# It’s all very well in theory, but… The place of research-based theory in English language teaching

Sources of teachers’ knowledge

* Courses (pre- and in-service)
* Conferences
* Reading (research, professional literature)
* Recommendations of colleagues
* Feedback from students
* Classroom experience + reflection

Professionals learn mainly by reflecting in/on action, not by applying research-based theories (Schön, 1983)

Research-based theory in teaching

It is generally assumed that teachers should learn from the research:

The teaching profession, as with all high-standard professions, needs the best available academic knowledge in order to fulfil its commitments to society… Teachers have to be familiar with the latest knowledge and research about the subject matter. (Niemi, 2008).

#### The research literature in teacher education

“The goal of this introductory course is to help practicing and prospective teachers to understand and explore the complex … world of second language acquisition. Through readings, critical analyses, in‐class and online discussions, students will be able to foster their beliefs and understandings of theories of second language acquisition. Students will critically examine foundational theories and research perspectives in the field of second language acquisition (SLA)…” (Second Language Acquisition, Course syllabus, University of Maryland, 2009)

#### And the teachers themselves?

Most teachers do not read the research literature very often, if at all.

Reasons: I don’t have the time; I don’t have access; it’s not of practical help; it’s difficult to understand ((Borg, 2009).

#### The teacher as researcher

Lawrence Stenhouse (Hopkins & Rudduck, 1985): Research as ‘disciplined enquiry made public’. Recommended ‘action research’.

But it hasn’t happened. Various other options, e.g. ‘exploratory practice’ (Allwright, 2005) – also – hasn’t happened.

Interim summary

Research-based theory is not seen by most practising teachers as a central or essential contributor to professional knowledge.

Teachers learn mainly from reflection on experience.

Teachers do not usually do research themselves.

But the study of research continues to be included in teacher courses and is prominent in the professional literature.

There is a trend towards ‘academicization’ of the profession (e.g. development of TESOL Quarterly since its inception (Ellis, 2010))

#### Where do we go from here? Some suggestions follow.

1. A substantial contribution

#### Different types of research-based literature:

1. Original empirical research
2. Overviews / meta-analyses
3. Theory, drawing on research evidence

Research produces **evidence,** that can be used to create practical principles for teaching. May provide new insights / information that hadn’t occurred to us. May contradict comfortable, but inaccurate, assumptions. May confirm our own intuitions

Example 1

Incidental vocabulary acquisition from reading

Overwhelming evidence that in most ELT contexts incidental learning of vocabulary on its own through reading will not lead to satisfactory levels of vocabulary knowledge (Cobb, 2007; Laufer, 2003, 2005, 2009; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Schmitt & Sonbul, 2010; Waring & Takahi, 2003; Zahar, Cobb & Spada, 2006…)

→ We need to include deliberate, focused vocabulary-learning activities in materials / lessons.

Example 2

Semantic sets

Teaching new items in semantic sets (e.g. a set of names of animals, or parts of the body) together, does not result in optimal learning (Erten & Tekin, 2008; Tinkham, 1997; Papathanasiou, 2009; Waring, 2008).

→ New items should be taught in syntactic rather than paradigmatic contexts.

Example 3

Corrective feedback:

‘Recasts’ are the least effective of oral corrective feedback strategies (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, Lyster, 2004, Sheen, 2004).

→ When correcting we need to involve the student (elicitation, negotiation).

And apart from such practical insights, a knowledge of the research enables us to argue with the ‘experts’: it empowers.

2. Some problems

#### Lack of clarity

Sometimes inevitable: specific terminology, statistics

Often unnecessary (and unforgivable!): difficult language for its own sake (Aaronson, 1977).

Orwell (1946) Politics and the English language

(1) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

(2) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

(3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

(4) Never use the passive where you can use the active.

(5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

(6) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

#### Contradictions

Example

The role of practice in instructed language learning

Salaberry(1997) vs. Ellis (2001)

#### Researcher bias

Articles which use the research to support a particular position

Example

Truscott (1999): Against the giving of corrective feedback

Swan (2005): Against task-based instruction

Limited practical application

#### (i) Small population or time-frame

Small populations: usually university students

Relatively short time

Example

Studies quoted in Norris & Ortega (2001)

#### (ii) The Hawthorne effect

Impressive results in an empirical study may be simply the result of change, and subjects’ awareness that this is an experimental innovation.

Example

Research on the use of CALL (Macaro, Handley, & Walter, 2012)

#### (iii) Pedagogical / practical constraints

The professional research we read is nearly all SLA.

But: practical pedagogical issues are often more important to practitioners (Ellis, 2010). For example:

* large and/or heterogeneous classes
* discipline problems
* pressure from stakeholders
* upcoming exams
* the local culture of learning
* limited time to prepare … etc.

Example 1: Culture of learning

Task-based or communicative teaching

The task-based approach is seen by many as the best basis for successful instructed language-learning, but is not appropriate for some cultures of learning (Carless, 2007; Hu, 2002).

Example 2: stakeholder pressure

The optimal age for starting to study English in school: in the context of instructed language learning, late starters learn better (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). But the pressure of parents, politicians and commercial interests leads to early-start programs.

#### (iv) Inadequate professional knowledge of researcher

The researcher’s ‘practical pedagogical implications’ are often in fact impractical.

Many excellent studies are followed by ‘off the wall’ suggestions for classroom teaching

→ Practical application of research to teaching has to be determined by the teacher (Widdowson, 1990; Ellis, 2012).

3. Reading selectively and critically

**Main problems**: Time, access, practical use, comprehensibility.

**Time and access**: the contribution of the Internet

**Access**: national and international conferences

**Practical use, comprehensibility**: the need for selective, critical reading.

#### Selective reading

* Check the topic: look it up on the Internet
* Check the source: a respected publisher or journal
* Check the author
* Websites, e.g. http://www.tesolacademic.org/
* Webinars, conference proceedings, Youtube…

#### Critical reading

* Check for clarity
* Check for replications / contradictions
* Check for applicability to your teaching
* Draw your own conclusions

There is an important role for ‘mediators’: teachers who are also trainers, readers of research and writers: can mediate the research literature for other teachers through their more accessible, practice-oriented books and articles.

4. Practical Recommendations

Surf ‘Google Scholar’ for the topic / author / question that interests you

Check out the **overviews** (e.g. in *Language Teaching,* or ‘The Handbook of…’)

Read online (if you can!)

My favourite journals

*Canadian Modern Language Review*

*ELT Journal*

*Language Teaching*

*Language Teaching Research*

*System*

*TESOL Quarterly*

…lots more. Ask a friend!

#### When reading an article…

I skim through the abstract. Then decide whether to read the article.

If I’m short of time, I move to the main results and conclusions

I skip the ‘practical implementations’!

I file the full reference in a database, with brief critical comment

What about teacher research?

Teachers on the whole do not have the time to do or write up classroom research.

Those who get interested in research tend to leave teaching and move into academe.

It is unlikely that this will change substantially in the foreseeable future, until / unless research and publishing are included in teachers’ job descriptions.

Summary

The research literature is an important source of professional knowledge.

It is increasingly accessible to the practitioner through conferences and the Internet.

It should be read selectively and critically.

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