

Małgorzata Jedynak

University of Wrocław

Are SLA Research Reports of Value for FL Teachers? On the Need for Researcher-Teacher Collaboration

Abstract: The paper discusses the issue of second language acquisition (SLA) research reports and the application of their findings in practice. On the basis of interviews with researchers and practitioners as well as the author's own experience, the reasons for the gap between theory and practice are explained. Some solutions are also offered to bridge the gap, such as teachers becoming researchers or collaboration between SLA researchers and practitioners. Finally, the author attempts to answer the question posed in the title of the paper. Since SLA research reports are not appreciated by many foreign language (FL) teachers, some solutions are proposed, such as eliminating research jargon, complex statistics and theoretical frameworks and introducing topics of relevance to FL teachers. The author also advocates the publication of simplified abridged versions of research reports in a special journal for FL teachers and wider dissemination of research findings among practitioners at various conferences and workshops.

1. Introduction

The main incentive for writing this article was an ongoing discussion among second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, most of whom are academics, about the practical value of their research. Being a researcher myself, I constantly face the question: "Who needs my research reports?" It seems that the readers are mostly other researchers or students working on their MA research projects. Foreign language teachers, school administrators and policy-makers still have difficulties accessing a good range of research reports. Many valuable research findings are left on the pages of language teaching journals instead of being used in the classroom.

Researcher-teacher collaboration can undoubtedly contribute to improvements in foreign language education. The European Centre of Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, as an executive body for the Council of Europe education policy,

has launched various programmes to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Teams of experts consisting of SLA researchers and practitioners gather to work together on various projects contributing to the development of EU education. Their reports are published on the ECML website. Occasionally, educational institutions in the EU countries are informed directly of the research results. The project coordinators and team members are responsible for disseminating the research results in their home institutions. Still, foreign language teachers are somehow neglected in the direct dissemination process.

SLA researchers attempt to ensure that their papers have a pragmatic dimension, usually including a final section entitled “Practical Implications” or “Implications for Teachers.” Practitioners, in turn, question the practical value of SLA research. They argue that researchers have insufficient knowledge of the realities of teaching. Furthermore, they point out methodological flaws and the fact that much research is conducted for its own sake.

This article presents the views of researchers and practitioners regarding the practicality of research reports. It reflects on the author’s experience with both of these groups. The paper also analyses various “Implications for Teachers” sections to evaluate their practical value. Finally, the paper deals with the question of the prospects for researcher-teacher collaboration in SLA.

2. The gap between SLA research and teaching

Throughout my research career I have encountered a dozen different definitions of research. One informal definition that has stayed in my mind describes research as the process of going down alleys to see whether they are blind. In a more formal definition put forward by Nunan (1992) one finds a depiction of research as a systematic process of question/hypothesis formation, data collecting and analysis. In his definition Nunan does not emphasise any pragmatic aspect of research or its embedment in the real teaching environment. Other authors, such as Michońska-Stadnik and Wilczyńska (2010: 20), accentuate a practical dimension of SLA research, asserting that it should be a basis for improvement of the foreign language teaching/learning process.

In the last thirty years there has been an increase in research activity in the SLA field. However, we can also observe dissatisfaction expressed by researchers themselves and foreign language teachers, who are potential consumers of research findings. The criticism is mainly related to the negligible effect of research. There is not much research that is really cumulative or clearly motivated. In fact, as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 221) noted, data-based work is frequently unproductive and lacking in theoretical motivation. One may question the value of descriptive studies whose final findings are far removed from the realities of teaching. Many research reports of this kind end by saying “no conclusions can be drawn about

the studied phenomenon” due to “the lack of certain crucial data or some missing element in the design,” followed by suggestions about how similar research should be conducted in the future.

If one focuses on classroom research, which by definition should be carried out in the context of a classroom and should consequently entail some implications for teaching, one may notice that a considerable body of such research is conducted in intact classrooms — that is, classrooms that exist for the purpose of pedagogy. At the same time, the majority of classroom research is carried out by an external researcher and not by a foreign language teacher with a view to improving his or her practice. Having analysed thirty widely cited studies that purported to offer advice to teachers (quoted by Ellis 2002), I found only ten that were carried out in classrooms. The others were conducted outside the classroom, either in simulated settings or through formal experiments. In the current literature there is a distinction between classroom-based and classroom-oriented research.

It seems that the gap between SLA research and foreign language (FL) teaching is to some extent inevitable. It is due to the fact that researchers and teachers function in two different spheres and perceive problems from different perspectives. What is more, these two professions represent divergent ways of thinking and are involved in a different discourse. Researchers have a tendency to overuse scientific or formal discourse, which is of little value for practitioners. Frequently, at various language conferences, one can hear SLA researchers attributing all innovations in foreign language classrooms to themselves, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or the European Language Portfolio (ELP). In their view, it is obvious that without research into the effectiveness of these innovations none of them could be implemented in classrooms. FL teachers’ position, in turn, determines the way they perceive things: some of them claim that only classroom-based research carried out by FL teachers can confirm the effectiveness of CLIL, CALL or ELP.

Despite FL teachers’ objections as to methodological flaws in SLA research, they do not neglect all research findings. Some findings, such as those related to developmental patterns, the use of Krashen’s Monitor, or the use of learning strategies, are entirely relevant to their practice.

In his book, Bartels (2005) shows that even MA TESOL students have doubts about the application of SLA research findings in the context of English language teaching (ELT). In interviews with students, a typical question that appeared concerned the relevance of research and the reality of teaching. The response of the MA TESOL student quoted below suggests that what can be read in research reports and the actual experience of teaching are like two different worlds.

I don’t think SLA can tell me how to manage students and how to motivate students. I don’t think that stuff, such as acquisition order of UG (Universal Grammar), can help me deal with the issues I am facing right now. (Interview, 15 April 2002) (Bartels 2005: 150).

The theory-practice debate is of interest to many SLA specialists. In his writings, Clark (1994) stresses the significance of the role of FL teachers, whose expertise is invaluable. It seems that an alternative approach that attempts to bridge the gap between SLA research and teaching is the most appropriate.

3. FL teachers as researchers

Bridging the gap between theory and practice requires the intensive involvement of both FL teachers and researchers. It seems that two solutions may be advocated to facilitate this process: 1) FL teachers becoming researchers, and 2) collaboration between these two groups. In this section I will only focus on teacher-researcher transition.

The transition of practitioners into researchers is possible, since FL teachers already possess some theoretical knowledge on teaching and learning. However, transforming SLA researchers into practitioners may be more difficult. Many researchers interested in materials design do not write textbooks, and (with notable exceptions, such as researchers like Swales), there are not many theorists who are at the same time practitioners.

Browsing the recent literature one may notice that the concept of the teacher as a researcher has frequently been addressed (e.g. Johnson 2009). Nowadays, FL teachers are more and more encouraged to be collaborators in revising school curriculum, professionalising teaching, developing FL education policy and/or improving the work environment. FL teachers in the European Union are now more autonomous than they used to be. This autonomy is related to teachers' new responsibilities. Teachers, schools, education institutions are accountable to their supervisors for the policies, language programmes and practices they intend to implement. Any decisions FL teachers want to make should be data driven. Only then there is a chance to be granted financial support for various programmes.

Research conducted by FL teachers is of special significance. They have practical knowledge that helps them to understand and identify problematic areas, and to conduct research in the classroom setting. As Ellis (1992) notes, teacher-research directly addresses matters that practitioners are concerned with because it focuses on problems they themselves have identified. Such research provides a means of enabling teachers to reflect on their own practice.

The advantages of teachers working as researchers are indisputable. FL teachers are able to identify what they need and expect from research. Still, not many of them are engaged in any research. My discussions with the junior high school teachers on the usefulness of their contributions to SLA research revealed that the main obstacle in doing any research is the lack of time and/or (when a project is more costly) funds. I also had the impression that some expression of appreciation from their supervisors — not necessarily a bonus or reward — was expected. These teachers undoubtedly need training and support as well as recognition for

undertaking research. As a teaching practice supervisor, I participated with my students in a number of lessons at which the teacher successfully applied mnemonic strategies in presenting (for example) vocabulary describing personality features in English. She did it in a way we had never experienced before, e.g. presenting *selfish* with the sentence “I want all the fish for myself!” The teacher was unaware that she was using mnemonics. She also rejected invitations to get involved in classroom-based research, stating that she had no knowledge of statistics. This reveals how many misconceptions of research function in the teaching world. FL teachers seem to associate research primarily with a conventional scientific experimental approach full of complicated statistical calculations.

For these reasons it is not commonplace for FL teachers to make the transition into research. My observations seem to be consistent with the findings presented by Borg (2009). In his large-scale study he investigated the extent to which teachers engage with research, both by reading various research reports and by conducting it. The 505 respondents from 13 countries who participated in the survey indicated that the concept of research was ambiguous. The majority of these teachers associated the characteristics of research primarily with traditional scientific and experimental approaches. On the other hand, when the respondents were asked to list research topics that they found appealing, they turned out to be interested in collecting course feedback from students or observing colleagues, which are closely related to practical classroom research and professional development. Borg found that the major factors inhibiting teachers’ engagement in research are a lack of time, knowledge, access to materials and institutional barriers. He also made the point that more reliable guidance and support are necessary for teachers involved in research. Furthermore, Borg noted that research methods manuals need to offer more than general advice, and to address more specific questions posed by practitioners. The field of ELT undoubtedly needs to recognise the importance of these changes to make teacher research an activity worth engaging in.

Rainey (2000), in turn, proved in her study that action research among teachers is declining. The survey she conducted involved 228 teachers from 10 countries. The findings show that the overwhelming majority of teachers (75.5%) did not have any knowledge of action research. Since that investigation took place more than a decade ago, it seems justified to investigate how widespread action research is among language teachers nowadays. We have some more recent data from the 2008 survey conducted by the British Council among 413 teachers of English. The findings give a more optimistic picture than those from Rainey’s study: 54% of the respondents were involved in action research.

Undoubtedly, there must be some incentive for FL teachers to get involved in research: either personal interests or additional benefits related to advancing in their career path. Furthermore, the significance of FL teachers’ contributions to the field need to be pointed out to them. Not only does their research offer them the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills in research methods and their application, but it also enables other practitioners to increase their awareness of the

options and possibilities for change. Teachers who are also researchers become more critical and reflective about their own practice.

4. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners

FL teachers may benefit from reading papers addressing various SLA problems on the condition that they contain research conducted in meaningful contexts. One of the ways to provide such a context is by ensuring collaboration between FL teachers and researchers. Integrating research into the real world of classroom teaching seems to be an even more adequate strategy than teacher-researcher transition for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Without good communication between researchers and practitioners, many useful research findings may be left in the pages of journals instead of being applied in language classrooms.

The very distinction between researchers and practitioners may be perceived as a barrier to effective collaboration. There is a danger that the researcher-practitioner dichotomy inherent in distinct role labels might unintentionally favour scientific knowledge over practical knowledge. This could have a detrimental effect on teachers' perceptions of research findings, which might be viewed as biased and new knowledge might be rejected.

The actual purpose of researcher-teacher collaboration needs to be clearly explained. Both collaborators offer each other expertise. Since both researchers and practitioners intend to improve the way theory functions in practice, it is the researchers who need to make some changes in their perspectives. When doing research they frequently refer to conventional models imposed by specialists in the SLA field. However, FL teachers question the validity of such models, since they rely in their professional work on various ideas and concepts regarding the nature of language and language learning. Thus, researchers need to adjust the way they view teaching in order to meet teachers' expectations.

The practical knowledge of FL teachers, as has been mentioned in point 2 above, is invaluable, since they bring hands-on experience into the research classroom. SLA researchers are not acquainted with the multi-dimensionality of teaching in a language classroom where one is dealing with the learners' multiple goals, their individual, idiosyncratic challenges, their different personalities and abilities. FL teachers seem to be more experienced in building a bridge between theory and practice, since they do it on a regular basis in the classroom when they reconcile individual learners' needs and experiences with formal school curricula.

The majority of SLA researchers, who work as full-time university academics, do not possess hands-on classroom experience. For this reason one cannot expect one-to-one correspondence between SLA theory and practice. The process of integrating theory and practice requires connecting what teachers know about their

students with what they know about the learning and teaching process (teaching strategies, motivation, cultures, social context).

There is a growing number of institutions aiming at bringing SLA researchers and practitioners together to work on various projects related to FL learning and teaching. One such institution was mentioned in the introduction to the article: The ECML in Graz initiates activities aimed at making FL teachers not only theory-consumers but also theory-makers. The project findings accessible on the ECML website provide tools and resources for FL teachers.

Another European agency that helps connect theory and practice is the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP).¹ It promotes and develops the idea of lifelong learning by providing information and analyses of vocational education and training systems, policies, research and practice. CEDEFOP engages a network of experts (e.g. on the early identification of skills needs) whose activities support the implementation of various initiatives that are practical in nature.

It is also worth mentioning the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) developed in the USA to strengthen ties between researchers and teachers. It was launched in nine states in 1997. The network functions as a channel for communication and collaboration between researchers from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy and practitioners. Increasing numbers of collaborative projects are also being started by various leading international educational and information companies.

While I interviewed the participants of various EU joint-research projects, both researchers (university academics) and practitioners (FL high school teachers) listed some factors that can facilitate collaboration, such as:

1. opportunities to meet all the network members face-to-face (researchers, teachers, leaders and coordinators);
2. the existence of internal listservs (cross-platforms, electronic platforms, mailing lists);
3. the existence of some coordinators to work with the teachers and researchers;
4. selecting the right leaders, preferably those with prior collaborative research experience or with some leadership role within a region;
5. dedication and enthusiasm on the part of the team members;
6. training in teacher research;
7. teachers' and researchers' hunger for information and interaction;
8. support and funding from educational institutions, regional institutions and ministries of education.

¹ CEDEFOP is the French acronym of the official name of the organization: Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle.

Undoubtedly, the impact of teacher-researcher collaboration is the strongest when the research is of adequate duration and a sufficient number of practitioners and researchers are involved. The interviewees informed me that project staff turnover and a lack of time were the main factors hindering effective collaboration.

While browsing for internet information on SLA collaborative programmes in Poland, I managed to establish that the ones that are accessible are only directed at individual teachers or researchers. The Institute for Research in Education (IBE) engages only professional SLA experts in various educational projects in the classroom setting.² E-twinning, in turn, which is one of four programmes within the Lifelong Learning Programmes run by the national Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE), is aimed only at practitioners who can cooperate with other practitioners in twinned institutions such as kindergartens or schools.³ The Study Visits organised by the FRSE facilitate communication and dialogue between researchers and practitioners in other countries; however, like the other aforementioned programmes functioning in Poland, they do not contribute to any collaborative researcher-teacher projects. Recently, the FRSE was invited to work with the Academic Cooperation Association (ACE), an organisation located in Brussels that supports the mobility of researchers and academics in order to internationalise university education in the EU. The quality of higher education in Poland will definitely be enhanced through ACE. However, ACE will not have any impact on collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Therefore, there is a need to enhance policy-makers' and educational institutions' awareness of all the benefits of collaborative research.

Conducting research will not have any impact on changing the realities of teaching unless the findings are disseminated. It seems that this is the stage at which the majority of problems appear. Internet-based publications are frequently met with no response from practitioners. There is a need for some regional and/or local education representatives to inform FL teachers of relevant research findings. Research reports, however, will not be of much use to practitioners if they are not followed by discussion and feedback. Workshops at which instructional theory is presented to practitioners seems a more appropriate form of dissemination than simply reporting. It is already practised by some conference organisers (e.g. UAM University in Konin) who welcome both practitioners and theorists in the field of SLA to discuss state-of-the-art approaches to foreign language teaching.

² IBE is the abbreviation of the Polish name of the institution: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych. IBE's activities are directed at using research findings in education policy making and education practice. IBE conducts research on its own in the following areas: 1) directions in education development (including the organisation and management of education), 2) models and ideas of education (aims, methods, means), 3) processes taking place in the education system. More information is available at www.ibe.edu.pl.

³ FRSE is an abbreviation of a Polish name of the institution — Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji. Other programmes within FRSE are Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and study visits. More information is available at www.frse.org.pl.

5. FL teachers and their expectation from SLA research reports

Painful as it may be, it needs to be stated clearly: the majority of FL teachers do not read SLA research reports. When I interviewed a dozen FL teachers working in both mainstream education and in special educational needs (SEN) settings, only two of them admitted to having read language teaching journals such as *Języki Obce w Szkole* and *English Teaching Forum*. The interviewed teachers of English gave many reasons for this. Firstly, they find SLA research reports boring. It seems that they lack the scientific competence to understand them. The language used in research reports is characterised by applied-linguistics or psychology jargon. Researchers attempt to make their findings accessible to a wider audience by adding an “Implications” section. However, FL teachers, as mentioned above, perceive various problems from a different perspective. Instead of outlining implications, SLA research reports should rather provide researched teaching theory. An example of such a theory was the Monitor Model Theory by Stephen Krashen.

Another problem is related to the subjects that research reports cover. Many topics that are discussed by SLA researchers are of no interest to practitioners. FL teachers regularly declare their interest in broad issues such as multilingualism (plurilingual syllabi) and intercultural communicative competence (cultural awareness development), which are discussed in Council of Europe publications, rather than what they perceive as typical SLA research. In fact there is a substantial body of SLA research catering to FL teachers’ interests, but the length and overly scientific language of research reports pose an obstacle for practitioners who might want to get acquainted with their content. It seems that summative (and in some cases simplified) reports published in a book or journal specifically designed for FL teachers would make SLA research accessible to a wider audience. Research summaries should include the most important conclusions. The point is that what is significant for a practitioner does not have to be significant for a theorist. Therefore, SLA researcher should first analyse pertinent questions raised by FL teachers in response to other researchers’ reports. Many such questions can be found on websites for language teachers in the form of “frequently asked questions.”

Finally, the style of reports should be adapted for teachers. A narrative style, rather than descriptive discourse, is advisable.

Other expectations that FL teachers have are related to the nature of studies presented in reports. Case-studies, action research, exploratory practice and reflective practice will definitely be very useful for practitioners. As was pointed out above, researcher-teacher collaborative research highlights the most crucial aspects of teachers’ profession.

My analysis of the content of “Implications” sections proved the validity of the problems identified by the interviewees. In the last section of research reports,

teachers are provided with instructional theory. However, there is no evidence that these theories are effective in the classroom. There are also no details on how to use instructions. Furthermore, SLA researchers frequently use the writing style of an authority who is more knowledgeable than practitioners (e.g. “teachers should implement this,” “it is necessary for teachers to understand that it may be more beneficial...,” “teachers must realise that...,” etc.). SLA researchers should make it explicit why some theory works (or not) by referring to collaborative researcher-teacher research findings. If they have not been involved in such research it seems advisable only to recommend to teachers how they can individually test instructional theory in practice.

Figure 1 (below) presents a compilation of all the advice for researchers outlined above. It seems that a starting point in making a research draft should be establishing the potential consumers of the research report, namely fellow researchers, practitioners, or both. The subsequent stages of research report design should be planned accordingly.

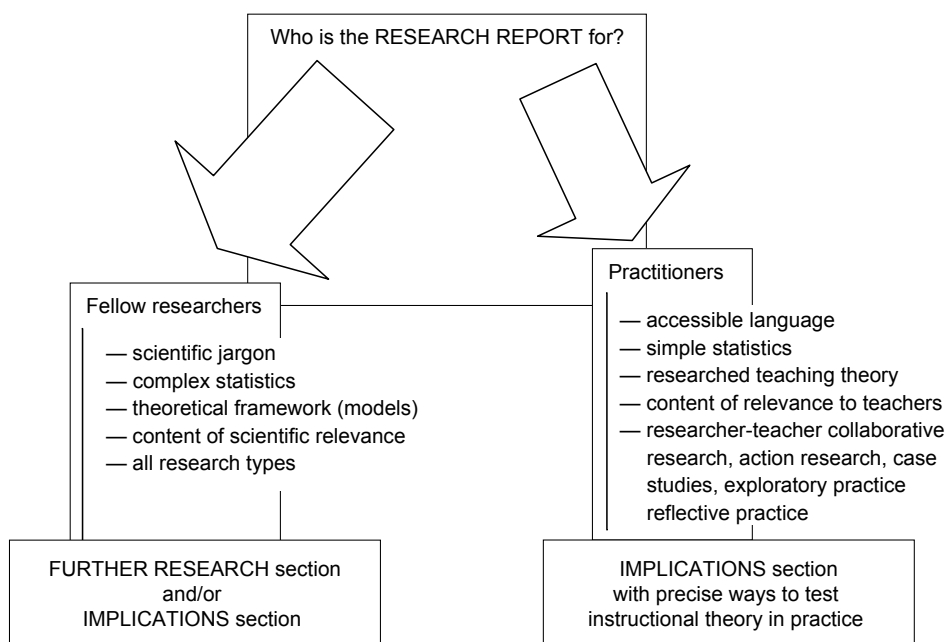


Figure 1. Stages of research report preparation

6. Concluding remarks

There is undoubtedly a need for better communication between theorists and practitioners. Collaborative researcher-teacher research seems to be an effective solution

to bring SLA research into real classroom teaching practice. Furthermore, scientific knowledge in the form of research reports should not be left unused in journals, but should be accessible to FL teachers. It seems advisable for universities, colleges or educational institutions to publish abridged versions of research that can contribute something of value to classroom teaching and learning. Some philological departments print compilations of the most interesting research results obtained by MA students. Since many of them are FL teachers, their research, frequently embedded in the realities of the classroom, is even of a greater use than the studies conducted by academics only occasionally involved in classroom research.

Furthermore, the form and style of research reports should be revised and new ways of disseminating research findings should be found. Only then will the work of SLA researchers contribute to language education development.

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