

The Difficulties of Teaching English Language: The Relationship between Research and Teaching

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Abstract

Researchers have conducted a large number of studies to solve problems and help teachers to overcome their difficulties. They have also tried to find the relationship between the result of research and their teaching. Learning English as a second or foreign language has received a lot of attention, so teachers have to find some well-planned and organized ways to facilitate the process of learning and teaching. This paper is a brief review on teaching English as a foreign language and why learners are interested in learning English. It also discusses why teachers have difficulties with teaching English language, and what they should do to facilitate the teaching process. It shows the relationship between language pedagogy and research as well as research and teaching. It also deals with a set of strategies and methods that teachers can apply as instruments to improve their students' learning English.

Keywords: Teaching English, Second language acquisition, Methods and strategies

1. Introduction

English language is a global language. Learning English improves the individual's status and opportunities in education, technology, global trades, and business. Moreover, English plays an important role like a channel of communication (Kannan, 2009). Teaching English has been an important issue in countries where English is not their first language, so learning second language is difficult for L2 learners because they cannot use English in real life situations, because they should learn sentences in textbooks not in a real environment. Therefore, teachers should always look for useful strategies to reduce the difficulties of teaching English language (Long, 1969; Chen, 2007; Nunn, 2011), and they have to deal with many challenges and often have questions about the best ways to teach. Some of these common questions are as follows:

- How can teachers teach English as a foreign or second language in different situations?
- What do teachers know about second language learners with different abilities?
- What are the benefits of learning English language?
- What can teachers perform in the classroom to facilitate the procedure of second language acquisition?
- What should teachers expect the second language learners in the classroom to be able to do?

Teaching is a multidimensional process, and teachers should pay enough attention to all skills of students such as: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These skills are educated by teachers and learnt by students. There are various strategies that researchers have introduced based on their studies (Oxford & Green, 1996; Philp & Tognini, 2009; Williams, 1995). These strategies may involve all skills. Researchers have different opinions about various strategies in teaching. For example, Nassaji (2012) believes that there is a relationship between teaching and research, so teachers and researchers learn from one another. Researchers (Crookes, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; Zaman, 2004) have conducted several studies to prove the interplay between research study and teaching, and they have suggested helpful strategies to facilitate teaching and learning process.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 *Conducting SLA Research*

Teaching English as a foreign language is a general issue and researchers have investigated problems in all aspects of teaching process. Some researchers have disputed that one of the vital reasons to do SLA research is to facilitate second language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, Long, & Pica, as cited in Nassaji, 2012, p.338). Learning strategies is generally defined as “the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help learners comprehend, learn, or retain new information (O'Malley & Chamot, as cited in Ganbarzehi, 2014, p.385). Lightbown (as cited in Nassaji, 2012, p.385) stated although researchers assume that many studies in second language acquisition are fruitful for language teaching, but the implications

of such strategies should be done judiciously. She argued that “second language research does not tell teachers what to do teach, and what it says about how to teach they had already figured out” (p.385).

Wardhaugh(1969) pointed out that there are some theoretical problems when teaching English to other students from other languages. He attempted to gap the bridge between the practical orientation of teachers and the theoretical concerns that should be the basis of practice. He believed every good classroom practice is based on a well-informed theory. According to Wardhaugh (1969), most classes are teacher-dominated, the teachers are sage on the stage and everything flows from the teacher. In other words, he stated that this direction should be changed because students should learn their tasks and teachers can help them.

Klein (1998) stated that “During the last 25 years, second language acquisition research has made considerable progress, but it is still far from proving a solid basis for foreign language teaching, or from a general theory of SLA”. Ellis (as cited in Nassaji, 2012, p.338) argued that there is progress in SLA, but the results of many studies are not directly related to teaching process. For example, the results of studies about Universal Grammar are not relevant to everyday teaching. There are problems in the relationship between SLA research and language teaching. One problem lies in the difference between the teachers’ and researchers’ perceptions and objectives. Ellis (1997) makes a demarcation between two kinds of knowledge, practical knowledge and technical knowledge. While teachers’ are concerned with improving practical knowledge, researchers deal with developing technical knowledge.

Technical research is explicit and researchers can find a good method by experiment, but practical knowledge is implicit, and it is not based on the experiment, and teachers can find a useful way to teach by experience. Another problem is in the form of research methods and the way of reporting plans to be used in SLA research. Crookes (1997) explained that most of the studies in SLA have viewed learning as a cognitive and internal process instead of a social process. Despite being concerned about the relationship between SLA research and language teaching, there is a growing body of research in the field relevant to language teaching, with useful resources to enrich teachers to embark upon in the classroom such as, the role of learners’ consciousness in SLA process, input and interaction, and learners’ needs and motivation (Pica, 1994, 2005). Larsen-Freeman (1998) asserts that the goal of SLA research is not simply to find effective teaching materials to help teachers to implement a certain lesson efficiently. If SLA is construed that way, and research is not able to cater solutions to practical problems, it is then concluded that teachers should stop taking into account research and simply depend on their own practice. SLA is a broad field which includes many items that cover both basic and applied research.

2.2 The Relevance between Language Pedagogy and SLA Research

The main goal of the research is to find and develop alternative methods in pedagogical problems (Wallace, 1998). Ellis (1997) pointed out if there is an interrelationship between language pedagogy and SLA research, it should be found out how, to what extent, and in

what areas. Evaluating the relevance is very important, so researchers should know how they evaluate the relevance. Ellis posited that there are two primary approaches; one approach is that an applied linguist should utilize SLA theory and research then tries to scrutinize its usefulness in the classroom. Ellis goes on to state that this approach is sometimes problematic because the researchers and teachers have different views about the relevance. Another approach starts with pedagogy and embarks on SLA to address issues proposed by learners and educators. In this approach, instead of evaluating SLA for relevance, pedagogical issues become the topics of SLA research.

This approach can be useful and teachers use the outcomes because it is practical instead of being theoretical although it has some pitfalls. First, all researchers of SLA do not embrace pedagogical issues because they have their own theoretical concerns (Crookes, 1997; Ellis, 1997). Second, this approach should be used by teachers because it addressed pedagogical issues, but always it may not be the case because classroom practice is contingent upon teachers' perspectives, beliefs, and views. In evaluating pedagogical findings, assessors should be familiar with the practice of classroom teaching (Nassaji, 2012). Interaction between researchers and teachers is very important because it helps teachers to know what researchers are saying and also "researchers can hear what teachers are saying" (Lightbown, 2000).

2.3 The Interplay between Research and Teaching

Pica (2005) mentions that "as teachers and researchers, we cannot work in isolation each other if we are to help our students meet their needs and accomplish their goals" (p.49). Researchers should pay attention to teachers' idea because it fosters the relationship between teachers and researchers and leads to the production of a useful research that can be more germane to classroom practices and hence more likely to be used by teachers. There are a few studies with regard to the relevance between SLA research and what teachers gain from their studies. For example, McDonough and McDonough (1990) conducted an investigation to find out the perceptions of a group of teachers attending a conference in the UK about the use of research in their teaching. They use a written questionnaire and collected data from 34 English language teachers to investigate their opinions about the relevance between L2 research and their teaching.

It was revealed that most of teachers in this study had used the research findings in their teaching and they had chances to conduct research in their institutions. Both of studies were in a limited condition and in second study, most of present teachers in the conference were already involved in conducting research. To explore the relationship between SLA research and L2 teaching, another study was conducted by Borg (2009). The research was conducted among two groups of teachers teaching in two different instructional settings: an ESL context in Canada and an EFL (English as a foreign language) context in Turkey. Collecting data by a written questionnaire revealed that most of teachers (in both contexts) were familiar with SLA research through taking SLA related courses. Most teachers had an agreement with using SLA research in teaching but some of them believed that their teaching experience is more useful than using research in classroom.

2.4 Analyzing Teaching

Besides these bodies of research and their relationship with real teaching environment, teachers should be able to analyze teaching in terms of student's learning, it is a key element because the objective of teaching is to improve student learning. Teachers should know what students learn, how and why instruction influences such learning, and how lessons could be based on this information to be more influential when teaching them next time (Berk, Hiebert, Jansen, & Morris, 2007).

Teachers can analyze teaching methods by observing the effect of methods on students. As Oxford (2001) stated, teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) is a tapestry. The teaching tapestry is woven from many strands, such as the characteristics of the teacher, the learner, the setting, and the relevant languages (i.e., English and the native language of the learners and the teacher). All parts are related to each other and teachers cannot ignore the one part or pay more attention to another part. Teachers should not separate the teaching skills, for example teaching grammar in isolation and without context. Students should learn all skills to improve their language learning.

Oxford (2001) suggested two forms of integrated-skill instruction: content-based language instruction and task-based instruction. Content-based language instruction puts a great premium upon mastering content through language; in other words, language is the medium to teach content, so content is primary and language is subsidiary. Task-based instruction, on the other hand, puts emphasis on doing tasks that require communication language use. In content-based instruction, students can practice all language skills through learning different contents, while in task-based instruction, students are involved in communicative tasks in English.

Nunan (as cited in Oxford 2001, p.1) defines tasks as activities that can stand alone as fundamental units and that require comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form. Teachers are required to learn different ways to integrate language skills in the classroom and evaluate the extent to which the skills are integrated. They are accountable to go for the instructional materials, textbooks, and technologies that promote the integration of four language skills and the components of language, namely syntax, vocabulary, and so on (Oxford, 2001).

2.5 Different Strategies in Teaching English

The main goal of language teaching and learning is to develop the speakers' four skills with a good command of grammar, but this is not the ultimate goal. The final objective is to empower speakers to be able to use language communicatively (Shakibaei & Keivan, 2014). For improving these skills, teachers choose the best strategies in the classroom. Stern (as cited in Ghanbarzehi, 2014, p. 386) tried to distinguish good language learners from those of unsuccessful learners, she supposed that the good language learners may have different strategies and abilities. She classified strategies of good language learners as: a) planning strategy, b) active strategy, c) empathic strategy, d) formal strategy, e) experiential strategy, f) semantic strategy, g) practice strategy, h) communication strategy, i) monitoring strategy, and

j) internalization strategy.

Stern (as cited in Ganbarzehi, 2014, p. 386) mentioned five categories: 1) management and planning strategies, 2) managing strategies that they relate to the learners intention their own learning, 3) cognitive strategies including the steps or operations used in learning or problem solving which need direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learn materials, 4) communicative-experience strategies refer to gesturing paraphrasing or asking for repetition, and explanation in order to help learners to express themselves better, 5) interpersonal strategies including the techniques that learners use to monitor their own development and evaluate their own performance; affective strategies used to create positive affect towards the target language and its speakers.

Oxford (as cited in Ghanbarzehi, 2014, p.341) merged learning strategies with communicative strategies and introduced her six-segmented classification of learning strategies. She suggested language strategies as: 1) cognitive strategies, e.g. helping the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, 2) metacognitive strategies, e.g. helping learners to manage the learning process overall, 3) memory-related strategies, e.g. helping learners link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding, 4) compensatory strategies, e.g. helping make up for missing knowledge, 5) affective strategies e.g. helping learners manage their emotions and motivation level, and 6) social strategies such as helping the learner to learn via interacting with others and understanding the target culture.

Teachers may use these strategies in their teaching program, but as Oxford (as cited in Ghanbarzehi, 1990, p.344) declared, “There is no complete agreement on exactly what strategies and how many strategies exist, how they should be defined, demarcated, and categorized, and whether it is possible to create a real, scientifically validated hierarchy of strategies... classification conflicts are inevitable”. The goal of teaching English is to facilitate learning language. Teachers can choose and use good strategies that researchers suggested for using in the classroom. These strategies are useful for planning before teaching and using them during teaching program.

3. Conclusion

Researchers concluded that teachers can use the result of studies in the classroom to facilitate teaching English language, but teachers sometimes have doubt about the relationship between the result of studies and teaching because they believe these studies are general and cannot be used in different situations. Researchers stated that teachers need the results of research because they can adapt the results in their classroom practice. Some teachers prefer to use their teaching experience instead of using the result of researches in the classroom. Other researchers suggested useful strategies to help teachers. Teachers use different strategies to plan the lessons because these strategies are adaptable with the classroom situation even students have good strategies to learn English language. As a result, researchers and teachers should have a close cooperation with each other to get the best results in teaching and learning English language as well as decreasing the problems in teaching and learning English language as a second or foreign language.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The researchers' responsibilities include setting up studies in order to get good results for performing in classrooms. Researchers should notice that the result should be practical instead of being theoretical because they are used in practice. Teachers should evaluate the research results whether they are applicable in teaching process or not. Teachers can integrate some strategies with language skills (reading, writing,...) in order to enhance the learners abilities. Students have different abilities in learning English language, so teachers should not expect a good performance in short time for all students.

Teachers can read the result of researchers' study then they can select some good strategies and helpful notes to use in the classroom, because all researches are not useful for teachers, some of them are only theories and are not related to teach in real environment. Griffiths (2007) stated, teachers can be able to promote language learning strategy used by their students. Bell (2007) suggested that teachers need to be enlightened with all methods, and they should construct their own principled methods or decide what principles they draw on in their teaching. Teachers cannot overlook the created methods and used by teachers. Teachers need a fundamental method to build their own teaching. According to Wardhaugh (1969), students should be stimulated to use the English language and attempting to use the innate process of language acquisition that they have.

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