SYMPOSIUM: RESEARCH AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

TESOL Quarterly will occasionally feature debates and discussions on emerging topics of interest in the profession. Leading scholars who represent diverse perspectives will comment briefly on the topic. In this issue, we focus on the place of pedagogical implications in the research articles we publish and, by extension, the connection between research and pedagogy in general. This symposium was occasioned by a reader response from ZhaoHong Han. I invited a former TQ editor, editors of two leading research journals, and the editor of an international practitioner-based journal to comment briefly on the topic.

Pedagogical Implications: Genuine or Pretentious?

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A central mission of TESOL Quarterly (TQ), as stated in its submission guidelines is “to publish manuscripts that contribute to bridging theory and practice in the profession,” and then, as its main submission category, TQ invites “full-length articles [that] present empirical research and analyze original data that the author has obtained using sound research methods” (TESOL, 2007). Indeed, many such articles have appeared in the journal over the years. However, what has also become increasingly eye-catching is a tendency in authors, in particular, those who report on experimental research, to have an add-on section, variously labeled “Pedagogical Implications,” “Classroom Implications,” “Applications to Practice,” and the like, to ostentatiously link the research to practice. This gesture is often more pretentious than genuine, for it does not seem warranted by the research reported. It is therefore not clear whether the authors indeed felt that they had sufficient empirical basis for drawing pedagogical implications or they did so because the reviewers had mandated them to draw such implications, guided by the journal’s criteria for evaluating the suitability of a manuscript for publication, such as the following:

The manuscript strengthens the relationship between theory and practice: Practical articles must be anchored in theory, and theoretical articles...
Either being the case, this practice can have such far-reaching ramifications given the journal’s wide circulation and diverse readership, which includes individuals “who may not have familiarity with the subject matter addressed” (TESOL, 2007), that it merits the field’s attention.

AN ILLUSTRATION

By way of illustration, Kim (2006) reported on an empirical study that sought to measure the effects of input modifications (via lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement) on incidental acquisition of low-frequency vocabulary. The study deployed an experimental design of six 20-minute-exposure conditions and three test tasks to measure postexposure performance. The study’s participants were 297 Korean learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Vocabulary acquisition was operationalized as form versus meaning recognition of isolated words. The results, as Kim summarized, were

(a) LE [lexical elaboration] alone did not aid form recognition of vocabulary.
(b) Explicit LE alone aided meaning recognition of vocabulary.
(c) TE [typographical enhancement] did not aid form and meaning recognition of vocabulary.
(d) LE and TE combined did not aid form recognition of vocabulary.
(e) Both explicit and implicit LE aided meaning recognition of vocabulary.
(f) Explicit and implicit LE did not differ in their effect on form and meaning recognition of vocabulary.
(g) Whether a text was further enhanced in addition to either explicit or implicit LE did not seem to affect the acquisition of the previously unknown words’ forms or meanings. (p. 341)

In a nutshell, the study yielded the finding that explicit lexical elaboration helped meaning recognition of the target words but not form recognition, and in contrast, typographical enhancement of words helped form recognition but not meaning recognition. In addition, there was no significant interaction between lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement.
Based on these findings, Kim concluded the research report with six "pedagogical implications":

- Explicit lexical elaboration emerges as an effective approach to help L2 learners recognize the meanings of low-frequency L2 vocabulary from reading. Different types of explicit lexical elaboration devices can be used for this purpose.

- To maximize the effect of explicit lexical elaboration, the text can be enhanced typographically. Although not systematically manipulated in this study, combining different types of typographical input enhancement that are proven effective with college-level Korean learners of EFL can increase their effectiveness.

- This study enhanced only the L2 target words, not their lexical elaborations. However, as long as the least distracting type of typographical input enhancement can be used optimally, the target words can be enhanced along with their lexical elaborations. This double treatment should better draw L2 learners' attention to form (i.e., target words) and meaning (i.e., lexical elaborations) at the same time.

- As with Laufer and Hill (2000) and Lomicka (1998), information technology can be harnessed to provide an electronic or online version of an elaborated and enhanced reading text. Extensive use of hyperlinked text and multimedia can maximize the effects discussed in this study for the teaching of reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. High speed Internet connections are available virtually anywhere in Korea at fairly reasonable cost, which affords Korean EFL a strategic advantage.

- As previous research into incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition found, a single exposure to L2 vocabulary in this study resulted in limited but selectively significant acquisition. This result provides at least indirect evidence that multiple exposures to the same words in different contexts are necessary to consolidate knowledge of those words.

- Multiple exposures to the same words entail that L2 learners either meet those words in the same text multiple times in one sitting or encounter them repeatedly in different texts over an extended period of time. For example, freshman English programs in Korea can design a reading program that extends over a semester or so, where English language learners choose reading materials of interest that are relevant to their academic areas. The reading materials will present target words in explicitly elaborated and typographically enhanced form. (pp. 366–367)

As expressed, these "implications" are a mixed bag of recommendations (i.e., "explicit lexical elaboration" and "double treatment") and suggestions on how to fulfill them, some of which are general (e.g., "Different types of explicit lexical devices can be used [for lexical elaboration]"
and some of which are specific (e.g., “extensive use of hyperlinked text and multimedia”).

It is important to note that when these proposed implications are pitted against the findings from the study, it is immediately clear that a preponderance of them are far-fetched; there is little or insufficient empirical support for them. Consider the two recommendations. First, with regard to “explicit lexical elaboration,” although the study generated some favorable results, it is necessary to keep in mind that the study was the first published research of its kind,¹ and as such, there is, as a whole, insufficient empirical evidence, and hence a very limited or inconclusive understanding, of its efficacy on incidental vocabulary acquisition.

With regard to “double treatment” involving typographical enhancement, the study, as noted earlier, reported a significant effect for typographical enhancement in form recognition of words, but existing research at large has depicted a conflicting picture regarding its efficacy for second language morphosyntactic and vocabulary development (see, e.g., Barcroft, 2003; Izumi, 2002; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty, 1995; Leow, 1997). Although the jury is still out on the ultimate efficacy of typographical enhancement (cf. Wong, 2003), two preliminary findings from this body of research are especially relevant to the present discussion. One finding is that too much artificial salience is not necessarily beneficial to learning, for it can encourage learners to cultivate an overuse of linguistic features that becomes hard to undo (see, e.g., Alanan, 1995; Jourdenais et al., 1995; Leeman, Arteagoitia, Friedman, & Doughty, 1995; Overstreet, 1998). A second finding is that simultaneously focusing learners’ attention on meaning and form during input processing may lead to a trade-off effect, such that one is processed at the expense of the other (see, e.g., Overstreet, 1998; VanPatten, 1992). Kim’s own study has corroborated this particular finding insofar as it shows (a) that typographical enhancement aided recognition of the form but not the meaning of the target words, (b) that explicit or implicit lexical elaboration did just the opposite, and (c) that when explicit or implicit lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement were combined, there was no superior effect for either form or meaning recognition over that produced when either approach was used alone (see Kim, 2006, Table 8). If these findings are confirmed by further research, double treatment should not be recommended for implementation in a pedagogical setting.

Finally, as a further compromise to the overall empirical basis of the alleged implications, Kim’s study suffers two critical weaknesses in its

¹ The limited research Kim cited was mostly unpublished master’s theses.
design. First, the experimental duration was too short, lasting only 20 minutes and involving only a single exposure to input. Second, the study did not effectively control for prior knowledge. As such, the findings from the study must perforce be interpreted with caution. Relating them to practice at this stage would be too far a stretch, if not misleading.

**A FALLACY**

The practice of devoting a section in 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, and the ones that are relevant may bear a direct or indirect, actual or potential, and above all, complex relationship to teaching (Ellis, 2003; Gregg, 2001). Moreover, like it or not, it is as yet a reality that on many fronts, “our knowledge of L2 development is too thin and eclectic to serve as a valid basis for application to practice” (Plenemann, 1985, p. 54), or even for proposing provisional specifications (Stenhouse, 1975), though it is equally the case that on as many others, where there has been sufficient accumulation of empirical findings, generalizations are safely drawn that deserve serious attention by teachers, materials developers, and/or curriculum designers (see, e.g., Ellis, 2005; Larsen-Freeman, 1995; Lightbown, 1985, 2000; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Towell & Hawkins, 1994; VanPatten, 2002).

**A SUGGESTION**

“SLA is still a very young field of study” (Ellis, 2005, p. 209), and for this reason alone, any excessive concern to allege or show a relationship between an empirical study and classroom practice may be counterproductive to research and practice. For researchers, such practice can create a false validity that stops them from undertaking further investigation. For practitioners who are unfamiliar with the research, on the other hand, the alleged implications may be indiscriminately embraced as a blueprint for daily classroom practice.

This is not to suggest that *TQ* should drop its mandate to prospective authors on linking research and practice, but it is to suggest that its editorial policy should be revised to reflect a more cautious stance (Hatch, 1978). The change that results should then translate into evaluation criteria that legitimize a variety of ways to articulate the link. For example, a research study may reflect this link by having a pedagogical question as its motivation; another research study may relate to an ex-
isting database that may eventually shed light on a pedagogical concern; another study may conclude, based on a careful analysis of its methodological limitations, that it is too early to draw any pedagogical implications; yet another study may offer ideas for teachers to experiment with in their own classrooms, and so forth. In all likelihood, this broadened scope will lead to a greater variety of research articles than are currently published in the journal, covering, for example, interventional, noninterventional, interpretive, or experimental research. Even so, researchers need be ever mindful that as much as their studies are generalizable, pedagogy is largely local, as pointed out by one of the reviewers. Thus, any suggestions on pedagogical implications or applications must be predicated on a sound grasp of classroom realities.

As the flagship journal of TESOL, TQ is in a unique position to provide leadership in TESOL research and practice. Inasmuch as the field is dynamic, it is imperative that its editorial practice be frequently subjected to review and modification to reflect changing conceptions and practices as well as to provide directions. Such a course of action will, inter alia, serve to preempt any inadvertent disservice to the profession by, for example, licensing researchers to inflate their findings through extending immature results to pedagogy, and, as a consequence, misleading educators into a practice that may inhibit rather than promote learning.

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REFERENCES


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