

Second Language Acquisition Research and Language Pedagogy: A Critical View

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, a substantial body of research on second language acquisition has been provided. The current study was an attempt to investigate language teachers' views on applying research findings in their every day practice of language teaching through a critical lens. Data for this qualitative study was collected by means of a semi structured interview with 10 language teachers teaching English at different language institutes in Iran. Analyses of data revealed that, although teachers find second language acquisition research a useful tool for their professional development; they do not usually consult bodies of research in their every day teaching practice. They report problems in applying second language research in their practice due to problems with practicality, particularity, and possibility. The findings suggest that language teachers need to be exposed to insight from SLA research and practice.

Keywords: Second language acquisition research, Theory and practice, Research in action

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) research has created a strong interest to encourage teachers to be engaged with research in their professional practice and development; SLA researchers are also interested in presenting their findings to engage teachers and other educators. The increasing number of professional journals, research articles, and conferences dedicated to the field is a clear evidence for this interest (Ellis, 2010).

Although, it is claimed that SLA research and language pedagogy are interconnected, the relationship between the two cannot be easily defined. It is believed that SLA research produces many pedagogically motivated studies (Erlam, 2008); however, there have been some controversies in applying research findings in teaching practice. Han (2007) argues over impossibility of linking research to practice. He asserts that some SLA researchers do not consider practical implications in mind; therefore, the results of many SLA studies cannot be considered as beneficial in teaching practices. Some researchers, on the other hand, suggest that improving language teaching is one of the main reasons behind conducting SLA research (Larsen-Freeman, 1998; Pica, 2005). Above all these debates stand the teachers; this is the teachers who should eventually decide whether the findings of the SLA research are pedagogically relevant to their practice (Widdowson, 1990).

A widely held assumption in educational research is that teachers who are engaged with research can deliver a better quality of teaching (Williams & Coles, 2003). Borg (2010) recommends language teachers to engage with SLA research, since such engagements can be considered as a productive form of professional development.

Despite all these, language teachers do not effectively engaged with research as part of their day to day practice (Borg, 2010). Being conscious of the existing gap between the two and recognizing the dangers associated with this gap, scholars have highlighted the problem and warned the academic society (Belcher, 2007). However, adequate disciplinary effort has not been made to examine the essential problems which made the gap wider (Biesta, 2007; Ellis, 2010; Nassaji, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationship between SLA research and language pedagogy.

A great number of studies conducted in this area have identified some factors affecting research-practice gap. Labaree (2003), for example, believed that the gap is mainly caused due to the differences between researchers' and teachers' cultural orientations. He asserted that while researchers are mostly theoretical, intellectual, analytical, and universal, teachers are more experiential, personal, normative, and particular. Such differences lead to a culture clash and misunderstanding between teachers and researchers. Stewart (2006) pointed out that teachers and researchers do not receive an equal degree of recognition in academia. Teachers' knowledge and opinions are often undervalued, although they enjoy in-depth knowledge of actual teaching practice. In the same line, Freeman and Johnson (1998) considered lack of a deep understanding and appreciation of teacher knowledge as the main issue, and argue that research findings are not clearly articulated to be used in classroom practice. Block (2000) interpreted the existing gap in terms of differences between teachers' and researchers' discourses; in fact, he emphasized researchers and teachers are different

people coming from different worlds.

Reviewing the existing literature, Borg (2010) reported that non-collaborative school cultures, limited resources and limitations in teachers' skills and knowledge to do research as some of the important barriers.

Many suggestions have been also offered to bridge the gap. One of the most important issues to be considered is to promote teacher research. This kind of research encourages teacher autonomy and empowers teachers in their professional activities (Allwright, 2005; Borg, 2010).

Action research has been advocated by many scholars as an influential initiative to raise teachers' awareness and to engage them with research (e.g., Burns, 2005; Allwright, 2005). Despite the attempts made to promote action research to gain a better understanding of teaching practice, the findings of research in recent years (e.g., Nassaji, 2012; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012) indicates that it is still not a widely-practiced activity.

Haley and Rentz (2002) emphasized that teacher education can play a crucial role in preparing teachers to apply research in their teaching practice. Teacher education is not only about teachers and their education. It is surely more than sum of the two, since it often deals with critical issues and questions beyond their boundaries (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) considered education and teacher education as social institutions that address not only ethical, social, and moral issues, but also philosophical and ideological questions (as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2012)

It is generally held that by performing a comprehensive analysis of teachers' beliefs and views on the relationship between SLA research and language pedagogy, invaluable information will be provided. Therefore, the present study is set to enrich our understanding of teachers' ideas on their engagement with SLA research in their daily practice of teaching.

To meet the aims of the study, some operating principles were chosen. Three parameters of *particularity*, *practicality*, and *possibility* proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2012) were selected as operating principles in this study. By operating principles here, he means a set of central tenets to clearly define the way a model, a system, or a corporation operates. He believes that on the basis of the educational, cultural, social, and political imperatives of language learning, teaching, and teacher education, these principles potentially offer the necessary conceptualization and contextualization. Moreover, by making use of these principles, new patterns can be offered in which the roles of learners, teachers, and teacher educators are all connected. Such patterns can establish symbiotic relationships with synergistic results.

1.3 The Principle of Particularity

This principle is defined based on the hermeneutic philosophy of situational understanding with the claim that a meaningful pedagogy need to be developed on a general interpretation of particular situations. Kumaravadivelu (2012) believes improving pedagogy equals improving those particular situations; hence, in language teaching it must be considered that "a particular group of teachers are teaching a particular group of students pursuing a

particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu” (p. 13). Thus, local demands and lived experiences are under the spotlight here. He pointed out that the principle of particularity is inextricably linked to the principle of practicality.

This principle takes a stand against pre-selected principles and procedures which mainly aim at accomplishing predetermined goals; it, rather, opts for context-sensitive teaching which is practiced based on a deep understanding of sociocultural, political, and linguistic particularities. This principle strongly advocates enabling “teachers to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize” (p. 13), and, in fact, argues against considering theorist and teachers as dichotomous.

1.2 The Principle of Practicality

The principle of practicality aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It mainly intends to clarify that teaching should not be looked at as mechanisms to maximize learning opportunities, but as active process which enables teachers to theorize from practice by understanding learning and teaching possibilities. In this sense, this principle is closely related to the principle of possibility.

1.3 The Principle of Possibility

This principle is mainly derived from critical pedagogy, in which teachers are invited to make use of variety of instruments and strategies to deal with social and educational dynamics. Therefore, there would be some classroom events and activities which have not been anticipated by policy planners, curriculum designers, or textbook producers. It favors teaching programs that considers sociopolitical issues and tries to recover consciousness among all the participants so that they can construct and reconstruct their personal and social identities.

In the present study attempts were made to analyze language teachers’ perspectives on the existing problems in applying research findings in their every day teaching practice based on the principles of practicality, particularity, and possibility. They were then invited to provide suggestion to fill the existing gap.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 10 language teachers teaching English at different language institutes in Iran. To ask the participants for their attendance, a number of language teachers taught at different language institutes in Esfahan were contacted and invited to take part in the study. The 10 participants who volunteered and attended the interviews came from different professional and educational backgrounds, and had varying teaching experiences. All participants were evaluated as qualified practicing teachers. Table 1 provides a summary of their personal background characteristics.

Table 1. Participants' background information

	Age	Years of teaching experience	Academic degree completed
1	37	15 years	MA
2	32	5 years	MA
3	31	6 years	MA
4	28	3 years	BA
5	34	11 years	MA
6	24	2 years	BA
7	25	1 year	BA
8	37	10 years	BA
9	31	9 years	MA
10	33	5 years	BA

2.2 Instruments

To provide an open platform for the teachers to discuss their perspectives in details, a semi-structured interview was considered as a methodologically appropriate instrument to elicit data.

As for the content of the interviews, various sections were included to collect extensive data. This semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical framework of the study. The interview questions were finalized based on the feedback received from a panel of experts in Applied Linguistics.

The interview questions were divided into five main sections. The first part was on their background information; they were asked about their age, teaching experience, and their familiarity with SLA research. The next three parts contained questions on particularity, possibility, and practicality of applying research in their everyday teaching practice. In the final section, the teachers were invited to provide suggestions to bridge the existing gaps.

2.3 Procedure

Face to face interviews were conducted in a place of convenience to the participants, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes. First, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and then the questions were asked. To avoid any misinterpretations, all the interviews were conducted in the respondents' native language (Persian), and at least one of the researchers was present in the interview sessions.

3. Results

Based on the results obtained from the interviews, the researchers recognized that teachers who had taught at university level or the ones who studied in graduate levels thought more positively about the value of research. They mentioned this positive attitude is mostly fostered in university environment and not language institutes. Moreover, more experienced

teachers were more eager to use SLA research in their teaching practice than less experienced ones. In general, however, they discussed that there are lots of problems in applying research in practice. The interview questions were designed in a way to lead the respondents to discuss the problems within the main principles of possibility, practicality and particularity.

In the following, their responses are classified and presented. Due to reasons of space, in each part, few quotes are presented as evidences for the results.

3.1 Possibility

With regard to possibility of applying SLA research to language pedagogy, teachers mostly mentioned that the outcomes of research in applied linguistics are not always possible to be applied in language classrooms. The reasons provided by the teachers could be divided to the following:

A. Lack of knowledge in analyzing research articles

Some of the participants mentioned that they do not know how to choose reliable sources; moreover, they complained they don't know how to apply the results in their teaching practice.

- I might sometimes refer to some research articles written in the field, but unfortunately, I cannot understand how to use the results in real classes.

- I might give enough importance to it but I feel, sometimes, I'm not quite aware of all the sources available. You know, I cannot find reliable sources especially on the net. There are many different scientific journals, but some of them cannot be trusted, I think.

B. Lack of Time

They complain that designing class activities based on the research needs a lot of time. Lack of time is not only a problem outside but also inside the classroom. They mentioned if they want to apply research findings in their teaching practice, a great deal of time should be devoted to those activities suggested by SLA research.

- Designing the class activities based on what is suggested by SLA research is sometimes becomes time consuming.

- I have to follow the syllabus provided by the institute. Based on the rules, I need to follow specific steps in my teaching practice. It, actually, leaves me no extra time in the class. If I want to apply any technique or tip suggested by SLA research, I need to postpone it for any extra time at the end of sessions.

C. Lack of facilities

Another reason mentioned by teachers was that, sometime, in order to apply techniques mentioned in the research articles, specific facilities are needed. However, such facilities are not always available in all classes in language institutes, they specifically referred to computer assisted language teaching and learning.

- I have read a research article which was really beneficial for both students and teachers; however, to apply the techniques at least a computer for each two students was needed. I found it in fact, impossible. Some more basic facilities are not always available

3.2 Practicality

Teachers believed that in the present situation applying SLA research in language teaching is sometimes not practical. Their reasons are classified and presented below.

A. Teacher Training Courses

This was one of the main reasons discussed by teachers. They complained about teacher training courses (TTC) which do not aim to present them with teaching techniques, but teaching methods. Since language institutes all try to apply a unified method of teaching, specific to their own institute, they ask their teachers to apply the method presented in TTCs step by step. Hence, no deviation from the rules is allowed, and consequently there is no room for applying the results of the research in their classes

- Since I have taught at different language institutes, I had to attend their TTCs. In such TTCs we were taught how to teach based on some steps. Sometimes, applying the results of research studies means doing something other than what I am expected to do.

- In TTCs we were presented with some techniques to be used in the class as steps of teaching. They were really useful, especially for novice teachers, but the problem is that we have to move in the same line as dictated in TTCs; in fact, there is no room for our own decisions in the class.

The teachers' views indicated that although they have found this kind of teacher education useful in providing them with the essential needs of classroom practice, at the same time, TTCs had limited their teaching practices.

B. Teachers' employment

This problem refers to the way teachers are employed. The participants mentioned that, teachers in language institutes are mostly selected based on their knowledge of general English, not specialized knowledge in SLA or applied linguistics.

- to get a job as a teacher in language institutes, first, you have to take a test of language proficiency, and then there would be an interview in which knowledge of general English is tested. But there are only some simple questions on teachers' knowledge of applied linguistics or even on teaching methodologies. In fact, it implies that language teachers are not required to improve their knowledge in applied linguistics. How do you expect them to apply SLA research?

-Honestly, my focus is mostly on teachers' guide and what has been offered to me in TTCs rather than research articles. Actually, I have no idea applying SLA research findings in my teaching activities.

C. Supervisors' ideologies and Classroom observation

As one of the most important barriers in applying research findings in everyday teaching practice, the participants referred to close and careful classroom observations, and critical looks at their teaching activities. In some institutes they complained that classroom observations do not let teachers deviate from the normal techniques offered in TTCs.

- Sometimes supervisors are too critical and pay too much attention to unimportant details that only confuses the teachers and makes them feel insecure about every teaching activity they perform. In fact, due to regular observations and in fear of being criticized of practicing something other than what is offered in TTCs, I prefer not to do anything new.

D. Top- down syllabus

Another point mentioned by teachers was the top-down syllabus to be followed by teachers. In fact, teachers cannot play a leading role in syllabus design.

-In most of institutes, the syllabi are presented to the teachers. You, as a teacher, have to follow them. I mean there is no opportunity for applying new things.

E. Selected materials

Teachers also mentioned that sometimes, pedagogical implications mentioned in research articles are only applicable if you want to present specific kind of material focusing on some specific points. However, according to the teachers, classroom materials are selected by the institutes and they have no role in selecting the textbooks.

- Textbooks are considered as the core of the classroom. Sometimes some teaching techniques are not applicable in what we have to teach. Once, I studied an article, and I decided to use its findings in my class. To do so, I needed to provide some supplementary materials, but after two sessions I found it practically impossible.

F. Teachers' knowledge and motivation

Some participants mentioned that teachers are not motivated enough to apply the findings in their classes. Lots of reasons were provided by participants as the reasons for their demotivation, the most important of which were: supervisors' and managers' criticism, students' demotivation, and inability to apply the findings.

- Sometimes, I think when I have to follow the steps mentioned in TTCs or in teachers' guide book, why bothering studying research articles and trying applying the techniques in the class, and then being blamed by the supervisors.

G. Devised situation

The participants believed in some research articles devised situation are provided by the researchers to meet the aims; however, in real classroom some of those activities are not applicable.

-In most of research articles, one specific skill is under investigation; therefore, those

teachers had tried to put more emphasis on that specific skill, while in real life this is not the case. In language institutes we have to focus on integrations of four language skills. I think they cannot be applied during the whole sessions.

-I believe SLA research cannot be done objectively; they all suffer from degrees of subjectivity and that's why we cannot apply the findings of others in our own classes.

3.3 Particularity

Most of the participants believed that the knowledge they gain from their own teaching experience is more relevant to their teaching than the knowledge they gain from research. They mainly believed that, sometimes, the findings of the research are not socially appropriate to be applied in our classes. They provided some reasons for their claim which are classified and presented below.

A. Social context

Sometimes, what mentioned as pedagogical implications are not actually applicable in our society.

-If I need to do something besides what is said in TTCs, I use my own personal experience, because I find them culturally suitable. Some of the points mentioned in research articles are good for western cultures not for ours.

Furthermore, they mentioned that more experienced colleagues can help them more than research, since they are teaching in the same situation.

- I think teaching is more hands on experience, rather than SLA knowledge. If I encounter a problem in class, I won't search for the solution in textbooks or research articles. Most of the times I prefer to find a solution based on the existing situation. If I cannot find an effective solution, I will ask my more experienced colleagues.

- The staffroom is the best place for sharing ideas. I mean, since my colleagues are teaching in the same place and dealing with the same students they can help me a lot.

- Most research studies cannot be successful in our context. Researchers investigated the things important for their own context and found solutions applicable in their own context as well.

B. Learners

Students' attitude was also discussed as an important issue. The participants asserted that something which is considered as applicable in one situation and for one group of learners cannot be claimed to be applicable for other learners too.

-I've found out that applying such findings in our context is in fact impossible since, culturally speaking, not students and their parents nor the institute managers accept such things. A personal experience that I have was making classroom newspaper which could be of great help for the learners. However, I was not successful since not students and their parents nor were the institute managers happy with that.

C. Particular context of class

Participants pointed out that, culturally speaking, sometimes the specific classroom context is not considered in SLA research.

-I strongly believe that each class has a particular setting and something which works very well in your class may not necessarily be appropriate for my class. I mean, if you and I teach completely similar in our classes we will come to different conclusions, because not only we are different teachers but also we are teaching different students. Generally, the situations are different.

- Whatever I do is based on TTCs and my own experience. Honestly, I do never use SLA research in my teaching. I believe nothing can be replaced by my own experience, because in each specific situation, you, as a teacher, should decide what to do. The learners who had participated in that research might have some specific characteristics that my students do not.

3.4. Suggestions to fill the gaps

The last question participants were asked was about their suggestions for filling the gap between theory and practice.

The first thing they discuss was that, the researchers investigate some points which are not really the main concern of the teachers in the classrooms. To solve the problem, they suggested closer relationships between teachers and researchers.

- Researchers are mostly concerned with theory rather than practice. They need to be in constant dialogue with teachers, administrators, and even learners to find out the problem areas to be investigated.

- It should be accepted as a fact that education starts with teachers, and they should play a crucial role in the process of research.

The teachers also believed that, in research articles there is still a huge gap between theory and practice. In fact, the researchers could not present pedagogical implications well.

- Honestly, sometimes I feel I need to study more and try to put theories into practice, but when I read the articles I can only find theories again. You know researchers do not clarify what should be really done in the classes.

Most of the teachers criticized teacher education programs. They believed that SLA research and its application should be appraised in TTCs. In fact, they thought that not using SLA research does not always mean that they are not applicable, but teachers have not learned to use them.

- If in TTCs they taught us how to use research in our classes, we would be more eager to do so. Nothing special, just tell us about reliable journals and how to study and use articles.

4. Discussion

Generally, the results of this study indicated that language teachers do not frequently apply research findings in their classes. The most obvious finding was that many teachers find SLA research unsatisfactory in addressing their specific needs in language classroom. This corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous studies (Bartels, 2003; Block, 2000; Ellis, 1997; Nassaji, 2012; Tavakoli, 2015, Tavakoli& Howard, 2012, to name only a few)

One of the main issues worth discussing here was TTCs offered by institutes. Sometimes, due to some restrictions imposed to the teachers, it can be argued that their autonomy is under question. If we define teacher autonomy as “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others” (Smith, 2003, p. 1), then it can be claimed that due to too much dependence on TTCs and following specific steps in language teaching, teachers cannot use their autonomy in language institutes.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), the post method condition clearly signifies teacher autonomy. Teachers not only need to know how to teach, but also need to act autonomously within administrative restrictions imposed by institutions, textbooks, or curricula. Widdowson (1990) adds principled pragmatism in post method era which emphasizes the relationship between theory and practice. He believes that ideas can be actualized and realized through the immediate activity of teaching (as cited in Kumaravadivelu , 2012). Therefore, principled pragmatism mainly focuses on how classroom learning is managed by teachers as a result of informed teaching and critical appraisal.

Based on the results of the study, the researchers could infer that teachers cannot teach as autonomously as possible in language institutes. As they mentioned they are under control by observers and do not have freedom to decide for their classes; instead, they have to follow the rules and the steps dictated to them in TTCs.

Another important issue the researchers notice was that it is not always the matter of possibility of using research findings. Sometimes, teachers do not know or do not want to use them. This might be caused due to lack of knowledge, attitude, or motivation. This seems to be in consistence with what has been discussed by Block (2000) where he asserts that language teachers and SLA researchers believe that they belong to communities with very different Discourses. Ellis (1997), in the same line, confirmed that SLA researchers need to engage in a discourse that their academic world values and rewards. In contrast, teachers have developed discourses that address their particular needs in practice of language teaching. He believes that one important reason for the conflict between the two discourses is that SLA research and language pedagogy represent different social worlds with different attitude, beliefs, and values.

Later, Ellis (2001) argued that important progress has been made in SLA, but much of the research still do not concerned with pedagogic issues. He pointed out that many of the issues that SLA researchers examine are rooted in bodies of knowledge which, have no or little relevance to language pedagogy. According to Block (2000), much of what is done under the rubric of SLA is not directly relevant to language and not generally applicable in everyday

language teaching practice. This can be considered as the most important reason for teachers' maintenance on their reliance on their own or their colleagues' experiences than existing bodies of research. This is also in line with the findings of William and Coles' (2007).

A more important issue behind not using the available body of research can partly be related to teacher education programs. As previously mentioned, the teachers who studied in graduate levels were often more willing to use research findings in their every day practice of teaching which indicates that teacher education programs can play crucial roles in teachers' practice. In fact, if teachers gain more knowledge of SLA, their perspective toward learning and teaching will change. In previous studies, it has also been demonstrated that knowledge of SLA can have profound effects on teachers' beliefs about language learning which consequently leads to differences in their teaching practice (Erlam, 2008; McDonough, 2006; McDonald, Badger & White, 2001).

According to Wallace (1998), teacher educators can play different roles. They can function as transmitters of information about SLA, which can be of great help in applied sciences. They can also function as mentors, as in apprenticeship models of education. Finally, they can function as awareness-raisers, as in a reflective model of education to encourage teachers to examine their own teaching practice. Crandall's (2000) mentioned that based on the specific needs of individual teachers and teaching programs they are engaged with, teacher educators should play all the three roles.

Kumaravadivelu (2012) asserts that global perspectives must be adopted to present effective teacher education programs. He maintains, in order to give teachers the freedom and flexibility they deserve and desire, there should be more focus on "acceleration of agency than on acceptance of authority" (p.16). He also insists, in order to meet local lacks, needs, wants, and necessities, due attention should be paid to teacher research with local touch.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers have valuable ideas to offer to SLA researchers; researchers also have valuable insights to offer to improve teaching activities. Therefore, the researchers highly suggest close dialogues between the two. This has strongly been emphasized by previous studies too (e.g., Ellis, 1997; Pica, 2005) too. Thus, stronger connections between them like having conversations and collaborative tasks can provide invaluable information for both researchers and teachers.

5. Conclusions

This study was set to investigate how do teachers use and engage in SLA research. Based on the interviews conducted to elicit information about teachers' perspective on use of the findings of SLA research in language teaching, the researchers found out that there is a big gap between theory and practice. There are a number of important conclusions this paper would find necessary to emphasize.

First, the results of the interview suggested that teachers do not usually use the findings of SLA research in their teaching practice because they believed there are problems with possibility, practicality, and particularity of applying those findings in their real practice.

Second, the findings of the study strongly suggest that teachers' knowledge and experience, developed through teaching practice should be acknowledged as the main source they rely on to find solutions for the problems they encounter in language teaching. SLA researchers should thus be informed of this knowledge and expertise, and should design studies to address teachers' needs and requirements.

Third, based on the rules established in most language institutes, teachers have to attend TTCs where they are told how to teach. In fact, in these courses teachers are not taught specific techniques but they are offered some steady steps to be followed in the classes. This can be considered as one of the most important reasons that teachers cannot find any room for applying SLA research in their teaching practice. This is indicative of the fact that, teacher education programs can play a crucial role in teachers' understanding of teaching and learning.

Finally, based on the problems teachers had confronted, they provided some constructive suggestions to fill the gap. The most practical suggestion was to foster effective collaboration between teachers and researchers.

Although the research has reached its goal, some limitations need to be noted here. First, due to manageability purposes the number of participants was limited. Moreover, the participants of the study were only teachers, while it would be more informative if teacher educators and managers of the institute could take part in the study.

For further research, researchers may use different instruments for data collection like questionnaires and observation in order to elicit information from a larger number of practitioners. Moreover, more comprehensive results would be obtained if the stake holders could share their ideas on the use of SLA research in language pedagogy.

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