

Forum

Towards Rectifying the Power Imbalance between Teachers and Researchers

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With an increasing number of researchers who have called attention to the power imbalance between teachers and researchers, the last two decades have witnessed a dramatic rise in the popularity of action research as a way to empower teachers by enabling them to conduct context-specific classroom research. Although not unchallenged, numerous contributions that action research makes to improving classroom practices have been well documented, and teachers are continually encouraged to do action research. However, the dearth of respectable international journals by which the findings of action research can be disseminated disheartens those who conduct small-scale classroom research that deals with context-specific questions for which no established learning or language theories may have clear, immediate pedagogical implications. With an example of such action research, this paper argues that seemingly purely practical action research studies that address specific local questions, when taken together, may eventually lead to new principles of language teaching. Before the renowned international journals, which serve the role of professional gatekeepers, stop insisting that every practical paper be grounded in theory, the power imbalance between teachers and researchers will never be rectified.

Key words: action research, power imbalance, linking theory with practice

THE POWER IMBALANCE

Bridging the gap between research and pedagogy has always been one of the main concerns of the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL. Many applied linguists—Canale and Swain (1980), Long (1981), Krashen and Terrell (1983), and Schmidt (1990), just to name a few—explicitly or implicitly stated various pedagogical applications of their research, some of which have immensely influenced the way teachers conduct their classes. However, there is an undeniable inefficacy in bringing the findings of SLA research studies into the classroom. According to Kumaravadivelu (1994), one reason for the disconnect between theory and practice is that most methods are not derived from classroom experience and experimentation because their proponents are not practitioners but theorizers.

Calling attention to the power imbalance between theorizers, who have “traditionally occupied the power center of language pedagogy,” and practitioners, who have been “relegated to the disempowered periphery,” Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 29-30) asserts that practitioners need to be empowered so that they can generate “location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative practices.” In the same vein, Stewart (2006) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the value of “localized teachers’ research” (p. 427) and argues that we should reject the term *teacher-researcher collaboration*, which marginalizes “one collaborator who does teaching” and lionizes “another who knows about and does research” (p. 421). Calling attention to the power imbalance between teachers and researchers and asserting the importance of empowering teachers by advocating teachers’ research are indeed the first steps necessary to rectify the power imbalance skewed towards researchers. But can they really bring about the change long overdue in the TESOL organization, where teachers still have to “battle for legitimacy and professional status equal to that of researchers” (Stewart, 2006, p. 422)?

In this article, with an example of action research that I conducted and subsequently wrote up not as a researcher but as a teacher, who may not be

versed in recent developments in theory, I will argue that seemingly purely practical action research studies that address specific local questions may eventually lead to new principles of language teaching and that before respectable international journals stop insisting that every practical paper be grounded in theory, the power imbalance between teachers and researchers will never be rectified.

ACTION RESEARCH: EMPOWERING PRACTITIONERS?

One way to empower practitioners is to encourage them to conduct action research, loosely defined as “a small-scale intervention in the real world (for example, a classroom) and close observation of the results of this intervention” (Brown & Rodgers, 2002, p. 287). Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 33) also advocates action research when he emphasizes “teacher autonomy,” arguing that it enables practitioners to “self-observe, self-analyze, and self-evaluate their own teaching practice with a view to effecting desired changes.”

In an era where the illusion of the best method has been shattered and teaching is considered highly contextualized practice (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003), the legitimacy and effectiveness of action research, which has seen “a dramatic rise in popularity since 1980” (Bailey, 2001, p. 495), seems unquestionable. After all, carried out by teachers in their own classrooms, action research plays an indispensable role in answering specific local questions (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). As Burns (2003) observes, however, many in the field of TESOL still harbor doubts about the value of action research, in spite of the evidence for a positive impact that action research has on teacher researchers (e.g. Burns, 1999; Edge, 2001; Freeman, 1998). Burns (2003) also lists a number of questions that those who believe in the value of action research should address, one of which concerns where and how action research studies and findings are to be disseminated.

Indeed, the importance of disseminating the findings of any research studies cannot be overstated. Researchers make contributions to their fields of study by sharing the findings of their research and gain prominence in their respective field by getting their work published in peer-reviewed journals. After all, it is publication that confers researchers “the status of *expert* on teaching and language education” (Stewart, 2006, p. 422). Likewise, if teacher researchers are to be encouraged to conduct action research, there should be respected outlets by which they can disseminate their work. Respected not only by teachers but also by researchers!¹

MY FIRST ACTION RESEARCH

Unlike other classroom research techniques that may require considerable training, action research entails only simple procedural steps, which Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 9-10) present as four “moments,” or four fundamental aspects, in action research:

- Moment I. Develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening.
- Moment II. Act to implement the plan.
- Moment III. Observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which occurs.
- Moment IV. Reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of cycles.

As I was nearing my career as a full-time EAP instructor in the spring of 2006, I prepared a manuscript detailing the action research that I started in 2001. As a recent Ph.D. in applied linguistics, I had spent three years teaching EAP full-time at a major university on the East Coast in the U.S. before I took on an assistant professorship in the fall of 2006 in Korea. I

started teaching university-level EAP writing classes as a graduate student who was trained in content-based instruction, and one of the first things I noticed was that many of my students had a difficult time organizing their body paragraphs.

This problem can be attributed to many sources, but the main culprit is the inadequate discussion of body paragraphs in writing books. Most writing books intended for college-level students—e.g. *Independent Writing* (O'Donnell & Paiva, 1993), *Text & Thought* (Lester & Resnick, 2003), *The New St. Martin's Handbook* (Lundsford & Connors, 1999), and *Rules for Writers* (Hacker, 2009)—discuss the essential elements and various styles of a body paragraph in academic writing. However, they do not teach students the necessary steps involved in effectively showing that their argument is based on what they have learned in class by incorporating information from class readings and lectures.

At first, I was working with my students in individual conferences, devoting much of the time in each conference to helping them organize their arguments into coherent body paragraphs. After a while, I began to see an effective organizational pattern of the body paragraphs in argument papers that my students were writing, which I wrote up as a four-step guideline (Moment I). By following the four-step guideline, my students were able to put together coherent body paragraphs without my individual attention (Moment II). After a few quarters of teaching the four-step guideline, I began to notice that although the body paragraphs that my students were producing were coherent, their topic sentences lacked cohesive devices (Moment III). Consequently, I had to modify my instruction by adding a lesson on effective transition (Moment IV).²

My action research did not stop at developing a guideline for writing an academic body paragraph and simply teaching it to my students. Having observed the unexpected negative effect that my students' body paragraphs lacked cohesion, I revised my instruction to include a lesson on effective transition and I repeated this cycle many times over a period of five years. This cyclical repetition, Burns (2003) argues, is an indispensable process in that it strengthens the rigor of action research by allowing teacher researchers

to use the evidence for more effective forms of practice from previous cycles, not from intuition.

After I completed my action research, I shared it with other teachers who were in similar educational contexts at a regional and a national TESOL conference. Having received encouraging comments from the teachers who attended my presentations, I wrote up my experience as an action research paper and submitted the manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal whose main readers are teachers of English as a second or foreign language. It was, however, summarily rejected because it read “a bit too practical.”

LINKING THEORY WITH PRACTICE: THE MANDATE FROM THE ELITE?

The comments from a reviewer, which read as follows, came about four months after I submitted the manuscript (the name of the journal has been replaced with *Journal*):

Journal aims to link theory with practice in our field. This means that work reported in the journal has to have a clear and demonstrated connection with established principles of language teaching and must show how these have been applied or modified in some practical context. The work is interesting in a highly practical sense, but it does not show the connection to underlying theories of language or of learning which our readers would expect. In its present form, the author may find that a teacher’s newsletter / magazine with a purely practical focus is the best outlet for the article.

Knowing that I could find some theory of language or learning vaguely related to my action research, I sent the editor an email to ask if I could submit a revised version with more theory included. The editor responded by saying that I would have to write a brand new article in order to meet the reviewer’s comments.

Yes, I admit that my manuscript was thin on theory—and intentionally so because my action research dealt with a context-specific problem with which most theories of language or learning do not have a clear connection. As a recent Ph.D. in applied linguistics, I knew I could somehow ground my action research in some theory. For example, I could have framed my action research, i.e. teaching academic body paragraphs to undergraduate students, as an instance of a content-based approach (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003) or as an instance of a genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2003) in this “post-process” era (Atkinson, 2003). But I wanted to write up my first action research study not as a researcher but as a teacher, who may not be familiar with recent developments in theory.

Having been a co-editor of the official newsletter of an Interest Section of the TESOL organization for three years, I also knew that my manuscript was too long for a newsletter. Moreover, I believed that my action research was just as useful to other teachers as any other classroom research that shows “the connection to underlying theories of language or of learning.” I understand the important role that articles with “a clear and demonstrated connection with established principles of language teaching” play in linking theory with practice. But is it really the case that every single practical article must show some connection to established principles of language teaching or underlying theories of language or learning, which are often criticized as “too far removed from teachers’ and learners’ immediate concerns” (Brown & Rodgers, 2002, p. 79)? Moreover, why should teacher researchers who autonomously conduct their action research settle for a newsletter or a magazine article, which is not an outlet sought by the elite researchers who control the extant knowledge base in TESOL?

RECTIFYING THE POWER IMBALANCE

Every methodology book that I have read discusses the importance and benefits of action research (Brown, 2007; Carter & Nunan, 2001; Celce-

Murcia, 2001; Gebhard, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Researchers advise teachers to do action research, citing various reasons why teachers, who are “not given financial or strategic support, release time, or even recognition for conducting research,” should get involved in language classroom research (Bailey, 2001, p. 496). They assert that “teachers *are* researchers and are charged with the responsibility of reflecting on their own practice” (Brown, 2007, p. 42). They eloquently argue that action research empowers teachers and plays an important role in rectifying the power imbalance skewed towards researchers.

But if well-known international journals make it almost impossible for teachers to get their work published by insisting that their action research be grounded in theory, how can teachers be empowered in academia, where power and influence are determined by the number of important publications that one has authored? I understand that there have recently been a growing number of international peer-reviewed journals that do publish action research and even have sections dedicated specifically for teacher research—for instance, *ELT Journal*, *Language Teaching Research*, *Educational Action Research*—but they all require submissions to be linked with theory by showing how they converge with, diverge from, or simply fail to match existing theory, and not existing classroom practices.

Admittedly, any attempt to rectify the power imbalance between teachers and researchers also needs to address the imperative of ensuring the quality of action research, in terms of the research procedures used and the ways that the procedures relate to the substantial problems, such as the teaching of writing, being investigated. Ensuring the quality of action research, however, will be taken care of on its own accord if international journals start rejecting action research studies not because they have not shown the connection to “underlying theories of language or of learning” but because there is a fundamental problem with the action research procedures reported in them—for example, the four “moments” outlined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)—or because the studies have not followed the procedures as rigorously and scrupulously as they should have.

Although some journals publish only purely theoretical articles, it is unlikely that any respected peer-reviewed journal will be committed to publishing only purely practical articles. A number of journals claim that their purpose is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Some of them mainly publish theoretical articles with pedagogical implications and others practical articles with theoretical underpinnings. In order to encourage teacher researchers to conduct more action research studies, these journals should stop insisting on the always-accepted-as-an-unqualified mandate that practice be linked with theory and start respecting the merits of purely practical articles that foster better classroom practices and, when taken together, may eventually lead to better established principles of teaching. Before this happens, the power imbalance between teachers and researchers will never be rectified.

Endnotes

1. One such publication was *TESOL Journal*, which ceased publication in 2003 (but began its online publication in 2010) despite its popularity among both teachers and researchers. *Essential Teacher*, which replaced *TESOL Matters* and *TESOL Journal*, had not been well received by researchers in the TESOL organization. In a business meeting of an interest section at an annual TESOL convention that I attended a few years ago, one researcher went so far as to say that she considers the publication an affront to her profession.

2. A revised manuscript of my action research described here eventually appeared in the journal *English Teaching*, published by the Korea Association of Teachers of English.

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