teaching career	M	SD
I find issues that need to be researched.	3.79	0.895
I develop specific action research questions.	3.13	1.118
I scientifically analyze data of my action research.	1.78	0.772
I design appropriate research instruments.	1.66	0.714
I collect data for my action research.	1.60	0.714
I develop a focused literature review.	1.53	0.685
Grand Mean	2.24	0.816

The table summarizes English language teachers' engagement in the different phases of conducting action research. Based on the criteria, the grand mean value (M=2.24, SD=0.816) indicated that the overall engagement was low. Notably, the level of practice was high in the first phase but declined in the subsequent phases. The first phase in conducting an action research project, finding issues that need to be researched, had the highest level of practice, indicating that English language teachers could identify potentially researchable topics or issues in their own context. The high level of practice in this phase can be attributed to the fact that identifying areas for improvement is a regular exercise for teachers and is not only restricted to conducting action research. Developing specific action research questions, the next phase in conducting action research, received the second highest score in terms of frequency of practice, a moderate level of practice. The rest of the phases, including analyzing data, designing instruments, collecting data and developing a focused literature review, fell into a low level of practice category. Thus, overall, the practice of action research in the Omani ELT context was low.

Similar findings were reported by all the interviewees who emphasized how action research is rarely practiced by English language teachers during their in-service teaching. One of the participants stated that during her 12 years of teaching, she had not heard of any attempt by English language teachers in her school to engage in conducting action research. She also stated that English language teachers would retire without having conducted any kind of research. Another interviewee reported not knowing any teacher who was actively engaged in action research in her school but had heard of a few teachers actively engaged in action research in some nearby schools.

Overall, data from both the questionnaire and the interviews revealed that action research is not yet a common practice among English language teachers in Omani public schools, concurrent with the findings of Al Gattami and Al Husseini (2014). These findings also go in hand with those of Borg (2010) who reported that globally, language teachers' engagement in research is still limited and practicing research by English language teachers in ELT contexts remains a minority activity. Dornei (2007) also stated that the only problem with action research is that there is too little of it practiced by teachers.

4.1.2 Patterns of Action Research Practice

The next table reveals the patterns of action research practice among English language teachers in the Omani public schools based on the classification given in the literature review section.

Table 2. The Means and the Standard Deviations of the Patterns of Action Research Practice by English Language Teachers

Statement During my teaching career,	M	SD
I conduct action research individually.	1.94	0.892
I conduct action research in pairs.	1.40	0.614
I conduct action research in teams.	1.29	0.523
Grand Mean	1.54	0.676

From the grand mean value (M=1.45, SD=0.676), there is a low level of practice of the different types of action research. There is almost an absence of collaborative action research practices in the Omani ELT context among researchers in pairs or in teams. Despite the level of practicing action research individually scoring higher (mean of 1.94), it remains a low level of practice.

4.1.3 Activities that Enrich Action Research Practice

Table 3. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Engagement in Activities to Enrich their Action Research Practices

Statement During my teaching career	M	SD
I attend workshops or training programs on action research.	3.02	1.347
I attend symposiums or conferences to enrich my practices.	2.86	1.307
I go through published studies that utilize the action research methodology.	2.83	1.281
I present my action research in symposiums or conferences to share my findings.	1.39	0.716
I participate in research contests held by educational institutions.	1.39	0.688
I publish my action research.	1.19	0.487
Grand Mean	2.11	0.971

Table 3 shows English language teachers' engagement in different activities that could enrich their action research practices. The grand mean (M=2.11, SD=0.971) revealed a low level of engagement in activities that enrich the

action research practices. Publishing action research, participating in research contests, and presenting action research findings in symposiums or conferences, was rated the lowest level of practice. Based on the low level of practicing research, this is an expected outcome. However, the participants reported a moderate level of practice in attending symposiums, conferences, and training programs as well as reading published studies that utilize the action research methodology.

During the interviews, the participants who were engaged in action research also reported a low level of engagement in participating in conferences and research contests and in publishing their action research; similar findings were also reported by Al Aamri (2019) who documented English language teachers' engagement with research activities after doing their master's degree. There were three main reasons behind such low level of engagement based on the interviews: lack of motivation, quality of action research and marketing. As regards motivation, participants felt that conducting action research was seen as extra workload; so was participating or attending conferences or workshops.

Furthermore, for a teacher to publish their action research, participate in a contest, or present their findings in a conference, the action research ought to be of high quality. However, there is limited formal guidance or feedback for teachers during their in-service teaching to enhance action research quality. Thus, if and when done, English language teachers shelve their research findings and do not make any attempts to disseminate them.

Moreover, several participants did not know about research contests held by different educational institutions, or the conferences where they could share their findings since they usually depended on informal platforms such as social media, rather than formal platforms in their schools to obtain information about the conferences and seminars.

4.2 Factors that Affect Action Research Implementation in the ELT Context

To answer the second question regarding the factors that promote or hinder action research implementation in the Omani ELT context, a five-point Likert scale of agreement (Strongly Agree– Agree – Neutral - Disagree – Strongly Disagree) was used in the second section of the questionnaire. The scale was equated to digits in which "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree" were represented by 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1, respectively. The criteria below were used to interpret teachers' perceptions regarding the factors that affect action research implementation in the Omani ELT context. These criteria were applied to the seven subsections that focused on teachers' beliefs, pre-service training programs, in-service training programs, teachers' skills, logistics, macro, and micro institutional factors.

3.68 - 5.00   High level of perceptions

2.34 - 3.67   Moderate level of perceptions

1.00 – 2.33   Low level of perceptions

4.2.1 Perceptual Factors

Table 4. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers Perceptions about the impact of action research

Statement	M	SD
Action research is important to improve the quality of education.	4.38	0.744
Action research is important to bridge the gap between theory and practice.	4.37	0.746
Action research can enhance English language teachers' teaching practices.	4.36	0.745
Action research is an effective professional development tool.	4.28	0.806
Action research can help English language teachers to solve problems they face.	4.25	0.765
Action research can help English language teachers to create a positive change in their schools.	4.20	0.834
Grand Mean	4.30	0.773

Table 4 summarizes the English language teachers' perceptions about the impact of action research. The grand mean value (M=4.30, SD=0.773) implies that ELT teachers had a high regard for the importance of action research practices. The participants believed that it has an impact on the quality of education, it bridges the gap between theory and practice, enriches teachers' practices, is an effective professional development tool, solves problems and creates a positive change. These results concurred with the findings of Al Farsi (2006) who documented Omani English language teachers' positive attitudes towards action research implementation in the classrooms.

Similarly, during the interviews, all the participants had strong beliefs in the power of action research to enhance education and improve teaching and learning processes. Moreover, the participants underscored the impact of implementing action research on their daily practices and in their schools. Action research also promoted the quality of their selected teaching materials and thus bettered their teaching.

These positive attitudes held by English language teachers towards action research indicate that perceptual factors encourage action research production in the Omani ELT context. However, there was a gap between English language teachers' perceptions towards action research and their actual practice of action research as highlighted by responses to the first question. This contradiction implies that there are other factors that influence the practice of action research by Omani English language teachers.

4.2.2 Factors Related to Pre-service Training Programs

Table 5. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Perceptions regarding the Pre-service Training Programs

Statement	M	SD
The pre-service training program helped me develop an in-depth understanding of action research.	3.78	1.019
The pre-service program has equipped me with the needed skills to conduct action research	3.64	1.041
The pre-service training program has prepared me to accurately follow action research methodology.	3.63	1.017
The amount of pre-service training on action research was sufficient to help me practice action research during my teaching career.	3.45	1.180
Grand Mean	3.62	1.064

As shown in Table 5, the grand mean value (M=3.62, SD=1.064) denote a moderate level of agreement about the effectiveness of the pre-service training programs on promoting action research practice. English language teachers who were actively engaged in action research expressed two contradicting opinions during the interviews regarding the effectiveness of the pre-service training programs in promoting action research practice and developing their understanding of action research. Some believed that there was no intensive focus on research in general during the pre-service training program despite them being asked to conduct research as part of their course requirements since they may have conducted research on any topic that was not necessarily related to education. Conversely, other English language teachers felt that there was a great emphasis on research and its importance for teachers during the same programs since they were introduced to action research and asked to individually conduct a full action research study as a compulsory requirement of the field experience course in their last semester before graduation. These differences in opinions could be attributed to the graduation dates of the interviewees; those who graduated several years preceding the interview were of the first opinion while recently graduating interviewees were of the second opinion. Therefore, it is possible that the recent pre-service training programs have paid more attention to the importance of research and focused on equipping English language teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to conduct action research; findings echoed by Al Riyami (2019).

4.2.3 Factors Related to In-service Training Programs

Table 6. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Perceptions regarding In-service Training Programs

Statement	M	SD
The current in-service training programs enrich my research skills to practice action research.	3.013	1.244
The in-service training programs foster the importance of teachers as researchers.	3.010	1.236
The in-service training programs I receive foster my attitudes towards practicing action research.	2.991	1.162
The amount of in-service training programs on action research is sufficient to encourage the practice of action research.	2.901	1.295
Grand Mean	2.978	1.234

Table 6 summarizes English language teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the in-service training programs in enriching their action research practice. Similar to the pre-service program, the grand mean value of in-service training programs (M=2.978, SD=1.234) reflected a moderate level of agreement regarding the effectiveness of in-service training programs in promoting action research practice.

In the Omani context, the training programs and the workshops that teachers receive during their in-service training programs are usually passive. Furthermore, teachers attend workshops based on their supervisors' nomination and not on topics that are selected by the teachers themselves (Al-Abri, 2012). The in-service training programs were described by one of the interviewees as "sit and get training" sessions that emphasized the theoretical, rather than practical aspects. Likewise, Al Abri (2011) asserted that the current in-service training programs in the Omani ELT context still use a top-down compulsory approach that is usually imposed on English language teachers. Gould (2008) showed that such training programs are unlikely to lead to improvements in teachers' research skills. In addition, no fixed in-service training program plan exists for all English language teachers. The professional development workshops offered by the Directorates General of Education vary from one governorate to another and there are self initiated professional development workshops provided by English language supervisors or senior teachers. As a result, the in-service training that teachers receive is not standardized.

4.2.4 Factors Related to Teachers' Skills

Table 7. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Perceptions about their Own Skills

Statement	M	SD
I have the writing skills needed to compose a clear action research report.	3.93	0.801
I have teamwork skills needed to conduct action research.	3.93	0.778
I am confident that I am able to conduct action research.	3.90	0.867
I have the skills of interpreting results and reaching conclusions based on them.	3.81	0.832
I have the skill of analyzing quantitative data.	3.74	0.894
I have the skill of analyzing qualitative data.	3.70	0.931
I have the motivation to practice action research.	2.22	1.117
Grand Mean	3.60	1.007

The grand mean from the table above (M=3.60, SD=1.007) implies a moderate level of agreement with statements regarding English language teachers having the research skills needed to conduct research. However, being motivated to conduct action research received a low level of perception (M=2.22, SD=1.117), reflecting English language teachers' low level of motivation to conduct action research. Motivation is one of the factors that hindered action research practice in the Omani context, similar to the findings published by Ulla et al. (2017) and Yuan et al. (2016). Data from both the questionnaire and the interviews indicated that lack of motivation limited ELT active engagement in action research practice and hindered those engaged in action research from taking further steps to disseminate their findings through publications or conferences.

Even though the participants reported that they had the needed skills to conduct action research, this did not automatically translate to an ability to apply these skills in practice. As one of the interviewees mentioned: "You cannot tell whether you have the adequate skills for conducting research until you apply your skills in an action research [project]. Personally, I thought I had all the needed skills but then I realized that I needed more expertise in conducting action research." In addition, English language teachers who reported not having engaged in any research activities had not used their research skills in an educational setting since college and thus may not possess the same level of skill they had before.

4.2.5 Macro Institutional Factors

Table 8. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Perceptions regarding the influence of Macro Institutional Factors

Statement	M	SD
The Ministry of Education supports action research production in schools.	3.37	1.064
The Directorates General of Education support action research production.	3.33	1.064
The current educational system supports action research production.	3.31	1.126
The school administration facilitates action research production.	2.88	1.156
Grand Mean	3.22	1.102

English language teachers documented their perceptions about the support they receive from the current educational system, the school administration, the Directorates General of Education and the Ministry of Education. The grand mean value (M=3.22, SD=1.102) revealed a moderate level of agreement to the statements regarding the macro institutional factors on supporting action research practice. There was also a moderate level of agreement for all four statements with the support provided by the school administration receiving the lowest level of agreement (M=2.88, SD=1.156).

The support from the Ministry of Education and the Directorates General of Education is essential for teachers who are willing to conduct action research. Yet, action research usually deals with local issues within the school context; therefore, the schools' administrative support is integral and necessary in school settings to facilitate the action research implementation and invite more teachers to engage in such practice. Administrative restrictions and limited encouragement and support, were also among the main challenges that English language teachers faced while conducting action research, as reported by Hemsley-Brown (2004), Allison and Carey (2007), Tavakoli and Howard (2012) and Mehrani (2017).

4.2.6 Micro Institutional Factors

Table 9. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Perceptions about the influence of Micro Institutional Factors in conducting action research

Statement	M	SD
The overall school environment facilitates action research implementation.	2.34	0.877
Colleagues are willing to provide me with the needed assistance and support to conduct action research.	2.09	0.879
School workload allows action research implementation.	1.95	0.898
I have sufficient time to conduct action research.	1.92	0.937
Grand Mean	2.07	0.897

Table 9 shows the results of teachers' perceptions regarding micro institutional factors that may affect action research implementation. The grand mean value of the micro institutional factors (M=2.07, SD=0.897) indicated a low level of agreement with the statements pertaining to micro institutional factors. ELT's time, workload, colleagues' assistance, and the school environment received the lowest levels of perceptions compared to all the other factors. Thus, it can be inferred that time, workload and colleagues' assistance are the most essential factors that hinder action research implementation in the Omani ELT context.

These hindrances are not unique to the Omani ELT context. Several studies reported similar findings in different ELT contexts such as the study by Rainey (2000), who found that lack of time and heavy workload were hindering factors in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Colombia and Thailand. Additionally, studies by Simonsen (2009), Anwaruddin and Pervin (2015) and Norasmah and Chia (2016) echoed these findings.

Insufficient or absence of colleagues' assistance may lead to a low level of practicing action research and lack of collaborative action research practices in the ELT context. Colleagues' assistance is needed not only to collaborate in conducting research, but also to facilitate the implementation process of individual action research conducted by a teacher. Based on the interviews, action research was usually an individually initiated activity, however, since conducting research is a demanding activity, colleagues' assistance was usually needed. Furthermore, colleagues would not only help facilitate the process of conducting research but could also be encouraged to practice action research in the Omani ELT context. Lack of assistance and collaboration has been also reported as a challenge in implementing action research in the studies conducted by Rahimi and Weisi (2018) and Rainey (2000).

4.2.7 Logistical Factors

Table 10. The Means and the Standard Deviations of English Language Teachers' Perceptions regarding the influence of Logistical Factors on action research

Statement	M	SD
I have easy access to resources (e.g. libraries, journals, computers, books …etc.) needed to conduct action research.	3.62	1.036
I have access to samples of action research conducted by other teachers.	3.57	1.112
I have easy access to data needed to conduct action research.	3.46	1.032
I can reach different educational institutions/research experts for guidance and assistance.	2.77	1.190
I have access to different options to publish/share my research results.	2.63	1.266
I can get the financial funding for my action research if needed.	2.26	0.854
Grand Mean	3.05	1.081

The table above reveals English language teachers' perceptions about the statements regarding the availability of logistical support to promote the practice of action research in the Omani ELT context. The grand mean value (M=3.05, SD=1.081) indicated a moderate level of perceptions.

Teachers who were engaged in action research had different opinions. Some agreed that they had easy access to resources and samples of action research conducted by teachers, while others reported having no direct access to action research samples. One of the interviewees mentioned, "I do not know anything about what other English language teachers research is about." Another interviewee reported, "I do not have any access to samples of unpublished action research conducted by Omani EFL teachers." There is no documentation, or a record specified for action research conducted by teachers in the Ministry of Education, nor in the Technical Office for Studies and Development. The only action research samples English language teachers could access were the ones that were published in a journal, presented at a conference, or disseminated on social media or other informal platforms.

Regarding access to data, the interviewees mentioned they had access to local data of their schools but did not have access to data outside the school setting or online. Even though the Technical Office for Studies and Development had offered its free services to avail to researchers the data they needed (besides facilitating the implementation of their research), action research mainly focuses on the local level, which is schools. Therefore, access to data at the local level to conduct action research may not be problematic for English language teachers.

The lack of collaboration between research experts in different educational institutions and limited access to different options for publication was also listed among the responses to the first research question. As aforementioned, the collaborative action research practices and the publications from action research produced by English language teachers are limited in the Omani ELT context. Although the participants felt they had limited chances of obtaining research funding, action research remains an activity that does not usually require lots of funds as long as it is conducted on teachers' practices inside the school settings. But, if teachers decided to expand their action research focus to the society, additional funding might be needed. However, and as the interviews indicated, limited attention is paid to action research within the school settings in the Omani ELT context.

4.3 Possible Solutions to Strengthen the Practice of Action Research in the ELT Context

The third research question was focused on possible solutions to strengthen the action research practices in the Omani ELT context. Qualitative data in response to this question was derived from the semi-structured interviews and analyzed as reported subsequently.

4.3.1 Training

Training is essential to enrich action research practices and build a strong research culture in Omani public schools; a suggestion provided by all the interviewees and reiterated by Al Gattami and Al Husseini (2014). Therefore, training programs must be carefully designed and implemented in the Omani ELT context. Teachers in pre-service training programs should engage in practical aspects as opposed to focusing on the theoretical aspects of action research.

The in-service training programs should complement the pre-service training program to sustain action research practice. A systematic training needs assessment that involves English language teachers in the process of designing the training programs can be conducted so as to design well planned in-service training programs. Teachers' involvement will help design programs that are bottom-up, as opposed to the ongoing top-down training programs that may not effectively target English language teachers' needs and preferences. Based on participants suggestions, in-service training programs that focus on action research should be run by qualified action research experts and

availed to all the English language teachers in all Omani public schools. The Specialized Institution for Professional Training of Teachers could incorporate action research into the New Omani Teachers Program, a mandatory program for all novice teachers joining the education sector.

4.3.2 Support

One of the most recommended solutions reported by the participants during the semi-structured interviews was the need for support among English language teachers.   Consistent support is essential for sustainable action research practices by English language teachers. Al Abri (2011) showed that only a few of their participants who were trained in conducting action research continued conducting action research after their training programs due to lack of support compounded by limited time to conduct research and heavy teaching workload.

Participants indicated that a systematic support system must be established and provided to English language teachers practicing action research. Some of the interviewees also proposed that the schools' administration be introduced to action research and its positive impact on education to facilitate action research processes for English language teachers by either availing data or resources to English language teachers, or providing exemptions from non pedagogical work requirements, which will reduce their workload and give them more time to carry out their action research. Furthermore, based on interviewees recommendations, initiating professional learning communities specialized for action research implementation in public schools will strengthen the research culture. One of the interviewees stated, "I think there is a need for learning communities to be created in order for teachers to support each other to conduct more research."

The support required was not limited to the school level. Participants also required support during the process of attaining the permissions from the Ministry of Education. They also mentioned the need to have access to other research resources such as those available in university libraries or the library of the Specialized Institute for Professional Training of Teachers.

4.3.3 Expertise

A research culture in Omani public schools can be enhanced by enriching action research practice and the action research quality. Participants suggested that formal channels be established between English language teachers and academic researchers to collaborate in research production. Such channels will also provide teachers with guidance, feedback, and research assistance to improve their research practices.

In addition, expert researchers, and academics could be invited to give talks or workshops related to the action research methodology, inspire English language teachers, and illustrate the feasibility of implementing action research and its positive impact on their teaching practices. Also, English language teachers actively engaged in action research can serve as role models for English language teachers interested in commencing action research. As one of the interviewees mentioned, "Inviting experts and Omani researchers who have conducted action research to schools is needed to encourage teachers to do so." Moreover, research experts and teachers engaged in research could collaborate to establish a bank of research issues that will not only help teachers take the first step towards practicing action research, but also enrich the Omani educational system.

4.3.4 Incentives

Different incentives could be provided to attract more English language teachers to treat action research as an essential part of their teaching practices. One of the participants stated, "Giving teachers who are doing research some kind of encouragement or rewards would help in promoting action research production and increase their motivation [to participate in action research]." Norasmah and Chia (2016) suggested making action research a mandatory component of teachers' official daily duties and an essential component of their annual evaluation to motivate teachers to conduct action research. However, the majority of the participants preferred not to make action research a mandatory component of their official duties and performance evaluation, as action research ought to be a voluntary and self-initiated activity (Elliot, 1999).

Furthermore, the participants suggested a set of incentives in the form of "promotions for those who are actively engaged in implementing action research." However, the current Omani educational system depends on other criteria for promoting teachers in schools that do not include teachers' practices of research. However, participants proposed other incentives more applicable to the Omani context including   "rewards for those who excel in conducting effective action research" and "providing aids to facilitate action research implementation" such as reducing the workload or offering some exemptions to teachers conducting action research.

4.3.5 Publication

Since English language teachers' do not publish their action research or participate in conferences to share their findings, "establishing a local journal specifically to publish action research produced by English language teachers" was recommended by the participants despite the existence of an action research related practitioners journal run by the MOE. Furthermore, the acceptance criteria set by the journal must align with the context and the anticipated level of the action research produced by English language teachers; proposals also made by Nunan (1997), Bartlett and Buton (2006) and Al Ghattami et al. (2018).

5. Conclusion

The present study explored the extent to which action research was practiced by English language teachers in public schools, and the identified factors that affected action research implementation in the Omani ELT context as perceived by English language teachers. The study also identified solutions that could be implemented to strengthen action research practices based on responses from English language teachers. A sequential mixed-methods approach comprised of a questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews was used to collect data. Study findings indicated that action research is rarely practiced by Omani English language teachers due to limited time, heavy workload, lack of support from colleagues and low motivation. While the perceptual factors seem to encourage the implementation of action research, pre-service training programs, in-service training programs, teachers' research skills and logistical support had a moderate effect on the implementation of action research. Solutions proposed to strengthen the action research practice in the ELT context included availing more training sessions, support and incentives and encouraging collaborative research with experts and publication of research findings.

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