Evolving the TESOL teaching-research nexus

Jim McKinley, University College London

Abstract

This paper makes further calls for more TESOL research to be conducted in the teaching-research nexus; specifically, for the research to be more grounded in classroom-contexts, and for methods to be more transparent about the messiness of doing real-world classroom research. I present two key calls for TESOL researchers: 1) to collaborate with teachers and ensure research questions are driven by practice-based problems; and 2) to report classroom research by being honest about the messinesss of their real-world data. The desired outcome of these calls is more transparency in research, resulting ideally in a better balance of teaching-informed research and research-informed teaching, and potentially the development of what some refer to as the 'holistic academic', referring to researchers who can shift easily within a range of relevant identities: including a researcher, teacher, and manager.

Introduction

TESOL research was traditionally led by researcher-practitioners, who acknowledged real-world English language teaching problems (in alignment with developments in establishing applied linguistics as a field of study) as the basis for research enquiries. Take, for instance, *TESOL Quarterly*'s first two issues: Published in 1967, articles offer descriptions of and suggestions for actual classroom practices. Some include sample exercises, based on either the author's own practices (see e.g. Arapoff, 1967) or on a combination of literature and personal experience (see e.g. Ross, 1967). Over time however, the focus moved away from anecdotes for teaching English towards empirical TESOL research, grounded in educational, linguistic or psychological principles. This movement was part of a larger trend in educational research and has led to continued calls from some higher education scholars to re-focus on the teaching-research nexus (see e.g. Neumann, 1992). These changes have contributed to a teaching and research bifurcation, where studies conducted by researchers who are removed from teaching tend to be more highly valued by the TESOL research community than many of the practical classroom-based, teaching-led work done by researcher-practitioners.

The reality we increasingly face is one where TESOL practitioners do not read or use applied linguistics research to inform teaching, relying instead on developing teaching skills from their own practice (Paran, 2017; Rose & McKinley, 2017a). Even where teachers are willing and interested in engaging with the research, they may be less aware of instructionally-oriented research, and may have less physical access to it (see Sato & Loewen, 2019 on teachers' engagement with instructional second language acquisition, or *ISLA* research). The lack of engagement with the research may also be due to the sanitized and idealized nature of published studies (Rose & McKinley, 2017b), conducted by researchers who often are not practitioners (see Ur, 2012). This results in decontextualized research publications, which do not always reflect the messiness of the real world, nor the complex issues that teachers deal with in their daily practices. Medgyes (2017) argues there may be no reason for teachers to engage with researchers, since there is no more assurance that

research findings should be any more trustworthy and informative than teachers' experience. But as Paran (2017) warns, researchers need to avoid isolating themselves from teachers, and should encourage teachers "to influence the research agenda" (p. 506). And as Marsden and Kasprowicz's (2017) large-scale study of UK-based foreign language teachers' lack of engagement with research showed, researchers should be finding ways for teachers to evaluate their work, to make their research part of teachers' communities of practice. These recent encouragements are significant, yet the bifurcation of teaching and research in TESOL persists. This paper, framed within higher education contexts, explores this concern from the position that researchers will continue to struggle with the teaching-research nexus in TESOL until we change or 'evolve' our understanding of it.

In this paper, while the idea is certainly not new, I make a further call for more TESOL research to be conducted in the teaching-research nexus; specifically, for the research to be more grounded in classroom-contexts, and for methods to be more transparent about the messiness of doing real-world classroom research (see Leung, Harris & Rampton, 2004). I present two key calls for TESOL researchers: 1) to collaborate with teachers and ensure research questions are driven by practice-based problems; and 2) to report classroom research by being honest about the messinesss of their real-world data. The desired outcome of these calls is more transparency in research, resulting ideally in a better balance of teaching-informed research and research-informed teaching, and potentially the development of what some refer to as the 'holistic academic' (e.g. Macfarlane, 2011), referring to researchers who can shift easily within a range of relevant identities: including a researcher, teacher, and manager.

Bifurcation of teaching and research

With the increase of narrowly-focused specialisation in modern higher education, and in the wake of the growing pressure for universities to climb the world rankings, competitive research output quota and research excellence frameworks that favour big data research have been introduced to boost (or maintain) the positions of globally-competitive universities (see McKinley et al., 2019). This influence is seen across the disciplines, increasing concerns about a bifurcation of teaching and research, especially in traditionally practice-based fields such as TESOL. Researchers have been exploring the different perspectives of TESOL researchers and practitioners on various aspects of English language teaching for decades, maintaining a separation between two populations. For example, Ebsworth and Schweers (1997) reported that researchers' approaches to teaching grammar contrasted with those of English language teachers. While the authors suggest that teachers would benefit from reading up on the research that has been done on this topic, they acknowledge that teachers also have insight into these issues based on their own teaching experience, not from the research. Their study targets TESOL researchers' need to incorporate teachers' perspectives in theory generation, acknowledging that these researchers were drifting further from practical teaching concerns.

TESOL research experienced a "coming of age" in the 1970s and early 80s when a substantial increase in quantitative studies were noted (see Henning, 1986, p. 704). Then the increase of qualitative TESOL research in the 1990s was considered a second coming of age (see Lazaraton, 2000). The maturation of TESOL research, however, has not necessarily been coupled with an equal 'coming of age' regarding university teaching—university teaching plays a very small part in ranking algorithms, and it is understandably not as easily measured. Having spent at one time more than a decade as a researcher-practitioner of TESOL in a university in Japan where the focus was on teaching, I have since been indoctrinated into UK higher education, dramatically shifting my focus away from teaching and toward research. I am now, it seems, part of the well-oiled machine that regularly produces research output, making great efforts to secure research funding that 'buys' me

out of teaching. This is the mark of success, bringing congratulatory praises from colleagues and the university.

The teaching and research nexus

But not all stories are like this—there is hope for the teaching-research nexus in TESOL. There is, in fact, a considerable amount of collaborative research investigating classroom language teaching currently conducted by university and school based researchers. For example, in Ntelioglou et al. (2014), we see a study initiated by two primary school teachers in Toronto who invited researchers Jim Cummins and Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou to collaborate on research designed to help the teachers to better understand student academic engagement for improving their literacy development. In Banegas et al. (2013), we see a group of secondary school EFL teachers in Argentina, led by researcher Dario Banegas while working on his PhD, carry out action research into their own teaching practices to make changes that addressed the changing student motivation and interest in their context. These studies, among others, provide valuable illustrations of the strengths of TESOL researcher-teacher collaboration.

Action research is certainly an important tool to bring about convergence between teaching and research. In TESOL, seminal research in many domains of study owes much of its development to the 'teacher as researcher' movement in the 1980s. But it also found strength from both sides: not only teachers publishing their own research to share their answers to their own questions, but also researchers recognising the importance in their research of being in the classroom and, for *participant* action research, participating in what goes on there (see e.g. Auerbach's report in Cumming, 1994). It was often described as a collaborative approach, where teachers and academics might have been equal partners (see e.g. van Lier, 1994). Over time, action research has come to be described as the work (and property) of *teacher practitioners* (see Burns, 2011), leaving assiduous researchers interested in (or at least willing to) getting involved in real-world classroom practices out of the discussion. While this change seems to have happened naturally and gradually, it adds to the problem of understanding the evolving nature of the teaching-research nexus in TESOL.

Such research plays an important role in TESOL teacher training, as indeed, "there seem to be few preparatory and in-service programs for language teachers… that do not now advocate some form of introduction to practitioner enquiry, usually in the form of action research" (Burns, 2011, p. 238). More than two decades ago, TESOL researchers questioned traditional training, noting the dilemma of teacher education programs that provide novice teachers with a great deal of research-driven theory but very little practical teacher training, creating difficulties for the novice teachers and their schools (Johnson, 1996). They also argued for the need to reconceptualise the knowledge base of language teacher education to shift teacher education toward more understanding of teaching activity (Freeman & Johnson, 1996). The dilemma continues in issues such as computer-assisted language learning (CALL) training. In their study of teacher education programs and CALL, Hegelheimer et al. (2004) noted different post-graduation goals, including *teacher*, *teacher-trainer*, or *researcher*. They produced a sample approach to supporting both CALL teaching and research through practical skills training that relied on both theory and practice.

More recently, applied linguistics researchers have focused more on pedagogy, especially among ISLA researchers (see e.g. Loewen & Sato, 2017), and TESOL researchers have made calls for teachers to be more involved in TESOL research (see e.g. Burton, 1998), leading researchers to give more consideration to how their research is reaching teachers. But this is extremely difficult where TESOL researchers are inaccessible to teachers, as they are under pressure to produce more research output in an environment that values research over teaching. Thus, the problem we now face is that

researchers are becoming increasingly isolated, far removed from real-world classroom practices. An example of teachers' lack of access to researchers is highlighted by the TESOL conference's event "Tea with Distinguished TESOLers", whereby teachers need to pay for the opportunity to briefly access researchers.

The holistic TESOL professional

Legitimizing TESOL as a field of research seems to have involved increasing individual-led clinical linguistic studies, and moving away from collaborative practice-based studies. This only adds to the fragmentation of the TESOL researcher-practitioner. Stewart (2006) expressed concern about Norton's (2004) *TESOL Quarterly* edited forum on teaching issues that made the distinction of the separated collaborator roles of a *teacher*, the one responsible for providing the real-world data, and a *researcher,* the one responsible for conducting and publishing the study. In addition to adding to the ongoing discussion in which research is more highly valued than teaching, Stewart raised the question as to why the distinction Norton made between the roles was necessary.

In such collaborative TESOL research, the one who teaches, rather than *the teacher*, would be a *researcher-practitioner*, or perhaps for lack of a better expression: a 'holistic TESOL professional', who is part of the evolution of the nexus of teaching and research in higher education. Nearly thirty years ago, the idea of holistic approaches to TESOL was reported in *TESOL Quarterly* to promote the importance of integrating the 'whole language' through real-world informed activities (Rigg, 1991). Today, suggestions of the 'holistic academic' as one who balances their teaching and research is held as an ideal of a personal nature, rather than an institutional one (Macfarlane, 2011). In TESOL, while it is sufficiently common to find an academic who did at one time teach English, it is less common to find them still teaching English unless they are in contexts where English language teaching is part of their academic role. In these contexts, where academics are required to teach English language, for example Japan, the weight of the teaching on their schedules usually leads to less opportunity to devote time to research. Indeed, in these contexts, institutions likely have less expectation of research output, recognising the obligations of teaching as substantial and in many cases the main contribution to the institution. These academics are in better positions to identify as TESOL researcher-practitioners (or holistic TESOL professionals), but it is not always up to them how they choose to balance teaching and research. In contexts where academics are being evaluated according to research output rather than teaching, their efforts to balance their identity are equally restricted.

In theory and in practice, good TESOL research should always be done collaboratively. This is the first solution to the problem presented in the previous section: TESOL researchers need to collaborate with teachers. This collaborative research should be done so that the research team works together to achieve a holistic, professional TESOL researcher-practitioner perspective. Without this, research conducted by non-practitioners is at risk of being out of touch with the real world.

Embracing the messiness of real-world TESOL research

While the value of engaging with 'real-world' classrooms was part of the very foundation of TESOL research, these days many researchers are apprehensive to conduct highly-contextualized classroom-based research due to perceived methodological messiness. In Rigg's (1991) *TESOL Quarterly* article, she explained the importance of "a willingness to accept the messiness that comes with opening the study to real people living real lives" (p. 536). The discussion drew on the ethnographic nature of the 'whole world' approach to TESOL, understanding that learners are real people with real lives, and their personal histories and reflections are both valuable and

unpredictable. Such messiness in TESOL research needs to be acknowledged for a number of reasons, including:

- the need to control it in teacher-student relationships in the classroom (Li, 2012),
- to appreciate it as a reflection of real-world interactions that might otherwise be lost in the rigorous treatment of academic work (Etherington, 2017),
- to recognise it in representations of cultural and racial stereotypes (Lee & Simon-Maeda, 2006)
- to recognise it in language and identity research (Giampapa, 2016),
- to admit it as an inherent characteristic of narrative reporting structures in qualitative research (Casanave, 2014)

While these are just a few examples, the next step after acknowledging the inherent messiness of TESOL research is to decide how such messiness is positioned within the research itself.

In addition to the messiness of the subject matter in TESOL research is the messiness of conducting it. In research with people—teachers, students, parents, school management and policy makers—it is inevitable that things will go wrong during data collection. Participants suddenly withdraw for various reasons, conflicts of interest arise, policies change the context for the inquiry, there are unexpected findings that challenge fundamental conceptualisations—any of these common problems have the potential of ruining an otherwise perfectly planned and conducted TESOL study. These are realities that experienced researchers know all too well, and in most cases, know how to navigate when it comes to the expectations of academic publishing. The result being research reports that show few of the difficulties faced along the way, hiding messiness from the view of the reader. For teachers and novice researchers, mostly what they see when accessing the scholarly literature are sanitized, idealized versions of TESOL research, as journals tend not to publish studies that are portrayed as methodologically problematic. There is an inherent problem where academic rigour of published research does not allow for admissions or confessions of mistakes made or dilemmas experienced in the research process; messiness should not be seen to detract from methodological rigour, but to reflect the realities of the contexts under investigation.

In some of the work identified earlier in this paper (see Burns, 2011; Etherington, 2017; Giampapa, 2016; Lee & Simon-Maeda, 2006), a connection is made between the messiness of TESOL research and the need to be reflexive (i.e. sustained, ongoing thinking about research, as opposed to *reflective*, or retrospective thinking about research). Attia and Edge (2017) explain that through reflexivity, the messiness and discomfort that can occur in TESOL research can present important opportunities and challenges for researcher development. This presents a valuable potential second solution to the problem of inaccessible TESOL research: TESOL researchers need to be reflexive about their research, and be transparent in their reporting of the research processes involved. This way, not only do readers get a chance to learn from the real experiences of the researchers, they can also see that TESOL research is inherently messy, leading to gains in confidence to conduct their own research without the pressure of producing something methodologically 'perfect'.

Closing remarks

In TESOL, the idea of a teaching-research nexus has always been complicated by the very nature of field, as the T in TESOL is for teaching, not research. Calling for TESOL researchers to collaborate more with teachers and to embrace the messiness of classroom-based research seems straightforward enough, and we know that there is a substantial body of research that embraces such collaboration, yet the bifurcation of teaching and research continues to grow. The changing higher education sector is one substantial catalyst. Recent years have seen further movement toward placing pressure on academics to produce research only for the highest-impact academic journals. These journals are often more concerned with controlled studies underpinned by

methodological rigour than in real-world educational practices, leading TESOL researchers to not only abandon contextualized holistic research in favour of controlled abstract research, but also to undervalue teaching itself. The highly-biased valuing of research over teaching is extremely damaging to academia that continues to fortify its 'ivory tower' (see Rose, 2019, this issue).

So, this familiar call goes out not only to TESOL researchers, but also journal editors and higher education policy makers. We need to be working together to integrate ourselves more as researcher-practitioners (or holistic TESOL professionals), and we are in an ideal position to pave the way for other disciplines in the pursuit of the holistic academic. Let TESOL inquiry show that the teaching-research nexus is evolving, and serve as an example of how all those involved serve to gain from this understanding. While the call may seem to be setting a lofty goal at this stage, the more we promote TESOL research in collaboration with teachers, and the more we embrace transparency and real-world value in our research, the closer we will be to achieving that goal.

The author

Jim McKinley is an associate professor of TESOL and applied linguistics and MA TESOL Pre-Service programme director at UCL Institute of Education. He previously taught ESOL for many years in Australia and Japan. His interests are research methods, second language writing, and internationalization of higher education, especially regarding English medium instruction.

References

Arapoff, N. (1967). Writing: A thinking process. *TESOL Quarterly*, *1*(2), 33-39. https://doi.org/10.2307/3585751

Attia, M., & Edge, J. (2017). Be(com)ing a reflexive researcher: A developmental approach to research methodology. *Open Review of Educational Research*, *4*(1), 33-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/23265507.2017.1300068

Banegas, D., Pavese, A., Velázquez, A., & Vélez, S. M. (2013). Teacher professional development through collaborative action research: Impact on foreign English-language teaching and learning. *Educational Action Research*, *21*(2), 185-201. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2013.789717

Burns, A. (2011). Action research in the field of second language teaching and learning. In Hinkel, E. (Ed.). *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, *vol. 2* (pp. 237-253). New York: Routledge.

Burton, J. (1998). A cross-case analysis of teacher involvement in TESOL research. *TESOL Quarterly*, *32*(3), 419-446. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588116

Casanave, C. P. (2014). Uses of narrative in L2 writing research. In Matsuda, P. K. & Silva, T. (Eds.). *Second Language Writing Research: Perspectives on the Process of Knowledge Construction, 3rd edn.* (pp. 17-32). New York: Routledge.

Cumming, A. (1994). Alternatives in TESOL research: Descriptive, interpretive, and ideological orientations. *TESOL Quarterly*, *28*(4), 673-703. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587555

Ebsworth, M. E., & Schweers, C. W. (1997). What researchers say and practitioners do: Perspectives on conscious grammar instruction in the ESL classroom. *Applied Language Learning*, *8*, 237-260.

Etherington, S. (2017). Mess and method: Researching others' realities. In Etherington, S. & Daubney, M. (Eds.). *Developing as an EFL researcher: Stories from the field* (pp. 44-47). Faversham: IATEFL.

Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, *32*(3), 397-417. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588114

Giampapa, F. (2016). The politics of researcher identities: Opportunities and challenges in identities research. In Preece, S. (Ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity* (pp. 289-303), London: Routledge.

Hegelheimer, V., Reppert, K., Broberg, M., Daisy, B., Grgurovic, M., Middlebrooks, K., & Liu, S. (2004). Preparing the new generation of CALL researchers and practitioners: What nine months in an MA program can (or cannot) do. *ReCALL*, *16*(2), 432-447. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004001223

Henning, G. (1986). Quantitative methods in language acquisition research. *TESOL Quarterly, 20,* 701–708. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586520

Johnson, K. E. (1996). The role of theory in L2 teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, *30*(4), 765-771. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587933

Lazaraton, A. (2000). Current trends in research methodology and statistics in applied linguistics. *TESOL Quarterly*, *34*(1), 175-181. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588103

Lee, E., & Simon-Maeda, A. (2006). Racialized research identities in ESL/EFL research. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(3), 573-594. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264544

Leung, C., Harris, R., & Rampton, B. (2004). Living with inelegance in qualitative research on task-based learning. In K. Toohey & B. Norton (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 242-267). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Li, L. (2012). Belief construction and development: Two tales of non-native English speaking student teachers in a TESOL programme. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language), 6*(1), 33-58.

Loewen, S. & Sato, M. (Eds.). (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Instructed Second Language Acquisition.* New York: Routledge.

Macfarlane, B. (2011). The morphing of academic practice: Unbundling and the rise of the para-academic. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *65*(1), 59-73. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00467.x

Marsden, E. & Kasprowicz, R. (2017). Foreign language educators' exposure to research: Reported experiences, exposure via citations, and a proposal for action. *Modern Language Journal, 101*(4), 613-642. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12426

McKinley, J., Harris, A., Jones, M., McIntosh, S., & Milligan, L. (2019). An exploration of the teaching-research nexus in the humanities and social sciences in higher education. *British Academy,* in press.

Medgyes, P. (2017). The (ir)relevance of academic research for the language teacher. *ELT Journal 71*(4), 491-498. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx034

Neumann, R. (1992). Perceptions of the teaching-research nexus: A framework for analysis. *Higher Education*, *23*(2), 159-171. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00143643

Norton, B. (Ed.). (2004). Teacher-researcher collaboration in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 38*, 335–343. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588385

Ntelioglou, B. Y., Fannin, J., Montanera, M., & Cummins, J. (2014). A multilingual and multimodal approach to literacy teaching and learning in urban education: A collaborative inquiry project in an inner city elementary school. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *5*, art. 533.

Paran, A. (2017). "Only connect": Researchers and teachers in dialogue. *ELT Journal 71*(4), 499-508. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx033

Rigg, P. (1991). Whole language in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, *25*(3), 521-542. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586982

Rose, H. (2019). Dismantling the ivory tower in TESOL: A renewed call for teaching-informed research. *TESOL Quarterly,* forthcoming.

Rose, H. & McKinley, J. (2017a). The prevalence of pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics: Extending the debate. *Applied Linguistics, 38*(4), 599-604. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw042

Rose, H., & McKinley, J. (2017b). Realities of doing research in applied linguistics. In McKinley, J. & Rose, H. (Eds.). *Doing Research in Applied Linguistics: Realities, Dilemmas and Solutions* (pp. 1-10). Abingdon: Routledge.

Ross, J. (1967). The language laboratory in a small TESOL Program. *TESOL Quarterly*, *1*(1), 15-23. https://doi.org/10.2307/3585908

Sato, M., & Loewen, S. (2019). Do teachers care about research? The research–pedagogy dialogue. *ELT Journal*, *73*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy048

Stewart, T. (2006). Teacher-researcher collaboration or teachers' research?. *TESOL Quarterly, 40*(2), 421-430. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264529

Ur, P. (2012 Oct 16). How useful is TESOL academic research? *The Guardian,* 18 paras. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/oct/16/teacher-tesol-academic-research-useful

Van Lier, L. (1994). Action research. *Sintagma: Revista de lingüística*, *6*, 31-37.