On the Relationship Between Second and Foreign Language Teachers and Research

Graham Crookes

Recently Christian Faltis asked me to address some aspects of the relationship between research and teaching because I have reviewed this topic before in other places (Crookes, 1997; cf. Ellis, 1997). I was reluctant at first: Though there are aspects of the matter that I believe deserve attention in print, the presence of the academic's voice (which you're hearing now) and the absence of the teacher's (a common absence in the academic literature) is part of the problem.

If the relationship were simple, or not a source of concern, I do not think it would come up so often. But it seems that where a domain of social action (like ours) has both academic and professional/practical dimensions, the relationship between the two is often strained, as it is in mainstream education, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, architecture, nursing (Rice & Richlin, 1993), social work (Wenger, 1987), and counseling (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986; Peterson, 1991), and we really know less than we should about it. Are teaching and research mutually exclusive? How can research in second language acquisition (SLA) become more relevant and accessible to practicing teachers?

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In this discussion, I want to focus on the relationship mainly in its social aspects. I will review some things that probably make it weaker than it ought to be, then some that might make it stronger, and conclude with the familiar call for more research—but which in this case is a request for any research on this important relationship.

Distinct Social Groups?

In our area, researchers are generally university-employed teachers, or "academics," who produce writings known as *research*. There are considerable differences, however, in the extent to which academics in different cultures and education systems are required to do research. In many parts of the world, academics would like the chance to do research but are prevented by the lack of resources, politically motivated efforts to control universities, or salaries that do not cover living expenses. On the other hand, it is generally accepted that teachers working in primary and secondary educational institutions, or in the adult education sector, do not do research. However, we cannot discount the growing number of teacher-researchers who explicitly combine teaching with research, despite shortages of time and resources.

Have I adequately separated academics and classroom practitioners so that we can go on to think about their relationships? No, because another problem remains—one of personal history. In the second and foreign language (SFL) area, many academics start their careers in education as instructors, whether at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level, and then, with the accumulation of degrees, move from one set of working conditions and demands to another. But their academic questions may stay with them across contexts. Many a piece of academic SLA research, for example, started life as the concern of a SFL teacher about his or her students' learning (Pica, 1994, but cf. Clarke, 1994). Furthermore, research-oriented academics do actually teach, though unfortunately they may not be rewarded for paying more than minimal attention to their teaching—and it is often said that academics who get too close to the world of teaching find that their careers suffer as a result.

The Traditional Explanation of Relationship Problems

But what about this relationship, then? SLA is one of several areas of academic study that might on its face seem relevant to teaching and teachers, as would L2 teaching, analysis, and use. There certainly have been discussions of the relations of teachers or teaching to the other two areas, with the relationship of teaching to the analysis area coming under criticism from time to time. If there has been more discussion, both questioning and affirming, of the SLA-to-teaching connection than of the others, I will assert that this is because of the lead that SLA gained in the late 1970s and 1980s in establishing itself as the more academically credible part of a would-be academic area. Some have suggested that it is only by distancing itself from teaching that SLA can continue this trend. So distancing moves by some and, perhaps, jealousy in other quarters might have put a putative connection under strain. Just as academics associated with education find themselves pulled in two directions—one toward the university research community and the other toward teachers, with financial and career rewards only in the first direction—so it may be that SLA will always be pulled in two directions as well. That is, so long as one or more academic disciplines (e.g., linguistics and psychology) influence the content and style of research concerning second and foreign languages and how they are learned, this research is likely to be pulled away from what Ellis (1988) calls *an educational approach*—that is, pulled away from an SLA that "seeks to illuminate language pedagogy through studies of what takes place in the name of instruction and how this affects acquisition" (Ellis, 1992, p. 15; cf. Long & Crookes, 1987; Pica, 1994).

When people do research, they produce oral and written accounts of a social practice. These discourses and texts are surrounded by other social practices that support the differences these texts have from less privileged ones, such as the conversations teachers have in the staff room. They may not be easy to understand for those without familiarity with their genres. Yet because these texts appear to be about matters such as language, teaching, and learning—that is, the things teachers are close to—some teachers might expect them to be accessible, but many are not. Why? Besides the effects of detail or level of abstraction of the accounts, these books, articles, and conference presentations—items apparently separate one from another—are not separate at all; they are short utterances in a very long, polyvocal discourse—a conversation decades long. As anyone who has tried to pick up a conversation part way through knows, figuring out what is being talked about can be pretty difficult.

Some of the criticisms of published research on grounds of accessibility or relevance have focused on journal literature. But if teachers are going to get anything from research, are they not more likely to get it from publications that try to provide a more substantial chunk of information than the single piece of the puzzle provided by most journal articles? As Atkinson and Jackson (1992) note:

> The effects of research on educational practice are seldom straightforward and quick. As in other fields, there are few definitive studies, but rather a gradual accretion of knowledge drawn from overlapping studies in many fields of study, conducted over a long period of time, punctuated by an occasional breakthrough .... [D]ecades of basic research provide the seedbed for new approaches and methods. (p. 20)

Teachers sometimes grumble, though not very often in print, about the inaccessibility of research-related discourses. Academics have been known to be worried about such grumblings, and sometimes irritated by them. This has led to attempts at various levels to make published research more accessible to the teacher. Articles with text that differs most markedly from ordinary prose have come in for explicit concern—hence, for example, J. D. Brown's (1991) efforts to make statistics comprehensible to readers of the *TESOL Quarterly*.

Some have hoped that increased professional training in the area of research could help to solve the accessibility problem, because accessibility is an interactive matter. For those teachers who go through a fairly academic MA program, much that was inaccessible becomes clearer; one can say, following Gee (1992), that they have successfully apprenticed to a discourse (cf. Ellis, 1997). Some might hope that the move toward qualitative research, with its direct forms of writing and limited use of inferential statistics, would make research or theory more accessible. Yet some quantitative studies are very simple and even simply reported, and some qualitative studies are impenetrable because of their conceptual presuppositions or because of their length (Eisenhart & Borko, 1993).

Recent developments in SLA literature may affect its relevance or accessibility. It is increasingly recognized that disciplines previously assumed to be neutral accumulations of findings of relevance to teachers, such as psychology, may contain assumptions (e.g., about human nature) that are actually political or have political effects. We also increasingly see research concerned with issues of power in L2 learning and teaching. This is sometimes associated with the word *critical*, which in an increasingly loose usage refers to critiques of society based on radical democratic values (that might be anarchist, libertarian socialist, feminist, green, communitarian, though perhaps not merely liberal). Could these orientations produce work that would strengthen the relationship by maximizing the relevance problem and minimizing the accessibility problem? It depends on which group of teachers you ask, of course. Teachers with a strong social conscience might choose to read periodicals like *Radical Teacher* or *LibEd*, though obviously those who have never considered themselves active citizens or are now expatriates ("I'm not political, I just want to make big bucks in Japan") will find such writings just as inaccessible or irrelevant as others might find studies of theoretical pragmatics. And unfortunately, some sections of this literature have an academic superstructure every bit as discoursally impenetrable as language testing or Hallidayan linguistics is to the uninitiated.

The problem is not one to be resolved solely as a result of squabbling between academic factions over which theoretical or methodological approach should be followed in SLA research or in research conducted directly on L2 teaching or in the analyses of language. It is not even going to be solved by those like myself who, as a result of their professional responsibilities, concern themselves with philosophical, political, and moral dimensions of SFL teaching and teacher preparation. In my view, though aspects of accessibility at the textual level always deserve attention by writers ("Who am I writing for?") and by readers ("Am I

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part of the targeted audience, or am I going to have to either make a serious effort to understand this or look for a different treatment of it?"), a more important concern is whether the professional conditions of SFL teachers limit the relevance and accessibility of research.

Working Conditions

Though, thankfully, we can all think of counter examples, far too many SFL teachers are working under unprofessional conditions. Having said that, let me comment on the contested term *professional*. It is not necessarily the case that we should desire those characteristics that make the archetypal professions (e.g., law and medicine) professional (Ginsburg & Kamat, 1995; Smyth, 1995). However, I am happy for SFL educators to use the term *professional* as a club to beat down those who would force us into working conditions that above all provide no time for reflection and no time for the non-classroom parts of our job that are essential if we are to grow and develop as human beings and enable us to fully discharge our responsibilities, humanistically conceived.

When it becomes more widely accepted that ESOL teaching that adequately responds to the local needs of specific student populations, to the changing demands of programs, and to the various cultural conditions in which English is taught around the world must be tied in with curriculum development, program evaluation, and human resource development, it is quite possible that we will have fewer articles like this one. The action research movement, with its concern for locally generated solutions to problems, is, in my view, the ideal vehicle to bring together such terms as *professional growth*, *curriculum development*, *course evaluation*, and *program self-study*, and to provide increased legitimation for these aspects of teachers' work.

Many teachers never have a chance to participate in these activities, so academic research remains far from their concerns. They do not have the time to read it, even if they wanted to. Others, a much smaller proportion of the SFL community, participate in materials writing and similar endeavors, but perhaps without the long-term stability of a program in which this is part of the cyclical process of course evaluation and program improvement. And again, of those that do, how many conceptualize what they are doing in research terms? If research has primarily presented itself to them as something that aims at universal generalizations divorced from specific contexts, it is asking too much of SFL teaching programs alone to bridge the conceptual divide.

The distance can be narrowed, however, by a variety of means.

Teacher-Researcher Connections

At the most formal level, university-school partnerships, mainly in developed countries, can strengthen the relationship between the teachers and academics involved and aid in the uptake of research. But where this sort of thing is needed most, the university skills are often missing—in the Third World or U.S. ghettos, for example.

Less formal connections are also important. Research on the communication networks between researchers and practitioners suggests that contact among individuals in a network of socially or professionally related educators and researchers increases the use of research findings by practitioners (Huberman, 1990), though direct teacher input in the formulation of reports is also important (Florio-Ruane & Dohanich, 1984; see Muir, 1980, for an early teacher account of this sort of thing).

Very small-scale partnerships are increasingly reported, a well-known one being that of Branscombe and Heath. When teacher Amanda Branscombe had completed in-service coursework on teacher research, she invited Stanford University researcher Shirley Brice Heath to her classroom to do a joint investigation of high school writing, and a variety of interesting and highly accessible papers ensued (cf. Branscombe & Thomas, 1992). Other collections were developed to promote this kind of connection (e.g., Branscombe, Goswami, & Schwarz, 1992). A number of joint efforts can be found in the ESOL field (see Edge & Richards, 1993; Hudelson & Lindfors, 1993), including those early ones that Allwright and Bailey (1990) flag, like Florio and Walsh (1981). Allwright and Bailey, who have advocated various forms of action research over the years, say

> ideally it would be best to have researchers act as local consultants in school systems, just as educational psychologists already do. Classroom teachers could then turn to such a consultant for expert advice in exploring anything that intrigued them about the learners in their classrooms. This would neatly reverse the present unsatisfactory pattern whereby it is typically the researchers who invent their own research projects and then come to teachers for help in carrying them out. (p. 198)

However, few professional rewards are available to the individuals who participate in such partnerships. Although service is currently an official part of an academic's responsibilities in the United States, it is rarely the deciding factor in hiring or promotion. And most regular teachers gain little professional or financial benefit from investigations they might do toward improving their classroom practice. Despite exceptions, the educational institutions on both sides of the relationship tacitly support the divide rather than help individuals to cross it.

Yet the connection could be strengthened by simply making teachers and researchers the same people and by recognizing teachers' knowledge of their students' learning as research with some, though perhaps not all, of the desirable characteristics of academic L2 research (generality, detail, or duration), just as academic L2 research does not have all of the desirable characteristics of teachers' knowledge (insider perspective or applicability). This is the position of the teacher-researcher movement. Teacher research (i.e., action research) has been advocated in ESOL by prominent figures over a long period (Ellis, 1997; Long, 1983; Nunan, 1997; van Lier, 1990; cf. Wallace, 1998). These days it is usually qualitative research, whose reports "more closely resemble the narrative forms already used by practitioners to communicate their knowledge" (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994, p. 20). In addition, when it is also critical (cf. Auerbach, 1991; Crookes, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), it can take teachers from solving immediate technical problems to jointly investigating and ameliorating the sociopolit-

ical pressures that prevent them from having professional working conditions.

Questions About the Relationship

What in reality sustains the teaching-research relationship has hardly been studied by those involved in it. However, knowledge utilization and information dissemination are empirical fields of study. Here are some questions that lie within this domain:

Does the fact that many ESOL teachers have no time to read the *TESOL Quarterly*, for example, truly mean that they cannot relate to research or that their pedagogy is really uninformed by it? What really goes on in this respect when teachers talk or think about classrooms? (See Bailey, 1992.)

Which parts of TESOL textbooks reflect SLA and teaching research, and which do not? Some of these textbooks now contain ideas that were not explicit in texts in the past, and that have appeared first in research writings (cf. Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; e.g., learning strategies: Chamot, 1987; Rubin, 1975; Rubin & Thompson, 1994; Stern, 1975). What are the roles of the researcher, materials writer, and publisher in bringing in some things and keeping out others? What is the comparable role of the teacher resource book?

Assuming that the relationship between L2 research and the average classroom teacher—if and when it exists—is almost certainly a mediated one, with various agents (including textbooks) standing between the two groups, is it always only one-way, from the research community to teachers? Should we not document the thought I have heard my colleagues express—that even academic research follows rather than precedes classroom practice? Or should it not better be conceptualized (and documented) as a passing back-and-forth of concepts?

If the relationship, insofar as it exists, is a mediated one, what specific ways of strengthening the forms of mediation have been tried? Can we document occasions of "continuous personal contact" that Fullan (1991, p. 53) says are necessary so that teachers can become aware of and follow up on innovative ideas? In this context, where there is L2 action research going on, what administrative support, encouragement, and other conditions are necessary to support and foster it? (cf. Edge & Richards, 1993; Markee, 1996).

We need to hear about how school administrations address their responsibility for teacher development, and about staff development programs in our area that "enhance the collective capacity of people to create and pursue overall visions" in "learning communities" (Senge, 1995). Does the decontextualized nature of mainstream SLA research contribute to the problem of relevance or uptake—and if so, what should be done? That is, assuming that teaching is a social and political act, which aspects of source disciplines like psychology or linguistics should be drawn on for L2 researchers to produce research writings that teachers will find relevant? Would this aid its relevance to ESL teachers in countries where the status and working conditions of teachers are poor, in which ESL is for refugees and migrants?

On the other hand, in those EFL countries where English is a middle-class aspiration and the birthright of the rich and powerful, would such work be seen as irrelevant? Or is it the case that even in these countries, the working conditions of teachers in elite institutions are by no means always favorable, and that empirical studies in this tradition, focused on specific contexts, might thereby be relevant?

Most published research, not only in SLA but also in applied linguistics, is done by academics. This is even the case in strongly teacher-oriented journals such as *English Teaching Forum*. When teachers do research, as in the more academic training programs, what sort of informal relations between researchers and teachers—for example, mentoring—are needed for teachers to break into print?

What is the role of teacher education programs in strengthening the relationship? Do we provide adequate opportunity for student teachers to digest the research component of academic coursework so that they can relate it to their teaching (cf. Freeman, 1992; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Wallace, 1991)? Do student teachers ever use research after they graduate?

Too much relevant information is physically inaccessible: The two indices most focused on TESOL (*Second Language Instruction/Acquisition Abstracts (SLIA)* and *Language Teaching*) are not on-line and are very expensive, so teachers may not be able to draw on research with these tools. In ESL, can we replicate initiatives like that of one teachers' union that funded teachers to assist the in-school delivery of research, materials, and information, and to link colleagues with common interests and needs (Kent, 1985)?

What are the successful—and unsuccessful—strategies used by teachers who organize their workplaces to struggle for more respectable working conditions? Where did they learn their successful techniques? And if it was not in our, or my, ESL teacher education classes, why not?

A Call for Dialogue

I, for one, would be very happy to read answers or responses to the questions above, whether written in academic language or sent in brief narrative accounts over the e-mail networks of teacher-researchers, including tj@tesol.edu. To improve the relationship between research and teaching in TESOL, the work conditions of SFL teachers, the conception of teachers' responsibilities, and the conception of schools' responsibilities in sustaining professional practice and development must change. At the same time, perhaps the academic concepts as well as the responsibilities of those academics engaged in the preparation of SFL teachers should also change. And we badly need to turn our academic and teacher-researcher attention to empirical exploration of the complex and important relationship under discussion here.

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