

Writing methodology texts: a view from the bridge

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'A lack of time is the predominant reason cited [for not reading research]... A perceived lack of practical relevance was also a common hindrance, as was the inaccessibility, both physical and conceptual, of published research.'

Borg, S. 2009. 'English language teachers conceptions of research.'
Applied Linguistics, 30/3, p. 370.

‘Research in second language acquisition and pedagogy almost always yields findings that are subject to interpretation rather than giving conclusive evidence.’

Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by Principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, p. 75.

‘Studies of teachers’ consumption of and attitudes towards academic research articles show that such articles do not seem to function well as a mechanism for communicating information for teachers.’

Bartels, N. 2003. ‘How teachers and researchers read academic articles.’ *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 19. p. 737.

'When the word “research” is used in any publication, readers have particular expectations about what they will read in terms of the language that is used in the publication. In most cases, such publications in education are written with a particular audience in mind that for the most part is academics'.

Farrell, T. (2016). Review of *Teacher-Researchers in Action*, by Dikilitaş et al (eds.) *ELT Journal*, 70/3, p. 352.

‘Given the hierarchical nature of the profession and the higher status of theorists [...] the voices of teachers are subordinated to the voices of others who are less centrally involved in language teaching.’

Clarke, M. A. (1994) ‘The dysfunctions of the theory/practice discourse.’
TESOL Quarterly, 28/1, pp. 12-13.

‘For the ELT practitioner the main source of professional learning is classroom experience, enriched by discussion with colleagues, feedback from students, and – for those teachers with the time and inclination – input through reading, conferences and courses, of which research is one important component. Research is not the primary basis of ELT knowledge for the practitioner, but it is a valuable supplement.’

Ur, P. (2012) ‘How useful is TESOL academic research?’ *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/oct/16/teacher-tesol-academic-research-useful>

‘It should be the responsibility of theorists and researchers to establish the “particularizability” of their work for teachers. The important question to ask is “To what extent can this information be made usable for particular teachers?”’

(Clarke 1994: 20)

‘Researchers need to be ever mindful that as much as their studies are generalisable, pedagogy is largely local...’

Han, Z. (2007) ‘Pedagogical implications: genuine or pretentious?’
TESOL Quarterly, 41/2, p. 392.

‘The practice of devoting a section on any research article to pedagogical implications might have stemmed from a fallacy that any research can be related to pedagogy. In the domain of SLA, not every topic (or study, for that matter) is relevant to second language teaching.’

Han, *op. cit.*, p. 391.

‘It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal.’

Chomsky, N. 1966. 'Linguistic theory' in *Language Teaching: broader contexts*. Report of N.E. conference on the teaching of foreign languages, Menasha, Wisconsin, pp. 43-49.

‘How is the researcher going to communicate with the consumer of his research? Does he even know what his audience is and what his audience wants?...’

Carroll, J. 1966. ‘The contributions of psychological theory and educational research to the teaching of foreign languages.’ In Valdman, A. (ed.) *Trends in Language Teaching*. New York. McGraw-Hill, PP. 97 – 98.

‘There could be an analogue of the county agent in education: the individual who makes a specialty of communicating the findings of research to the potential consumer, the teacher, teacher trainer, educational policymaker, or preparer of instructional material.... The major problem that would be encountered... is the shortage of persons qualified to do this kind of educational liaison.’

Carroll, J. 1966. ‘The contributions of psychological theory and educational research to the teaching of foreign languages.’ In Valdman, A. (ed.) *Trends in Language Teaching*. New York. McGraw-Hill, PP. 97 – 98.

‘As the various fields of theory develop and proliferate, the demands on those introducing theory to practitioners grow ever more complex. That is why intellectual guides to the whole area and its many perspectives are needed, as a resource for trainers and educators and as a way of demonstrating the richness of available perspectives to practitioners wishing to understand and develop their practice.’

McNamara, T. 2008. 'Mapping the scope of theory in TESOL.' *TESOL Quarterly*, 42/2, p.304.

'One way of bridging the divide between the two discourses is to devise a theoretical discourse that is accessible to teachers. This is what the pedagogic literature – in particular, teacher guides – seeks to achieve by attempting to explain the ‘process of performance’ in terms that teachers can understand and relate to. In contrast, the theoretical discourse of SLA typically makes no attempt to be accessible to teachers.'

Ellis, R. & Shintani, N. 2014. *Exploring language pedagogy through SLA Research*. London: Routledge. p.331.

1. How did you get into writing methodology texts?
2. How important is it, do you think, to link research and classroom practice?
3. How have you kept/do you keep abreast of new developments in research, e.g. SLA, corpus linguistics, neurobiology etc?
4. Given that most research is somewhat inconclusive, how do you select from – and prioritize – the research findings that inform your texts?
5. Do you feel you have an ‘agenda’, i.e. a bias towards a particular theoretical (or a-theoretical) position? If so, do you think this matters?
6. If not (or even if so) do you attempt to be balanced/impartial/non-prescriptive? How do you achieve this?
7. Does it concern you that you might be ‘dumbing down’ or otherwise misrepresenting research findings? How do you guard against this?
8. To what do you attribute your success? (Don’t be modest!)

1. How did you get into writing methodology texts?

JS: I thought there was a real space in the market for a book that focused on the *hows* a teacher needed when doing a short intensive practical course like CTEFLA (CELTA)... I basically then spent three years trying to write down everything I knew about teaching (much of it gained from watching my colleagues teach).

DB: Early in my career (mid-1970s) I found that no one current textbook fit my needs for assigned readings for courses, and considered writing my own book. When a Prentice Hall rep came to my office asking if I had any books “up my sleeve,” that was all the impetus I needed.

PU: I got excited about things that worked for me in the classroom, and wanted to share...

JH: It started when I wrote notes to accompany/ follow up my somewhat incoherent input on a teacher training course in Mexico many years ago.

2. How important is it, do you think, to link research and classroom practice?

JH: I simply fail to understand people who deny the role of research in helping us understand our practice and improve it. Research is, after all, what all good teachers would do if they had the chance.

DB: Imperative! Teachers need to ground their teaching in research-based findings and assumptions. And, more importantly, teachers themselves should not shrink from engaging in their own classroom-based “action research.” It’s an all-important interaction.

PU: It's sometimes a useful support and can provide interesting insights, but it's certainly possible to write helpful and valid professional guidance for teachers with no research references whatsoever.

JS: I've never found much formal "research" very helpful to my own classroom work. I am not "anti-research" but I do carry a suspicion of many statistical studies in teaching.

My teaching is not applying linguistics. Rather, it is about tuning in to people and attempting, moment by moment, to help create a space where learning can happen. I more often look at the literature to see if it can help me understand what I have already noticed myself.

‘From the beginning, TEFL in the States has been closely tied to developments in linguistics, so closely that in the States we assume this relationship or collaboration. This does not universally seem to be the situation in Britain. Indeed, linguistics seems suspect among people in TEFL there.’

Womack (1969) cited in Rixon, S. & Smith, R. (2017) *A History of IATEFL*. Faversham, Kent: IATEFL.

3. How have you kept/do you keep abreast of new developments in research, e.g. SLA, corpus linguistics, neurobiology etc?

DB: By teaching university courses myself and disciplining myself to set aside reading time. Purposeful reading of summaries of research in edited “state of the art” volumes helps to acquire information in subfields that are of interest but not in my central focus.

PU: It's impossible to keep abreast of it all. I regularly scroll through the major ELT and applied linguistics journals, and have an 'alert' on Google Scholar which notifies me when a new article comes out on one of the subjects I have listed I'm interested in [...] Inevitably, I'm sure I'm missing some key publications, but on the other hand things that are really important get cited by those I *am* reading, so sooner or later I think I get most of the major stuff. But certainly not all.

JH: Teachers journals, published books etc - though I fear that I do not have enough time to do as much of that as I should. [...] The large number of teachers' conferences and seminars that I attend [...] News media, magazines and, increasingly, social media where news about new research often breaks.

JS: For some years I think Twitter has been a very important signpost to interesting articles and websites [...] In general, I have been more inspired by research in science areas (quantum physics, brain, astronomy etc) than by mainstream ELT / language learning research). *New Scientist* magazine is excellent in pointing towards science books worth reading.

4. *Given that most research is somewhat inconclusive, how do you select from – and prioritize – the research findings that inform your texts?*

DB: The selection of findings to inform my writing is based on degrees of (1) *validity* through triangulation of findings, (2) *relevance* of findings to pedagogy, and (3) *practicality* of those findings for classroom teachers.

PU: One criterion is, obviously, that I feel the research is reliable – well-designed and carefully executed, with convincing evidence and logical conclusions. Another is that it's not on a trivial or very limited subject [...] Another is that it provides some interesting and non-obvious insight (sometimes even counter-intuitive).

JH: I go for what seems plausible to me. But I have to be careful (and suspicious) of my own unreliable instinct ... There IS an element of fashion in this too, of course. Readers of a general methodology book need to know what is most 'current'.

JS: Mainly, I think I write what I do and what I see other teachers doing. Informed ideas that may or may not work for others. These need to fit in with my own internal schema for how I think people learn, study, behave etc.

5. Do you feel you have an 'agenda', i.e. a bias towards a particular theoretical (or a-theoretical) position? If so, do you think this matters?

PU: I really try hard in my own writing to be as objective as possible. The problem arises when a researcher's data seems to contradict my own experience-based opinions: so then I have to read the research very carefully, re-examine my own experience, and try to decide who is right, or how they might both be.

JH: Rather boringly, I try not to be seduced by any particular position and my absolute certainties about what we do tend to fluctuate (although core beliefs remain the same I think).....I write 'general' methodology and I see it as my duty to try and present a balanced picture of what is going on - showing where alternative views of what is going on can be relevant.

JS: I have been very influenced throughout my career by the voices I came across in IH Hastings – especially the educational world view of Carl Rogers. This is what I think of as “muscular hard-edged humanism” based on honest, uncompromising feedback cycles...

DB: Everyone has biases, but I try to be as fair-minded as possible in weighing relevant alternatives.

Having said that, I firmly believe that language learning is a universal means for multicultural communication and reaching across national and linguistic borders, as well as appreciating and affirming diversity in points of view. I always remind my teachers that they have a social responsibility to appreciate that diversity among their students, to be nonjudgmental in responses to students, and to remind their students that language is a bridge to global peace. If that's a bias, so be it!

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7. Does it concern you that you might be 'dumbing down' or otherwise misrepresenting research findings? How do you guard against this?

JS: No... I think there is a valid place for practical manuals for teaching that do not encumber the reader with all the background understanding the author has acquired.

JH: I worry about dumbing down all the time. If I see it as a useful service to make some complex ideas more accessible to practising teachers, then the corollary is that I may (and almost certainly do) fall into the trap of oversimplification. It's something I desperately try to guard against.

DB: The best way to guard against it is to provide concrete examples and “show” (rather than “tell”) how research informs pedagogical decisions and actions. I always try to represent research findings in language that’s comprehensible to my audience of language teacher education students.

PU: I don't think this worries me. Research which is very complicated and difficult I can't understand anyway, so I'm not about to dumb it down because I'm too dumb myself to deal with it in the first place. If I understand a research study then it can probably be understood by other teachers as well, except they don't have the time or resources to read it.

8. To what do you attribute your success? (Don't be modest!)

DB: I avoid language that's pedantic and academically stuffy. I talk to my readers as I would in a classroom setting or sitting down with them in conversation.

PU: People tell me they like my books and talks because they are 'practical'.... At the same time, I can explain the underlying rationale and quote supporting research where appropriate, have 'done my homework', as it were.

JS: It is not the content of my books that is most often mentioned, but the voice. I've been told that I sound like a real teacher – someone who quite obviously has taught a lot - talking to them...

JH: I seem to have found a writing 'voice' that many teachers have found congenial. I think it's as simple as that.

Conclusions:

1. Methodology writers have an interest in keeping abreast of developments in research, but largely as filtered through their own experience and 'sense of plausibility'.
2. Methodology writers use research findings less to promote new practices than to validate existing ones.
3. Methodology writers are sensitive to, and respectful of, prevailing trends, while, at the same time recognizing their possible lack of probity.
4. Methodology writing is not 'applying linguistics' so much as 'particularizing theory'.
5. Methodology writers present options rather than prescriptions.
6. Methodology writers adopt a voice that is non-academic and practitioner-oriented.

Suggestions:

1. Choose only robust studies. ‘Pedagogical implications should be strictly limited to clear, substantial findings....’ (Magnan, 2007)
2. Avoid dogmatism. ‘Pedagogical recommendations might be made in rhetoric that suggests informed questioning... rather than declarations...’ (Magnan, 2007)
3. Read macro-studies, state-of-the-art articles, and literature reviews in recent papers.
4. Enlist expert reviewers.
5. Curb your enthusiasms!
6. Fine-tune your crap detector!
7. Don’t presume ... that your book matters...

Thank you!

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