

## The Paradox of Harmonizing Teaching and Research in a Research-Dominated System of Education

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### Abstract

*The EFL population in Iran has been burgeoning in recent years, and hundreds of enthusiastic Iranian students enter universities every year, hoping to pursue their future in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. Along with this, language educators and learners are barraged with cutting edge research in the field, much of which has little instructional efficacy. An obvious consequence of this is a superfluous amount of focus on theoretical knowledge rather than the practical applications, and research now dominates contemporary EFL at higher education level in Iran. One reason for this imbalance and mismatch between purely theoretical research and practical applications might be rooted in Massification; the increase in EFL population, which is apparently making it virtually impossible to pay proper attention to the application of theory in practice. Simply put, it seems we are gradually failing to remember that the ultimate goal of all research is to improve the quality of what is done in the language classroom. We are drowned in statistical analyses without understanding the implications of our findings in real situations. While arguing for a combination of theory and practice, the present paper intends to discuss the possible options for bridging the gap between the two, while being mindful to keep both on the front burner.*

**Keywords:** *Massification, EFL, Theory, Practice, application;*

### 1. An Overview

The research-practice divide seems to have become the spicy food and the buzz-phrase of many conferences and is vastly disputed in academic circles. It is not a new issue though, and many scholars have been repeatedly voicing their concern for some years now, and as we advance in time, it seems to grow even stronger, and the need to bridge this gap seems to be more critical than ever before.

However, the enthusiasm to bridge the gap seems to be greater in teachers/practitioners than in researchers/theoreticians. This might be indirectly translated to a lack of interest or even reticence on the part of the researcher community to fill this gap; as if they do not regard the issue as crucial as it is for practitioners.

In ELT, one reason for this mismatch is that many researchers are drowned so deeply in their research that they hardly find the time to contemplate on the ways to minimize the gap between research and practice. They occasionally argue that it is the duty of practitioners and teachers to decide on the how's of applying research findings in practice. They also complain that teachers/practitioners very often expect researchers to dumb down and oversimplify their research findings and make them more digestible so as to provide quick and easy solutions for classroom application. Teachers, on the other hand, complain that very often they are even further puzzled by the cryptic findings of most research and find the results barely discernible let alone applicable. They find most research findings inaccessible due to their convoluted jargon and obscure statistics.

A major consequence of this rather poor connection between TEFL research and practice in Iran has been manifested in our MA theses and some of our PhD dissertations. A review of many unpublished theses reveals that many of these research attempts do not have much to offer and fail to contribute at all to the already available literature. Some are even inadequate reverberations of previous research. Nevertheless, the question of how we have to fill the gap between theory and practice does not necessarily mean that we are confronted with a conflicted educational community which is in dire need of being peaced together, rather it is a question of finding how each one of these two may contribute to the quality of the other.

The present paper intends to provide a picture of ELT research and practice in my local context, and in my educational setting, namely higher education, and discuss the issues which might very well be the case in many other contexts as well. Needless to add that the discussion by no means intends to



finger-point or blame any of the groups for the existing problems because that is definitely not the best way to find an answer.

## 2. Researcher-Practitioner Categories

In order to provide a clearer picture of the situation, a closer analysis of the researcher-practitioner types is deemed necessary. Four major groups can be identified in any discussion regarding research and practice:

1. Teacher-researchers
2. Researcher-teachers
3. Teachers
4. Researchers

The first group includes teachers who are interested in research as well and perform action research, but they are more into teaching than research. The second group are researchers who believe in order to verify their research findings, they need to be directly involved in the teaching profession. The third and the fourth groups are respectively teacher-only and researcher-only. The focus of the present paper is on the first two groups, and how to bring them together.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> groups will progress not far on their own because mere researchers believe teachers need researchers to lead them to the right path, and mere teachers think researchers need teachers to test the validity and reliability of their research findings. This can be interpreted that researchers and teachers are independent and do not need each other. They may also assume there is nothing much each can offer to the other. Medgyes (2017) for instance, argues that researchers do not have much to offer to teachers, while Paran (2017) emphasizes the positive role research and theory play in providing teachers with insights into ways of enhancing their understanding of what they do. Lourdes Ortega (2018) emphasizes that although many language teachers believe SLA research has revolutionized their outlook on teaching, there are many others who argue that SLA research has almost nothing to offer to language teachers, nothing to help them find answers to 'some of their most urgent classroom questions'.

Yet the truth is both communities need each other to reach their goals. This is not just about ELT; a simple internet search shows that this is the concern of many other fields of education and science as well.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

In any discussion regarding research and practice, two issues are often raised. The first one is related to the research-practice gap and how to bridge it, and the second issue concerns the outcomes or consequences this gap entails.

Many ELT researchers and teachers agree that the primary goal of all research is finding the best way to improve the quality of language education. However, if the immediate customers of research findings are teachers/practitioners, then how is it that the exchange of knowledge and information between them has turned into a challenge?

A prominent reason why researchers and practitioners usually find it hard to have a clear conversation is that they speak totally different discourses, and the often unnecessarily abstract jargon of research might be intimidating for teachers and obscure the effectiveness and importance of research findings. Clark (1994) for instance refers to this as the 'dysfunctional discourse of research and practice'.

The next reason for this lack of mutual understanding might be that those involved in research believe what they are doing is much harder and more time consuming than teaching, leaving them no time to consider how their findings have to be or can be applied in the classroom. This may inadvertently create the notion that researchers look down on practitioners, regarding them as inferior users of the outcome of their research.

Some research projects on the other hand make researcher-teacher connection problematic because they seem to be done simply for the sake of research, as if their findings are not supposed to be applied by anyone, just like when someone cooks a lot of food and prepares a lot of desserts without intending to feed anybody. This type of research which can rightly be titled "The-Effect-of-the-Spoon-on-the-Fork" type of research includes all research papers which are so rudimentary that even a novice practitioner/teacher can predict their results with a high degree of precision without employing unnecessarily complicated statistical computations.

An unfortunate consequence of this lack of ELT research-practice balance at higher education level in Iran has been an increasing number of MA theses (and a few PhD dissertations) which have fallen into this pit. Some local experts believe this is also the consequence of Massification; an increasing

number of TEFL students who enter the field for various reasons, and a considerable number of whom have no intention of pursuing a career related to teaching at all. They are already employed and only seek a job/salary promotion. Regarding the fact that writing a Master's thesis is part of a Master's degree, many of these students only awkwardly reduplicate/copy what others have done before them. The theses they write, mostly in the form of quantitative research, can hardly be considered a research paper at all. They simply lack scientific rigour expected from an academic endeavour. One may as well argue that these students step on the road of higher education without being adequately prepared to perform a research work.

Another reason that makes this research-practice gap wider is the socio-political orientation of education in Iran. Foreign language teaching in particular has been downgraded during the past few decades. The educational system which is highly influenced by the political system of the country, regards foreign language learning and teaching inconsequential, enough reason to deprive language teachers and language educators from all the benefits, rewards, and support available to their peers elsewhere in the world.

#### **4. What is to be done?**

The two issues presented here raise the vexed question of whether there is any way to reconcile ELT research and practice. The problem is clear, and we need expert solutions to solve it. However, no matter how trivial or significant it may seem, if one group does not try hard enough to fill this gap, we will not go even one step farther than where we are. This is an issue which calls for the close cooperation and collaboration of both parties. As long as there is not an equal consensus between the two groups regarding the problem, nothing much can be achieved.

Promoting action research is one way to bridge this gap. Teachers have to be encouraged to perform research and try to find answers to their questions with the help of researchers. In other words, they have to involve themselves more in the theoretical aspect of their profession and the 'process of knowledge generation' (Ferguson, 2005). However, without proper support from educational sponsors too, this may never happen.

Teachers who currently perform action research in Iran, do not receive much support whatsoever from anywhere, and it is entirely their own choice and personal interest to do research. These teachers are not under any pressure by their respective educational organizations to perform a research work either. Therefore, one way to bridge this gap can be supporting action research, both financially, and intellectually. Although their research endeavours may initially seem to be half-baked ideas, they have to be encouraged to step on the road.

Teachers are the carriers of information and knowledge, and they are responsible for the transfer of knowledge to their students. If students are well-equipped with knowledge and information, they will enter higher education with an adequate understanding of their role in the bigger picture of generating new knowledge. The content of that knowledge then entails a full understanding of the objectives of doing research.

What we need is research-driven teaching as well as practice-based research. Even if we regard teachers as the mere customers/consumers of research findings, it is a huge misunderstanding to think that researchers can be fully successful if they stay completely away from the practice community. If this is solved, then the second issue regarding the theses will also be solved. I would like to call this the 'Domino Effect'.

Another option can be to give up any attempts to bridge the gap and accept the current state of affairs in the ELT community, and look for other options to ameliorate the quality of what is done in the language classroom. In that case, we have relinquished our responsibilities as educators.

This debate is by no means exhaustive, and as long as the ideas for or against the argument vary widely, or the two parties involved refuse to undertake part of the responsibility to bridge this gap, the ELT community will keep on turning round a vicious circle.

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