Summary/Commentary

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Session Title: Research Fair: Issues, Approaches, and Challenges in TESOL

Presenters: Amanda Kibler, University of Virginia; Mario Lopez-Gopar, UABJO, Mexico; Peter Sayer, University of Texas, San Antonio; Diane Dagenais, Simon Fraser University, Canada; and Michael Legutke, Justus Liebig University, Germany

Content Area: None

Session Type: TESOL in Focus

Summary

This presentation addressed the research-teaching divide. The idea is that there should not be a divide because research should inform practice and practice should inform research. The presentation was divided into four parts. The introduction was given by Mario Lopez-Gopar, who introduced the panel. Then Peter Sayer, Diane Dagenais, and Michael Legutke briefly talked about their research and about different research issues to consider. For the last 20 minutes we discussed our research at our institutions in small break-out groups.

Peter Sayer

Peter Sayer has done a lot of EFL work in Mexico. For him, research is not only about modifying a dominant theory of teaching or second language acquisition. Research can also start with descriptions of what teachers and students are doing. Then there can be follow-up questions to explain what was observed. This is a kind of "bottom up" research that consists of ethnographic descriptions of what happens in the classroom. Sometimes teachers bring up questions and problems they are experiencing. The researcher, then, helps the teacher answer the questions and solve the problems. This is research!

The approach is inductive and does not begin with predetermined categories, making this kind of research more qualitative than quantitative. Any theory of language pedagogy or second language acquisition will have to account for the descriptions and observations that researchers make, so this kind of research is at the heart of the knowledge of our field.

Diane Dagenais

Diane Dagenais is a French speaking Canadian who now lives in Vancouver. Dagenais' research agenda includes: (1) identifying multilingual and multimodal competencies, (2) designing multilingual and multimodal competencies, and (3) refining methods for video analysis for policy makers to give a realistic picture of language learning so we can have realistic expectations of our students. Dagenais is interested in translanguaging, which refers to code-switching, code blending, and Interlanguage[3] characteristics.

Dagenais promotes multilingualism and translanguaging and notes that non-target-like forms of the language, especially when written, are not acceptable in educational institutions but are a necessary part of the process of language learning.

Michael Legutke

For Legutke, Clarke's (1994) TESOL Quarterly article is a landmark article for the discussion on the research-teaching divide. Legutke has 7 key issues and questions relevant to bridging the research-teaching divide. These issues and questions are for faculty to address, so no definitive answers were given.

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[3] I noticed Dagenais did not use the word Interlanguage but seemed to describe Interlanguage characteristics in the speech of students she works with.

1. *A Community of Teachers and Researchers*: How do you establish a community of teachers and researchers where we meet face-to-face and "speak the same language?"
2. *Sustainability*: How do we sustain the community of teachers and researchers?
3. *Process of Collaborative Inquiry*: How do we start a process of collaborative inquiry where the classroom is the center of discussion/research?
4. *Diversity of Interests*: How do we bring together the interests of teachers and the interests of researchers?
5. *Joint Understanding of Key Concepts*: How do we arrive at an understanding of key concepts that is understood and valued equally by researchers and teachers?
6. *Notion of Change and Teachers' Professional Confidence*: How do we deal with the changing profession and our levels of confidence that get affected by change? I think we have a structural advantage here because we accept the idea of professional development.
7. *Professional Politics*: How do we bring TESOL and AAAL closer together? Researchers do not want to be involved in the messy work of teaching and teachers do not want to be challenged to change by new research.

Break-out Groups

In our group I brought up our e-journal, *ILI*. I explained that we are interested in capturing and sharing tacit knowledge, the kind of knowledge that a teacher acquires over years of experience. Our focus is the AEC and our main question is, "how is TESL practiced and interpreted at the University of Kansas?" By staying focused on our institution, we can keep the quality of submissions high because we have experienced faculty who know much about the mission, goals, instruction, assessment, technology, and institutional history of the Applied English Center. One Japanese scholar said her department had something similar. The facilitator of our group, Diane Dagenais, liked the idea and wanted to bring it back to her department. She said the graduate students had something like *ILI* but the faculty did not. The idea of an in-house journal was very well-received and I learned that different versions of in-house e-journals are being created at different institutions as one way to bridge the research-teaching divide.

Commentary

This presentation made clear that teachers can also be researchers. Noted by others and restated in Clarke (1994) "…all teachers have theories" and "[g]ood teachers are scholars by definition: They pose questions, test assumptions, revise beliefs, and proceed based on what they have learned" (p. 22). Unfortunately, theories of language pedagogy do not come from classroom teachers because language teachers have little time to formalize their theories, which puts them at a disadvantage to other professionals who theorize about language instruction but do not teach language classes. A point to be made here is that no fully adequate theory of language instruction can come from another discipline. It must come from language teachers because they are most familiar with every detail of the practice. This means that for a comprehensive theory of language teaching to emerge, language teachers must be significantly involved.

We at the AEC are dealing with the research-teaching divide in a slightly different sense. We focus on professional development. We understand the importance of professional development and encourage instructors to pursue professional development activities, which could include research. Language instruction, however, is a highly time-consuming activity. There is often little time at the end of the week to devote to significant reading or writing in the profession. Financial restrictions on travel to conferences and workshops also make it difficult for instructors to participate in professional development activities.

To encourage faculty to continue with their professional development, we have year-end self-evaluation forms that ask faculty to report on their professional development activities. This is a kind of "stick" approach to professional development in the sense that there is pressure to do the activities in an environment where teachers have little extra time.

We need a carrot. To encourage faculty development, it may be worth exploring a Senior Lecturer position at the AEC. The AEC currently has no Senior Lecturer position although such a position exists at the university.[4]

A Senior Lecturer at the AEC would have to have a long, distinguished teaching career at the AEC. In addition, a Senior Lecturer might also need to have a record of professional development and accomplishments that goes beyond the usual teaching duties. This might include getting another graduate degree in a related field, significant experience leading workshops in language teaching, publications, or significant active participation in a related professional organization. The idea is to acknowledge hardworking, devoted faculty for excellence in teaching and for significant professional growth over a sustained period.

References

Clarke, M. A. (1994). The Dysfunctions of the Theory/Practice Discourse. *TESOL Quarterly 28*(1), 9-26.

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[4] For more information see Guidelines on Academic Appointments in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences http://policy.ku.edu/CLAS/academic-appointments.