

The Relevance of SLA Research to Language Teaching from Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract

Second language acquisition (SLA) research, the mostly said and heard term in recent years among second language researchers, is regrettably a kind of Cinderella term for the majority of EFL teachers. Strictly speaking, when SLA research began to emerge as a separate discipline, one of the hopes was that it would benefit language teaching (Corder, 1973). Oddly enough, in recent years SLA research has mostly seen its role as raising teachers' awareness of SLA concepts rather than affecting teaching directly. By and large, it supposedly sounds that EFL teachers' taking advantage of SLA research results is not widespread. Accordingly, the current paper is an attempt to meticulously analyze and evaluate some articles so as to reach a sound conclusion in this regard. The overall result revealed that although there are some gaps between SLA research and teachers, those gaps can universally be bridged by moving EFL teachers from the more usual and traditional role as consumers of educational research to active participants in knowledge-making. What is more, SLA research is one of the most important and reliable sources of obtaining academic information that would clearly help teachers set appropriate expectations for themselves and their students. Above all, it is noteworthy that the discourse of SLA research should be defined and clarified in plain English for EFL teachers' convenience to use.

Keywords: SLA research; language teaching; teachers' perspective

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely said that the coverage of SLA research has now become quite extensive in teaching and learning contexts. Nonetheless, teaching is a variable not a constant; it can mean a vast range of methods and techniques can be implemented in class. Therefore, the

application of SLA research results to particular aspect of language teaching has to take account of the particular goals and need of the society in which teaching is taking place. Furthermore, teachers' awareness for appropriate use of SLA research is purposefully needed. According to Lightbown (1985) SLA cannot serve as the basis for telling teachers what to do and how, sadly, it may be attributed to the limited scope of SLA at that time. Contrary to expectation, most of the research had not been designed to answer pedagogical inquiries. However, SLA is one important sources of information that would help teachers set appropriate expectation for themselves and their students. A number of sometimes conflicting positions can be identified, ranging from a super-cautious "don't apply" to a confident "go ahead and apply" while also claiming that the relationship should not be one-way but symbiotic.

II. THE GAP BETWEEN SLA RESEARCH AND TEACHING

First and foremost, there is a lack of communication between second language acquisition researchers and language teachers. On the other hand, that much of what is done under the rubric of SLA is not particularly relevant to language teachers; therefore, the result of SLA research is not really applicable to the day-to-day language teaching and learning which goes on in classrooms. What is more, SLA publications are often about issues which are not of particular interest to language teachers. Stewart (2006) documents that the split between research and practice has, in the last decade, been much discussed and that attempts to bridge it have been the main focus of the TESOL organization.

Concerning previous SLA research, it is clear-cut that the more the academics have devoted their time to SLA research, the greater the distance has been in many cases between the research and those most directly involved in language teaching and learning. Interestingly but regretfully, the researchers of the current study, as English teachers, have seen in informal contacts over the years with teachers of institutes in their hometowns that very few English teachers, if any, regularly read articles in journals. While it might be argued that one of the functions of teacher education is to get teachers interested in the reading of such literature, the hard truth in their experience is that even those who have completed M.A level generally do not keep up with reading of academic materials upon their return to full-time employment (indeed, many never really start to read such literature). Thus, there is the paradox that the more research is conducted into SLA, the more language teachers are disengaged from SLA research.

A. Teachers' Perspectives of Relevance of SLA Research to Teaching

1. General perspective

Sadly to note, it would arguably appear that the drastic problem and thorny concept is that even the majority of well-educated teachers who hold M.A or probably Ph.D degrees have been ignoring studying SLA research results, especially in Iran's context.

2. Specific perspectives

Strictly speaking, according to the majority of the teachers' attitudes, the general relevance and use of SLA research to teaching is rare. Therefore, the researchers have classified their suggestions in the following part:

1. The SLA research to be applied should be fully valid (i.e., have a sound methodology, adequate data, and sound conclusions).
2. The SLA research must be ethical (e.g., it is not appropriate for the research to have exploited learners by placing them in a context where they are not expected to succeed).
3. The research must be of sufficient generality to allow for extrapolation to different contexts.
4. There should be a match between the profiles of the learners being investigated and the profiles of the students being taught.
5. The coverage of the language learning areas needs to accord with the instructional goals. Cook (1999) suggests that the overly narrow research focusing on morpho-syntax limits the usefulness of SLA for language teaching.

B. Some Guiding Principles and Solutions for Bridging the Gap

The literature suggests a number of ways in which the gap between technical knowledge and practical knowledge may be bridged. The first is to make summaries of research available in language that is accessible to the practitioner (Ellis, 1997). However, making technical knowledge available and accessible is only one part of the picture. In effect, the 'how' of presenting is as important as the 'what'.

Similarly, Block (2000) stresses that teachers should be encouraged to discuss the research and its applicability in terms of their own classroom situations. That is to say, they should illuminate problems in their particular contexts. In engaging with the research in this way, the teachers will determine for themselves the relevance of specific SLA findings. This is an example of what Ellis (1997) describes as relevance being determined from outside rather than inside SLA in the following principles:

1. The overall goal of an SLA research for teachers should be to contribute to teacher learning by assisting teachers to develop/modify their own theory of how learners learn a L2 in an instructional setting.
2. The topics covered in an SLA research should be relevant and consist of "ideas" rather than "models".
3. The texts selected for an SLA research need to be comprehensible to teachers who lack technical knowledge about SLA. Technically speaking, this means that the texts should have been written for teachers and not for SLA researchers or applied linguists (or even for students preparing to become applied linguists). A good

example of an accessible text for teachers is Lightbown (1985). In addition, teachers might be invited to refer to more technical texts (e.g., Ellis, 2009) to research specific topics of interest to them in greater detail.

4. Teachers need opportunities to become researchers in their own classroom as well as consumers of SLA research. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, through collaborative research with an SLA researcher or through action research and exploratory practice.

C. Analysis and Elaboration on Ellis' Principles

Personally speaking, teachers are likely to come to the SLA course with a set of beliefs about how learning takes place; therefore, the theory that teachers develop should be explicit. The gist of Ellis' point is that the main purpose of an SLA research is to assist teachers so as to evaluate their beliefs and modify them in the light of information from SLA that the teachers find relevant to their own instructional setting, nevertheless, some teachers are not capable to analyze the technical texts and implement them in their own class.

As for the second and third principle of Ellis, it is crystal clear that dealing with some models sounds demanding for some teachers, so using easy ideas can lead to noticeably better teachers' understanding, specifically for amateur teachers. Accordingly, regarding the practical aspects of SLA, it is said that any proposals emanating from the SLA "ideas" examined in the course or from the pedagogical implications of research articles should be viewed as "provisional", to be evaluated in the light of teachers' own classrooms and experiences of learning and teaching a L2. In other words, this process of evaluation needs to be conducted explicitly. One way of facilitating evaluation might be to make use of published responses to articles. However, the only problem is that some teachers are not professional enough to clarify the results and implement them to their own classes appropriately. To put it simply, idealistically, it would be preferable and far easier to tackle an idea such as "learners inevitably and naturally commit errors" and "learners sometimes make errors and sometimes don't" than to examine models such as Krashen's Monitor Model or Ellis' emergentist theory of learning. Theoretical positions should emerge out of the "ideas" discussed in the course not vice versa. Academically speaking, awareness-raising tasks based on L2 data or on SLA texts can be pretty helpful to encourage teachers to evaluate the relevancy of specific "ideas". Such tasks may prove more effective in making the link between technical and practical knowledge than more traditional, transmission modes of teacher education. Interestingly, awareness-raising tasks serve two purposes in teacher education. They guide teachers to the self-discovery of "ideas" and they encourage reflection on "ideas" presented to them in texts. An example of an awareness-task directed at teachers' use of questions in the classroom can be found in Ellis (2010) while a good example of awareness-raising activities designed to stimulate reflection can be found in Rosemary's (2008) report of her in-service workshop for teachers.

By and large, to shed light on Ellis' fourth principle in the case of collaborative research, it is important to be mentioned that it is the teacher who identifies the issues to be

investigated, not the SLA researcher. That is, the issues must be drawn from teachers' own understanding of language pedagogy as this is practiced in their own classrooms. The role of the SLA researcher should be that of facilitating the teacher's research by providing relevant information from SLA and helping to develop appropriate data collection instruments and procedures. Personally speaking, in the case of action research, teachers should identify problems relating to their own teaching. In the case of exploratory practice, they should identify aspects in the life of their classroom that they wish to gain a better understanding of. These problems and issues are not likely to be the kinds of problems and issues that SLA researchers would choose to examine. In practice, this is not important. What is important is that teachers are able to relate SLA ideas to their own research questions. SLA is best viewed as a body of technical knowledge that can illuminate pedagogically inspired questions. It may also be useful to encourage teachers to give public presentations of their research.

Consequently, given the importance of SLA research, there is a growing concern amongst L2 researchers as whether teachers can benefit from the results of the studies at their own class advantage. One stumbling-block in this sense is teachers' resistance to change; therefore, they prefer to stick to their own way of teaching, whether fruitful or fruitless, and reluctant to accept or refresh their methods.

III. CONCLUSION

It can be best summed that EFL/ESL teachers should be moved from the more usual and traditional role as consumers of educational research to participants in knowledge-making. An interesting debate about research and its pedagogical implications took place in *TESOL Quarterly*. Han (2007), after reviewing a research article by Kim (2006) which included an implications section on the grounds that they "ostentatiously link the research to practice" by means of an implications section, interestingly enough, concluded that only in the domain of SLA not every topic is relevant to second language teaching, and the ones that are relevant may bear a direct or indirect, actual or potential, and above all complex relationship to teaching". Responding to Han's concerns, Chapelle (2007) pointed out that there is no such thing as a perfect research design so the limitations of a study should not be a reason for failing to propose implications for teaching. She argued that "if an author can state no implications for teaching and learning, *TESOL Quarterly* is the wrong journal". Implications, applications, and proposals are all fine providing that researchers acknowledge that it is ultimately the teacher who must determine the relevance of SLA constructs and findings for teaching.

Last but not least, however, there is a gap between the discourse of research and the practice of teaching. This gap can be filled in two principal ways. One way is through applied rather than pure research. The researchers perspective has been that of an applied SLA researcher should seek to make SLA applicable to pedagogy by addressing issues that are of acknowledged relevant to the practice of teaching, such as corrective feedback. The second way is through the mediation of teacher educators, whose job is to facilitate the process by which technical knowledge about SLA can interface with teachers' own practical knowledge of teaching. Mediation, however, has to be principled. To recap, generally, it is always the

teacher who ultimately determines the relevance of SLA constructs and findings for teaching, not the SLA researcher.

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