A Bridge Too Far?

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I applaud ZhaoHong Han’s call for more measured and varied presentations of pedagogical implications reflective of the actual likelihood of a research article’s pedagogical relevance. It is probably easy for all of us who read research to think of research articles that seem to reach for...
pedagogical implications not clearly motivated by the research results or that read like afterthoughts the authors would rather not have thought of at all. In articulating what many of us have probably privately felt about pedagogical implications but not publicly expressed, Han has provided stimulus for a conversation the field needs to have, a conversation that can be entered from a number of vantage points, including pedagogy, research, and the profession at large.

From a pedagogical perspective, I suspect that few would disagree that cautiousness is needed in offering pedagogical implications. Let’s hope, however, that authors do not become so cautious that they are wary of making any claims of possible connections between research and pedagogy. There is already a significant, perhaps growing, divide between research and pedagogy in our field (witness, e.g., the temporal and physical distancing between the more research-oriented AAAL and more pedagogically oriented TESOL conferences, and the attendant decreased interaction between participants in the two). Many of us involved in graduate TESOL education work hard to persuade our students of the benefits of research-informed classroom practice, yet we all, faculty and especially former students, know the reality—that once in the field, teachers, with more students than discretionary hours in the day, may have little time and energy for keeping up with research that could inform their decision making. If the research they do find time to read makes little effort to speak to them, then it should come as no surprise if they have little incentive to read more of it. There have, of course, been notable efforts over the past decade or more to close the research(er)–practice(ioner) gap by encouraging more classroom-based and -oriented research, with more obvious relevance to teachers, and by urging teachers to view themselves as researchers (e.g., Crookes, 1993, 2003). The divide is not lessened, however, if teacher or action research is perceived as not real research but something that teachers do for the sole purpose of reflecting on their own practice in their own classrooms. As Casanave (2001) has observed, “It is not enough to know thyself” (p. 15), especially if one does not also look beyond the realm of personal or close colleagues’ classroom experience. It is interesting that, although there has been much discussion of teachers as researchers and critical consumers of research, there has been less public discussion of the need for language researchers to be, or be informed by, language teachers.1 If researchers are themselves far removed from second language (L2) classroom experience, it may indeed appear “pretentious,” to borrow Han’s term, or presumptuous, for them to advise classroom practitioners on what to do or not do in their classrooms. This apparent presumptuous-

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1 Teacher cognition is, though, a rapidly growing area of interest among researchers (see Borg, 2003).
ness is not, however, an argument for absolving researchers from responsibility for considering the possible value of their work for the language learners and teachers who might benefit from it, but instead a reason for more collaboration between language teachers and researchers as professionals who can inform each other in research and teaching.

Many researchers are, no doubt, well aware of not just how partial their knowledge of language pedagogy is but also how partial the state of knowledge in their research area is as well, and thus with good reason they may only reluctantly play the pedagogical advisory roles that journals often want them to take on. As Han notes, SLA is a young field; much about second language learning (or acquisition) remains un- or underinvestigated. At the same time, from an epistemological standpoint, we might well ask when knowledge in any human science will ever be anything but partial (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000). Teachers are faced with making countless pedagogical decisions, with or without complete confidence in their efficacy, every time they enter a classroom, and, it’s worth noting, second languages are learned, and have been for millennia. This is not to suggest that the contributions of ongoing L2 research are not needed, that we need not aim for more efficient and effective teaching and learning (though it may suggest that teacher cognition deserves more credit than it often receives). Let’s not forget that when teachers find the time to read what research has to offer, they bring to their reading a fund of knowledge based on prior experience, prior reading, and, not infrequently, prior classroom-based research, but, perhaps most important, also current awareness of their local pedagogical situations, all of which place them in a strong position to judge the relevance and transferability of researchers’ pedagogical suggestions. What’s missing, however, and what research writers can proffer, as Han’s comments suggest, is close knowledge of the researchers’ own particular projects and of how their findings help advance (if they do) a broader research agenda that may be meaningful for pedagogy—knowledge that can be shared in the research article’s pedagogical implications section and thus contribute to the joint pedagogical knowledge construction of the field.

Of course, L2 research projects actually exist on a continuum of objectives, from the more theoretical to the more pedagogical (Ellis, 2006). Researchers primarily concerned with linguistic theory building may not anticipate an audience of teachers when they carry out and write up their research, well aware that their projects may have only the most tenuous connection to pedagogy. Given the wide variety of publishing forums now available, with more than 50 applied linguistics journals now in print (Braine, 2003), researchers can choose from a range of possible audiences, from the more theoretically inclined and highly specialized to a broader readership that includes both researchers and teachers. If au-
thors aim for publication in *TESOL Quarterly*, with its commitment to bridging theory and practice as the only refereed journal published by the largest professional organization for teachers of English to speakers of other languages, then the choice of a diverse audience has been made. Being responsive as an author to the spirit, not just the letter, of the *TESOL Quarterly* commitment to readers and the profession may well entail considering pedagogy early in one’s research plans (long before the implications are written up), conceiving of research problems as nested in a number of research and real world contexts, and contemplating the needs of an audience that includes those eager to make the most of our field’s partial knowledge on Monday morning.

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REFERENCES


