Abstract

This paper briefly reviews literature on the topic of divergence between academic research and classroom practices in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) or English as a Second Language (ESL). The discourse related to misapplication of research and research based teaching practices can be applied more broadly to a variety of teaching areas. The overarching questions in this paper are: What guides best teaching practices? Who is educational research for? In what ways are current teaching theory and practice substantiated by relevant and carefully interpreted data derived from a variety of reliable academic studies?

Keywords: SLA Research, English as a Second Language, Second Language Acquisition
Academic Research in the Classroom

Rationale

Introduction & Statement of the Problem

As a Ph.D. student, researcher and a passionate classroom teacher, I sometimes feel as though I live a dichotomous life. Although there are intersections between these roles, the teacher role and the graduate student position often seem polarized. In theory, learning and teaching should be synonymous and complement each other; however, in practice these two spheres tend to exhibit rigid and complex criteria, and rules of engagement. The literature shows that although most teachers respect and understand the need for research, they do not use it more than their own experience to guide their teaching practice (Nassaji, 2012). Researchers like David Block (2000) assert that the reason for the absence of application of research by teachers is the large gap between second language acquisition (SLA) research and pedagogy. This lack of SLA research’s applicability to pedagogy not only divides theory from practice, it is also the appropriate environment to breed misapplications of research. One example of a controversial topic in SLA research is the critical period hypothesis (CPH). CPH’s misapplication to the pedagogical context and has had irrevocable influence on educational policy (Spada, 2013). Researchers like Teresa Pica’s approaches to research in classrooms, Nina Spada’s use of the classroom context among other scholars, are representative of the research pendulum’s shift toward classroom settings instead of laboratory research. Moving forward, it is imperative to explore the perceptions of teachers and researchers on SLA research’s influence on pedagogy.

In this brief literature review I will address this disconnect between academic research, classroom practices and the limited opportunities for their convergence to guide teachers’ practices. Applying educational research to effective schooling can be dangerous territory if it is not done with ethical rigor. Academic research is notoriously polarized because it is not always readily applicable to classroom contexts. Classrooms have rigid internal constraints as well as pressing external forces that influence their structure, function and outcomes, for example provincial testing, school board mandated policies and
practices, and etc. Even though schools and academia, teachers and researchers, may have similar goals in regard to achieving more positive learning outcomes, these two worlds do not always concur on what is mutually beneficial or on the best way to operationalize new ideas within the teaching and learning context.

**Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks**

**The Field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

Relative to other areas in the field of Linguistics, Applied Linguistics and the discipline of SLA is relatively young, as it has only been 40-50 years since it became an autonomous field (Mackey, 2012, p.22). In the early years of SLA, Lightbown (1985) warned research consumers that the majority of SLA research at the time had not been designed to answer pedagogical questions, thusly, SLA research could not be largely applied to pedagogical settings. These generalizations about the connections between SLA research and teaching are prefaced with Evelyn Hatch’s (1978) golden rule of research: “apply with caution” (p.453). Specifically, Lightbown (2000) was concerned with research that might be considered contrary to the contextual experiences of many teachers. On the other hand, Lightbown warns how equally misleading common knowledge about SLA can be to classroom practice. The pedagogy derived from ‘what everybody knows’ may not always be consistent with empirical facts (p. 433). Lightbown (2000) attempts to bridge the gap between the intuitive knowledge of teachers and the widely accepted SLA knowledge.

More epistemological studies contribute to the body of knowledge from which pedagogy and policy can be based on. Lightbown, (1985, 2000, 2003) after two decades of reconfiguring her generalizations for SLA research in classrooms, still emphasizes the importance of exploring research’s validity, and questioning the research’s generalizability, especially since the nature of research is that it is dynamic and cannot be applied universally to any classroom context over any given time period.
When debating the validity and preference of SLA research contexts, invariably the research conducted in a laboratory is seen as less valid than a classroom for pedagogical application. The question of context is concomitant with the question of purpose. Lourdes Ortega (2005) addresses the question of purpose and relates it to the topic of ethics when she poses the question to researchers, “what is their research for?” (p. 87). As an insider using an ethical lens, Ortega pleads to other instructed SLA academics for more research in the classroom. Furthermore, Ortega suggests that methodological rigor, though essential, should not supersede the ends of research. Therefore, while “value free research” attempts to be neutral through the use of a laboratory as a context, it is ineffective. Further, “value free research is impossible” therefore attempting to be neutral through the use of a laboratory as a context not only is ineffective, but it is immoral as well. Her stance on the unethical overrepresentation of laboratory research of middle class, university/college students stems from the exclusion of disenfranchised populations, creating a problem of transferability for the research conducted in laboratories. This generalizability problem lends itself to potential misapplications of research. By addressing the ethics related to context, Ortega’s intention was to create dialogue around the question of access of information in SLA. If SLA research is guided by the question, “for what and for whom” research is for, it may lead to a greater connection between research and pedagogy in SLA.

On the misapplications of research, Ortega (2005) and Spada (2013) both emphasize the example of critical period hypothesis (CPH) research. CPH is one of SLA’s most controversial topics, it centers on the debate whether one’s ability to learn a language is linked to their age. Spada stresses the importance of context, specifically in CPH research, in determining research’s relevance. Based on the CPH and other misapplications of research, Spada cautions of the long-term effects that misapplications of context can have on policy.

The decision to introduce English language instruction at earlier grade levels is based on the commonly held assumption that when it comes to learning an L2, earlier is best! However, once again, these decisions are based on research that has investigated age and L2 learning in the natural, not the instructional, setting. And the assumption that ‘early is best’ is deeply ingrained and difficult to budge (p. 74).
Clearly, critical period research has influenced policy that affects minorities in schools (Ortega, 2005, p. 431). If SLA research purports to address societal problems, affect policy, and enact change, then the research must also be conducted in more equitable contexts, such as classrooms with a diverse range of learners.

While some researchers may argue that research in SLA should be related to pedagogy, others believe that direct applicability does not always need to be a goal of research. These dichotomous views on the relationship between SLA research’s relevance to pedagogy is discussed by Spada (2013) in her plenary speech entitled, “SLA research and L2 pedagogy: Misapplications and questions of relevance.” Spada’s speech highlights an example of a lack of caution in applying SLA research to pedagogy that ultimately created policy decisions based on insufficient evidence. This misapplication of SLA research was in reference to the role of instruction in SLA, in particular focus on form or meaning. The theory of the ‘Natural Approach’ (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) to instructed SLA, and Larsen-Freeman and Long’s (1991) stance that, “formal instruction does not alter acquisition in any significant way...” created a shift away from grammar and corrective feedback in classrooms toward an emphasis on meaning. Overstressing the importance of meaning and potential detriment of form created a long lasting effect on policy and L2 learning which is still present in contemporary English as a Second language (ESL) classrooms. When evidence for the benefits of form-focused-instruction and corrective feedback grew, the consensus focus on form and/or meaning once again shifted. This time, the greater abundance of research on both sides of the debate, form and meaning, lead to a more balanced approach, combining emphasis on instruction for both form and meaning (Spada, 2013). Teachers can lose faith in SLA research if it is constantly shifting, therefore, emphasizing caution and explicitly situating SLA research’s purpose would allow research to be understood as a snapshot in time rather than an unwavering truth.
**The Gap Between Pedagogy and SLA Research**

David Block (2000) argues that the gap between pedagogy and SLA research is so large that practical applications of SLA research for teaching are limited. As a result, researchers like Teresa Pica (2005) practice a different style of research. Her approach is immersed in the context of teachers and students. Pica’s role as a researcher and her research purpose is shaped by the learning contexts of teachers. The contrast between differing contexts, the majority of contemporary SLA research and SLA pedagogy, has created a new role for researchers like Pica who are attempting to change the way both research and teaching are conceived. This spectrum, and the ubiquity of the gap between pedagogy and research, is at the heart of SLA research debates.

**References**


