
TOWARDS A REFLECTIVE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: THE GAP BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at the gap which exists between teaching and research in language education. It clarifies some concepts and explores why there is gap between Second Language Acquisition researchers and language teachers touching on differences in status and stance towards knowledge. The paper proffers some measures in which the gap might be bridged.

Scholars in the field of education have long acknowledged the existence of the gap between research and teaching (Korthangen, 2007). In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Belcher (2007) warns of the widening of this gap and calls on researchers to make serious efforts to ensure that their output is relevant to language teaching. Indeed, it is a problem that can be found in various professions and disciplines. There is evidence that the research-teaching gap is found in the teaching of English language as well. Derwing and Munro (2009), in discussing the need for more research in L2 teaching, mentioned that there is currently "very little reliance" on existing research by teachers. Levis (1999) appraised international research and concludes that it is completely divorced from modern language teaching. Examining the role of English as an International Language (EIL) and by extension, its research, Sifakis and Sougari (2005) found that in pronunciation, teachers in Greece were not aware of the international spread of English and its implications for instruction. Fraser (2000), commenting on the state of pronunciation teaching in Australia stated that there is currently a dearth of reliable research-based information about what works and what doesn't in pronunciation teaching and why; though a large number of opinions can be heard. All these observations are aptly summed up by Levis (2005) who observed that to a large extent, pronunciation's importance has always been determined by ideology and intuition rather than research.

The causes of the gap are many but many scholars now believe that it is essentially a result of diverging professional cultures between researchers and teachers. The gap, however, was not always as pervasive as it is today. Ellis (1997) noted that research agendas in SLA were initially set by practitioners who wanted to address classroom-based concerns. Despite this, the growth of research in SLA also means that its agendas are no longer determined by

practitioners but increasingly by researchers who are based in universities or other research institutions. The gap is said to have widened even further because of the diverging interests that are underpinned by different epistemologies held by universities and schools. Labaree (2003) illustrated these conflicting worldviews in his description of the transition demanded of teachers who need to do research in doctoral programmes: the shift from [school] teaching to educational research often asks [these teachers] to transform their cultural orientation from normative to analytical, from personal to intellectual, from the particular to the universal and from the experiential to the theoretical.

The different views of knowledge and its relation to research held by researchers and teachers are also demonstrated by Jorani (2007) whose study uncovers teachers' tendency to consider knowledge of teaching as ungeneralisable and an enormous bag of tricks which cannot be reduced to a set of more general rules of thumb that might serve to guide the teacher's generation of teaching strategies and practices. According to the source, while this view may explain the teachers' aversion to research, the university professors in their study believed that knowledge of teaching can be generalized and applied across various contexts; thus, explaining their embrace of research. Other than this, researchers are often viewed as belonging to a higher professional status than that of teachers; thus, possessing more power in the making of scholarship in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) (Stewart 2006). The unequal distribution of power leads researchers and teachers to "mistrust" each other (Allwright, 2004). Teachers thus, view research findings presented to them with scepticism, questioning its practicality, conclusiveness and relevance (Broekkamp and Hout-Wolters, 2007).

McIntyre's (2005) argued that the kind of knowledge that research can offer is of a very different kind from the knowledge that classroom teachers need to use. Teachers are thus, seen to produce and make use of practical knowledge to solve problems in their work while researchers create propositional knowledge that mainly describes teaching and learning (Korthagen, 2007). Although researchers might expect them to do so, teachers rarely make use of the propositional knowledge researchers create because it does not really serve their needs. Ellis (1997) equated this 'propositional knowledge' with 'technical knowledge', pointing out the fact that it can be learned.

Theoretical linguists have long been arguing that their works are being carried out on a level of abstraction which tend to idealize away from the complexities of the 'real' world, but this view has hardly gone unchallenged. In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the same divisions are increasingly apparent. If SLA is to take its cue from the natural sciences, then it cannot be guided, inhibited, or distracted by practical concerns (Beretta and Crookes, 1993). On the one hand, this thought expresses an idea which is not in the least contentious as it seems to suggest that groups can carry on with academic endeavour and be independent of any practical application.

This paper explores the position, often argued about at language teaching conferences and in the pages of journals like this one, that there is lack of communication between Second Language Acquisition researchers and language teachers, and that much of what is done under the rubric of SLA is not particularly relevant to language teachers and is not

really applicable to the day-to-day language teaching and learning which goes on in classrooms.

Clarification of concepts

Teaching

Hyman (1974) conceived teaching as a system of actions inherited to induce learning. Similarly, Hirst (1974) perceived teaching as series of activities intended to bring about learning. Further, the source stressed that the intention of all teaching activities is to bring about learning and opined that because of the tight conceptual connection between learning, and the characterization and *raison d'etre* of teaching rests on that of learning. Teaching could be seen as a chain of consciously selected activities specifically designed to maximize learning by ensuring that the efforts of the teaching and learner yield the desired dividend. Gage (1993) defined teaching as an interpersonal influence which aims at changing the ways of persons and their behaviour. From these definitions, it can be asserted that learning is an important criterion of successful teaching. In other words, teaching is to bring about a relatively permanent change in learner's behaviour. But where this does not occur, the teaching processes have to be well examined to avoid mediocrity. Teaching is a highly valued social service in every country of the world. It requires specialized knowledge and skills comparable to those required for members of the profession.

Research

Research has been defined by Best and Kahn (1989) as the systematic and objective analysis and recording of controlled observations that may lead to the development of generalization, principles or theories, resulting in prediction and possibly, the ultimate control of events. Osuala (1987) considered research as the process of arriving at dependable solutions of the problems through the planned and systematized collection, analysis and interpretation of data. In the aspect of educational research. Traverse (1973) defined educational research as an activity directed towards the development of an organized body of scientific knowledge about the events with which educators are concerns.

In educational research, decisions are taken in relevant areas in order to improve and also give a sense of direction to the education system. Information is therefore, needed from the various facets of educators such as adequate teaching methods, appropriate textbooks, efficiency and effectiveness of teachers and the desirability as well as the adequacy of educational programmes and the like. The pieces of information are meant to be the bases for making policies for the country's educational system.

Gap

The word, 'gap', has many meanings and implications. In the context of the situation as used in this study, it means the differences in ideology between SLA researchers and language teachers in the classroom. If there is something missing from a situation that prevents it from being complete or satisfactory, one can say that there is a gap. It implies that

there are certain issues, changes or developments that arise, that do not allow for a satisfactory achievement of what is desired.

Reasons why the gap exists between teaching and research

One reason for the gap as pointed out by Crookes (1997) is that the SLA researchers have relatively higher status than teachers. The relative status of the researcher is higher because as academics, they occupy the upper echelons of the knowledge chain. They are the makers of knowledge which are the plenary speakers at language teaching conferences who are meant to be listened to by those attending. Some other professions downgrade the role of academics; those who work in university posts generally command much higher salaries and are seen by the general public to be at a higher level than teachers.

Many SLA researchers are what Reich (1991) called "symbolic analysts", while language teachers are what he called "in-person servers". Symbolic analysts are the problem identifiers and solvers, a super-class of highly educated and skilled individuals who are becoming progressively less dependent on traditional, local organizations and frameworks; and are more integrated with a developing international socio-economic and intellectual elites. By contrast in-person servers, such as sales staff at department stores, secretaries, hairdressers, bus drivers and teachers, are involved in repetitive tasks (controlled ultimately by symbolic analysts) which are carried out in the presence of those consuming their products. In the increase in administrative control over what they do on day-to-day basis (for example, the increasing number of teaching contexts where teachers are expected to follow closely a national curriculum), teachers find that they are progressively deskilled and ultimately declassified.

The educational system is dynamic like any other aspects of human endeavour, because it is prone to changes over time. These changes could be in ideology, technology economy, cultural, political and other societal needs. Therefore, for education to be meaningful, teaching must be effective in order to realize the goals and objectives of education, what is taught must also reflect the changes, yearning, and the needs of the society. To improve upon a system, there is often the need to amend and completely change or create new policies since this will introduce a new perspective or value into the system.

Another difference between SLA researchers and language teachers contributing to the gap is related to the stances which the two groups tend to adopt vis-a-vis knowledge about SLA. Rorty (1980) contrasted what he termed in somewhat unorthodox fashion, epistemological and hermeneutic stances towards the acquisition of knowledge. In the former case, there is a paradigm in place with all that this entails: agreement about what is to be researched and how, and how what is researched is to be validly or reliably assessed. In this model, the growth of knowledge happens within well defined strictures. In the latter case, we are in the realm of exploration and speculation where knowledge growth is akin to a conversation which unfolds with development contingent on diachronic and synchronic factors in context. Thus SLA researchers and language teachers may be seen to have what in essence are different ways of life. The investigators could like to add that these different ways of life are intricately tied up with the different ways in which language is used by researchers and teachers

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On a more general level, one may see SLA researchers and language teachers as belonging to communities with very different *discourses*. Gee (1996) defined discourses as a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'; or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role. Thus, SLA researchers inhabit a world of reality. Teachers, on the other hand, inhabit a place where there is pressure to detonate - to name and surge that they are naming reality. Teachers inhabit a world which obliges them to deal tippie connotations of reality manifested through the multi-layered and textured social interaction which constitutes classroom language teaching and learning.

In the examples outlined in the previous section, one can see elements of the gap on the SLA researcher-language teacher gap. The question of status is perhaps another obvious reason for the gap in the sense that the researchers published in journals which constitute the knowledge base for SLA theory and ultimately the recommendations about language teaching. Different stances towards knowledge are reflected in the discussion of the Van Patten and Oikkenon (1996) who engaged in an epistemological exercise opined that while language teachers see the issue of competence as learnt linguistic knowledge and less relevant, they negotiate the ongoing and contingent nature of classroom events and behaviour. As regards discourse on the researchers' side, there is the academic concern with making a contribution to the research base of SLA where the emphasis is on denotative descriptions of classroom life. On the teachers' side, there is the concern with maintaining an ongoing narrative with a group of students with an emphasis on the context based connotations of language use in the classroom.

The Gap Between Teachers and SLA Researchers:

The long and short history of SLA clearly shows that as more and more academics have devoted their time to such research, the greater the distance in many cases between this research and those most directly involved in language teaching and learning. Informal contacts over the years with teachers of a number of languages in a number of contexts reveal that few regularly read articles in journals such as *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)* and *second Language Research* 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 remains that direct beneficiaries are not keeping up with reading of academic materials. Thus, there is the paradox that the more research there is into SLA, the more disengaged from language teachers this research becomes.

Secondly, there is lack of contact between researchers and teachers' as recorded in the June, 1998 issue of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* which was devoted exclusively to inter language phonetics and phonology. The article related its study of effect of noise on the perception of native English and Mandarin-accented spoken English to practical matters. They observed that the result reported is likely to be of interest to second-language teachers who are often concerned with helping their learners improve intelligibility in a wide range of communicative situation. Because noisy conditions are commonly

encountered, it may be useful in the classroom to promote speaking strategies which might be recommended by researchers.

Another problem is that too many authors ignore the physical and psychological space which separate practitioners around the world from academics who are currently not teachers of English as a foreign or second language themselves; and above all, who do not live and work in conditions which are even remotely similar. In addition, these authors are not addressing the fact that in their contacts with teachers, it is seemingly inevitable that it is the researcher who decides what is to be researched. The lack of synchrony between researchers and teachers leads inevitably to a gap between the two groups, what Clarke (1994) called "theory practice dysfunction".

More recently, Ellis (1997a, 1997b) and Crookes (1997) have problematised the applicability of second language acquisition research to teaching practice pointing to a psychological and professional gulf between language teachers and applied linguists. Ellis and Crookes felt very strongly about maintaining their links with practising teachers because as former language teachers themselves, they would genuinely like their work to be applied during teaching in the classroom. Both authors called for closer ties between SLA researchers and practising teachers.

The teaching practices of some teachers undoubtedly point to the existence of a gap between what is espoused by researchers and what really takes place in the classroom. In the aspect of spoken English, Pennington (1997) noted that teachers' focus on segmentals run counter to the call for more attention to be given to suprasegmentals.

Moreover, there was no indication of English as an International Language (EIL) being integrated into their instruction manuals despite the more frequent teaching of segmentals. This claim can be supported by the teacher's practice of teaching individual sounds and the simultaneous absence of any considerations for intelligibility targeted at a broader worldwide community of English speaker.

Finally, the teaching of pronunciation itself was more likely to take the form of grammatical error correction than a genuine attempt at teaching English sounds. What arises from these findings now is the need to identify the factors that contributed to the creation of this gap.

Conclusion

Through an investigation of teachers' beliefs and practices, this study has illustrated the gap that exists between research and teaching. It is certainly true that teachers must increase their uptake of research and its findings to build their technical knowledge because it has been proven in this study that there is a place for such knowledge in their practice. However, researchers must equally strive to make their research more relevant to teachers by taking into account the latter's practical knowledge and refine their findings from this perspective. Realizing that there is much to learn from each other, is a step in the right direction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are outlined as approaches to bridging the gap between research and teaching which may be more likely to succeed, albeit on a modest level.

There should be collaborative experiences between researchers and teachers during which they spend time together in an attempt to better understand teaching. Research of this kind means engaging in activities such as sitting down with teachers to talk about why they became teachers in the first place or asking teachers to comment on transcriptions of lessons in an attempt to get at how they understand their decision making processes even sharing in planning, teaching and assessing lessons with a teacher. This could easily make published research based on collaborations with teachers.

Moreover, teachers should carry out researches themselves. Such researches are usually called "action research". This involves the teacher as exclusive actor in the complete research cycle of identifying research questions based on personal teaching experience, doing background reading on the subject identified, collecting analyzing data, drawing conclusions and then starting the entire process again. In addition, there is the expectation that the researcher will write up the results and share them with colleagues.

Research should not be added to teacher's responsibilities but be incorporated into classroom practice. This suggests exploiting already familiar and trusted classroom activities as ways of exploring the things that puzzle teachers and learners about what is happening in their own classrooms. This process begins when teachers and learners brainstorm what puzzles them about language learning and teaching. From the resultant list, puzzles might be selected for investigation above all those which look most promising as regards their potential to improve classroom through the elimination of obstacles to teaching and learning. At this stage, the teacher organizes classroom activities such as group discussions, role plays, dialogue which writing focus on the selected puzzles.

Classroom teachers should be sponsored to international conferences where they could be exposed to exploratory research efforts. This is a forum which would allow them to be heard by others who might determine how it resonates to their own contexts.

Furthermore, teachers should take an active role in what is termed "mediation", a process whereby the relationship between theory and practice, ideas and their actualization, can only be realized within the domain of application; that is, through the immediate activity of teaching in a more traditional form. The mediation process proceeds from a theoretical principled side; the former is called appraisal and the latter application. When teachers are engaged in application, they first put a theory into operation and then elaborate an empirical evaluation.

In acknowledging that teachers possess their own expert knowledge, researchers should similarly make efforts to learn from them and equally share that responsibility. The importance of grammar and students' performance to the teacher is a fact that cannot be ignored by researchers. The fact that these teachers are committed to the teaching of language to be mastered by the students, research on English as International Language (EIL) should be fine-tuned to meet the needs of such teachers.

Academic Excellence

Teachers' comments on time and curricular constraints are also a reality for teachers which researchers cannot afford to ignore. Being that assessments are tied to the curricula on which the teachers' base their instruction, researchers should consider how their findings can be incorporated into these existing blueprints for teaching. The researchers should suggest smaller-scale changes to the existing curriculum.

In the aspect of English pronunciation, training in teaching pronunciation should be given to teachers. Although EIL researchers may not emphasize suprasegmentals, they are still relevant to Nigerians who regularly use English among themselves. Research on how to teach suprasegmentals will become more relevant as teachers will need to utilize the information for themselves.

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