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Introduction

In this article, I draw attention to a widening gap that has been observed between current directions in TESOL and applied linguistics research compared to language teachers' everyday practices. While applied linguistics was once a field primarily concerned with explorations of linguistic theory within the scope of language education, it seems that pedagogy is no longer the main focus of the majority of its research (Cook, 2015). While it has been argued previously that journals like *TESOL Quarterly* still contain a largely pedagogic focus (Rose & McKinley, 2017), increasingly TESOL research has become more conceptual, theoretical, and written for a researcher readership, rather than directed at practitioners. In a recent special issue of *Applied Linguistics*, Kramsch (2015) observed a widened gap between applied linguistics researchers and practitioners, primarily due to intellectualization within the field. I would argue that a similar observation can be made of TESOL research. The result is a strengthening of the so-called 'ivory tower' within academia, where many TESOL researchers mingle in an isolated academic community 'above', while the majority of teachers 'below' are distanced from research and disempowered within research agenda setting.

In this article I propose a number of resolutions to dismantle (or at least lower) the ivory tower in a bid to increase the role of teachers within TESOL research. First, I call for more teaching-informed research to disrupt the current unidirectional flow of knowledge between teachers and researchers. Second, I call on gatekeepers of research (editors and reviewers) to play a more supportive role in ensuring

classroom-based research is valued for its inherent ecological validity. Third, I call for the adoption of extant practices in educational research which encourage greater engagement of teachers and teacher educators in developing our knowledge base of language teaching. Finally, I call for more integration of teachers and researchers in publication activities in TESOL. These moves require a degree of activism from people working at the crossroads of teaching and research (e.g. teacher-researchers, researchers interested in teaching, language teacher educators) to reposition pedagogy at the forefront of TESOL research.

The irony of preaching from the ivory tower

The irony of this article, whereby I preach to readers about teaching issues, while embodying my current identity as an academic at a leading research university, is not lost on me. I will preface this with a degree of transparency about my own teacher-researcher identity and my original intentions for writing this article. While I have been an academic for the past seven years, I was a language teacher for the 14 years preceding this, so have always viewed myself as a teacher first and researcher second. And it is from this identity that I write this paper. When I first ventured into academia, I was often bemused by certain researchers talking about what *should* happen in language classrooms, when it was apparent that many of these researchers had little first-hand experience of actual language teaching. This critique is especially relevant to researchers exploring pedagogical, rather than theoretical or conceptual, issues in language learning.

Now, as the course director of an in-service TESOL programme that is aimed at working language teachers returning to study, I am reminded daily of my own past cynicism, in that the teachers on my programme constantly question the relevance of much applied linguistics research for their current teaching practices. This article is written from my own identity as a teacher-researcher, who has metaphorically climbed the ivory tower, but who looks longingly back to my years of classroom-based research now that I have no language classroom of my own. While this position might be met with scepticism from some readers, hopefully this dual identity can also offer insight into what researchers can offer teachers, and more importantly, what teachers can offer researchers. For a researcher perspective on this topic, see McKinley (2019).

The need for a bi-directional flow between researchers and teachers

First, I see a clear imbalance at the moment in TESOL research where there is greater emphasis on research-informed teaching compared to teaching-informed research. Those occupying the ivory tower are often seen to devolve their theoretical wisdom to teachers to then integrate into their practice, but rarer are cases where teachers have an influential flow of knowledge back to the researchers to inform the field's future research agenda.

A recent study by Marsden and Kasproicz (2017) explored the flow between published research and language teaching, finding very limited exposure to research by teachers, and a disconnect between professional and academic publications. Their report concluded that "the emerging picture is rather bleak" (p. 613). Some of this lack of engagement with research might be explained by the fact that much

research is locked behind expensive journal pay walls, restricting access to those not working in academic institutions. Some of this lack might also be explained by the fact that many teachers do not see current research as a means “to solve the problems of their practice” (p. Kramsch, 2015, p. 459). Teachers, instead, turn to professional publications—written for and by teachers. The sad result is a research community that talks to other researchers and a teaching community that talks to other teachers.

This is not to suggest that research is being completely ignored by teachers. In fact, in most teaching contexts there are active communities of research-interested teachers, eager to put new ideas into practice. The publication *Knowledge Mobilization in TESOL* (Anwaruddin, 2019) is a recent example of reporting on such practices, and provides evidence of some flow of research into practices, and then the reporting of such practices for further knowledge creation. However, to truly disrupt the unidirectional flow of ideas, it is imperative that such practices are read by researchers. For this to occur, such practices need to be more present and visible in research journals, which are aimed at researchers. In these spaces researchers often talk about a need for research-informed teachers (often encased in sections of research publications called ‘*pedagogical implications*’) but rarer is there space for discussion of teaching-informed research.

As McKinley (2019) observes, while TESOL was traditionally a discipline led by teachers, they have increasingly felt disenfranchised from major decisions that have shaped their profession. Reflecting on the last major paradigm shift in language teaching, *communicative language teaching*, Medgyes (1986) noted at the time that there was a high level of resentment from teachers. He argued that teachers’ experiences and desires in terms of classroom practice were not considered when centralised researchers lobbied for a major change that would eventually underpin curriculum planning within their contexts. Medgyes argued that many teachers at the time felt that communicative language teaching ideology was forced onto the TESOL profession without participation in the research process from the teachers themselves. This resulted in a relatively slow uptake of communicative approaches in many parts of the world, brought into action through teacher education. Swan (2015) concurs referring to a “mismatch between what the student teachers have been taught, and what they have to face in their teaching environments” (p. 65). While communicative language teaching was an ideologically well-reasoned idea, it was not a one-size fits all approach. For teachers working in an exam-based culture, the approach did not fit curricula outcomes, and teaching time was inadequate to develop meaningful communication skills, requiring teachers to abandon “practices that are part of their own educational culture” (Swan, 2015, p. 65).

To avoid such situations, theory development that revolves around teaching practices needs to involve teachers; and better-still, be informed by teaching practices. Recently Torshizi (2018) has recommended that “teachers could provide researchers with real issues and contextual problems of classroom to be examined and addressed in their studies” (p. 576). This would better ensure real-world issues impacted by shifts in theoretical perspective are considered during the testing and development of new ideas. Currently in TESOL we are witnessing a wave of new theory surrounding teaching, (e.g. translanguaging, ELF-aware pedagogy) but many of these ideas are generated by researchers, and are yet to be accompanied by a

matching volume of teacher input on how new perspectives can improve their language teaching practices. Current TESOL research exemplifies an imbalance of power in terms of who shapes the research agenda: research aims to dictate the 'what and how' of teaching, but teaching issues play a minimal role in dictating the 'what and how' of research.

The need for value to be placed on research with teacher involvement

Action research is one such way for teachers to gain more power within TESOL research, as their very involvement in research is central to the methodology. Action research empowers teachers to examine their own pedagogical practices, requiring "a dual commitment to both participation and action... done with, rather than on, the participant" (Dick & Greenwood, 2015 p. 195). It is a methodology that cannot be achieved without practitioner involvement at its decision-making core. Teachers, however, are busy people, whose professional success is evaluated on teaching outcomes, rather than their research activity. Therefore, it may be the responsibility of TESOL researchers to forge partnerships with teachers to conduct more action research. Researchers can help to shape a study's methodology in consultation with the teachers' needs, and to also lead on the write up of the results, and both parties can ensure the research is shared on both professional and research platforms. It is unfortunate, however, that in many academic circles, action research is not valued as much as other methods, due both to a perceived lack of generalizability of the results and to contextual differences across classrooms.

In order to make pedagogically-grounded research more available in TESOL, there is a need for gatekeepers of research (editors and reviewers) to play a more supportive role in ensuring classroom-based research is valued. The practical value of 'real-world' research needs to be viewed in terms of its richness in ecological validity: that is, classroom research is a valid reflection of real-world practices, which are not found in sanitized experiments, which are still positioned as the gold-standard of research. Despite positivist views that such research can be perceived as methodologically 'messy', the practices that make classroom research 'messy' are the very reasons it should be valued.

One way to shift emphasis of value in research is to introduce 'real-world' criteria for research published in journals that are positioned as outlets of professionally-relevant research. Gutiérrez & Penuel (2014) call for the addition of 'relevance' as a criterion for rigor in educational research. They argue for a shift in focus of research efforts "away from innovations designed to be implemented with fidelity in a single context and toward cross-setting interventions that leverage diversity (rather than viewing it as a deficit)" (p. 22). The addition of relevance criteria within peer evaluation procedures of research would highlight ecological validity as a strength of classroom-based research. This would be one way to increase the volume of classroom research in journals with pedagogy at their core, and would help to reclaim a space where pedagogically-grounded research is highly valued.

The need for greater engagement of teacher educators

Third, I call for the adoption of extant practices in educational research which encourage greater engagement of teachers and teacher educators in developing our

knowledge base of language teaching education. One opportunity for work in this vein is to leverage the unique perspectives of those whose identity straddles the research and teaching domains. Here I refer to language teacher educators who work with teachers in a research domain, and who are in a unique position to link their in-depth research knowledge with pedagogical practices, and to work with those entrenched in (or about to enter) the teaching profession.

Peercy and Sharkey (2018) suggest “that a deeper understanding of the teacher educator as scholar, as practitioner, as researcher, is critical to the LTE knowledge base” (p. 2). The authors lobby for greater use of the methodological framework of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP), as a way to engage in research that has pedagogical practice at its core:

S-STEP is a methodology that draws upon a variety of research frameworks and methods, including narrative, case study, (auto)ethnography, and action research. It employs ‘traditional’ qualitative data sources (including journaling, videotapes of teaching, interviews, teaching artefacts), as well as less common data sources... to explore questions about one’s practice (Peercy & Sharkey, 2018, p. 2)

While the acceptance of S-STEP methodology in research can be found in the wider field of teacher education over the past decades (e.g. Loughran, 2004), it has yet to make a major impact in language teaching research.

Further to this, I would argue that in-service teachers returning to language teacher education are also in a unique position to conduct research that weds theory to practice, as they bring with them years of teaching experience within which to situate newly acquired research knowledge. Language teacher educators can help in-service or pre-service teachers to engage with first-hand research during and after their language teacher education, further forging ties between researchers working within academic institutions and teachers who have access to their own classrooms. In-service teachers are in a unique position to not only research themselves but to also promote more integrated research activities between teachers and researchers, which would ideally also lead to publication and visibility of such work through collaborative efforts. The experienced researcher could provide expertise on methodology, data analysis and dissemination, while the experienced teacher could provide a context-informed focus to the research, as well as play a pivotal role in data collection in their own teaching context.

Blurring the lines between teaching and research

In my call for a more balanced and teaching-informed approach to TESOL research, it is necessary to acknowledge that positive movements are being made. Many of us researchers working in TESOL are, or have been, language teachers ourselves and are supportive of blurring the lines between our teacher and researcher selves. Positive trends include recent initiatives by *TESOL Press* such as the publication *Engaging research: Transforming practices for the elementary classroom*, which reports on researcher and educator collaborative activities in the classroom. The publication uniquely provides an equal voice for the multiple partners working with young English language learners, including “a rich array of pre- and in-service teachers, graduate students, and university-based researchers” (Sharkey, 2018, p. 1). The creation of *TESOL Journal* as a complement to *TESOL Quarterly* is a further

example of increased avenues for practitioners to engage and report on research, however one might argue that it also facilitates a further separation of 'researchers' and 'researcher-teachers' by creating separate publications for both identities.

The journal *Language Teaching* is seeking new ways to blur the divide between research and teaching in its journal, by piloting a new type of article where a prominent researcher and a practicing teacher discuss the relevance, or possibly lack thereof, of a piece of applied linguistics or second language acquisition research. As journal editor Graeme Porte states, "This is an attempt to bring the two of them together and provide sound suggestions which at the same time might help bring the teacher closer to the academic discourse and research as well as help the researcher understand better the teacher's problems and how their own research might be tweaked to reach out to the practitioner" (personal communication). Such innovations are a positive sign of key research gatekeepers trying to dismantle the ivory tower from within. In 2016, RELC journal added a section titled *Innovations in Practice*, which specifically provided a space for practitioners to share contextually-situated, but theoretically-supported, innovative classroom practices. This is a further example of an editorial effort to provide more visibility to teacher-led innovations within a research domain.

S-STEP-like methodologies have also made inroads into some top-tier TESOL journals, increasing their visibility to researchers. Casanave (2012) published a self-study narrative of her experiences of learning Japanese, drawing on eight years of her own personal diaries. While written from the perspective of a learner, it was Casanave's in-depth understanding of language learning research as a teacher and teacher educator that provided her the knowledge to interpret her own learning processes in unique ways, adding to our understanding of language learning motivation. In a later reflection, Casanave (2017) recounts her difficulties getting her diary study published, overcoming multiple rejections and going through 20 versions of the paper with reviewer feedback. This is an indication that while it is possible to have such research published in coveted research journals, it is not necessarily a smooth journey. Emboldened by Casanave's work, I recently dabbled in a duoethnography (or joint autoethnography) with another teacher-researcher, where we jointly explored our lived experiences of teaching English as an international language in Japan and Thailand (Rose & Montakantiwong, 2018). It was my first foray into reflective research of this kind, and while I was liberated by the experience, I was also nervous about how such a methodology might be viewed with scepticism by the research community.

Despite positive efforts, there are structurally-manifested barriers for those working in higher education, which drive a wedge between practitioners and researchers, thereby strengthening the ivory tower. In many institutions there are administrative divisions between people hired to conduct intellectual research on language learning, and people hired to teach language itself. While some institutions do have strong ties between applied linguistics researchers, and, for example, EAP teachers working within the same university, in many cases there may be little opportunity for the two communities to come together, despite both working to solve language learning problems. Because of these structures, change might be difficult, but I strongly believe both teachers and researchers must collaboratively be the agents of change. Otherwise the result may be an increasingly irrelevant body of TESOL

research in terms of actual uptake by teachers, as well as real-world teaching problems that fail to attract research attention.

Another barrier to successful collaboration of researchers and teachers is that teachers are evaluated according to their professional practices, and thus engaging in, and publishing, research is not a main priority. Many teaching contracts do require research engagement, and many institutions do not value teachers' role in research. For researchers, however, this type of collaborative activity—rich in impact—should be highly valued. In order for TESOL research to become more relevant to teaching, advocates in the research community need to actively forge stronger links with teachers on the ground. We currently see two common forms of classroom-based research in TESOL: 1) Researchers who independently plan a study and conduct their studies in classrooms with institutional and teacher permission; 2) Researcher-practitioners who conduct action research within their own classrooms, and report on this. Rarer is research that has been jointly shaped by researchers and teachers, with a shared vision and shared authorship such as that found in Sharkey (2018), and it is more of this third type of research that is needed to ensure teaching relevance. While researchers may need to take a leading role in shaping the research methodology, linking ideas to current theory, and writing up the joint research, the inclusion of teachers as co-creators (and co-authors) of the research at each stage of the process will help to better ensure TESOL research has greater real-world relevance, thus enhancing its ecological validity. When collaboration occurs, it is vital that both parties meet on equal footing, and research is teaching-informed, thereby (re)harnessing the largely untapped knowledge that teachers can bring to developing a much-needed research agenda in TESOL.

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