

The Gap between Research and Practice in the Field of SLA: The Rationale behind It and Bridging the Gap

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Abstract

The gap between research and practice in the field of SLA is an issue of debate in the literature. Researchers and the practitioners are concerned in their paradigm. In this paper, firstly, the gap between research and practice has been discussed; what is the gap all about? Secondly, the reasons for emerging such gap between research and practice were examined; why the gap is? Lastly, some probable solutions have been discussed to bridge the gap between research and practice; how to bridge the gap?

Keywords: SLA; research; practice; Second language teaching; second language research

INTRODUCTION

The existing gap between research and practice in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is widely discussed and acknowledged in the literature (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015; Light & Gnida, 2012; Erlam, 2008; Ellis, 2010, 2008; Stewart, 2006; Spolsky 1990; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013). Second language acquisition (SLA), at present, is the widely taught subject in the graduate and post graduate program around the world as a full pledge subject and research paradigm (Ellis, 2010). Numeral conferences and journals have given an entire platform to SLA been flourishing as a discipline of research. SLA as a discipline represents an important ground in the non-native tertiary level educational institutions, where Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), English Language Teaching (ELT) or applied linguistics is taught. However, pointing out the significance of the mismatch between research and practice, Stewart (2006) documents that the split between research and practice has been the key issue to focus in TESOL for last one decade.

Alongside the theoretical foundation, the pedagogical aspect of SLA in language teaching is the determining factor of its high evaluation as a discipline. By profession, researchers have a traditional concern to consider, not just the explanatory power of

theory, but also its relevance to second language pedagogy (Spolsky 1990: 610). One of the biggest interests of SLA always has been the pedagogical implication of the language. In fact, SLA Researchers are relentlessly attempting to establish the relationship between SLA and second language teaching and learning (Hatch, 1978; Krashen, 1983; Lightbown, 1985, 2000; Nunan, 1990, 1991; Ellis, 1994, 1997, 2008). However, research shows that in language teaching or more specifically SL teachers' or practitioners' have a mere idea and hardly practice these theories. Therefore, a gap between the theory and practice has evolved (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015; Light & Gnida, 2012; Tabatabaei & Nazem, 2013). In their research, Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2003) explain, teachers perceive research as irrelevant, unhelpful and too theoretical. Despite of the fact that, SLA first introduced by teachers- cum- researchers in order to incorporate theory or research in practice for the sake of language learning, SLA originated in the felt need of a number of teachers-cum-researchers to understand how learners learn a second language (L2) in both untutored and tutored settings, so as to better incorporate those experiences that were founded facilitative of learning in the actual practice of language teaching (Ellis, 2010, p. 183).

RESEARCH QUESTION

SLA has been a discipline of research and practice in second language acquisition and learning since the last four decades, dealing with the theories of second language acquisition-learning and their implication in the language pedagogy. However, it seems the "gap" between theory and practice has become an important issue to look upon and should effort to reduce it to its minimum. In this paper, we will address these questions:

1. What is the gap between research and practice in the field of SLA?
2. How the gap between SLA theory, research and practice in language pedagogy has evolved throughout these decades?
3. What measures can be taken to reduce the gap?

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions of the present study, an extensive amount of literature has been reviewed and explained. Searches for peer-reviewed articles were conducted in ERIC (EBSCO or CSA), Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (CSA), Social Sciences Full Text (Wilson) of different years to find out many numbers of literature related to the topic and keywords. All data that are collected from different secondary sources are acknowledged accordingly.

The Gap: a loophole among research and practice

The debate is an old one between the gap of theory and practice, not only in the field of SLA or language teaching but also in the field of any other applied or practice-oriented disciplines, like- business, medicine or law, we find gaps between theory and practices (Nassaji, 2012). It is very usual in the most applied fields of discipline, as every single

theory cannot be applied in practice or somehow our everyday practice has not illustrated in research. So, moreover, that is where and the gap arises in the field of SLA.

So, should we really be concerned much about the gap between research/theory and practice? The answers in the literature are divided into two ways. One group of researchers, (Brumfit, 1997; Bygate 2005; Larsen-Freeman, 1998) explains that SLA should contribute in language pedagogy as it deals with real world problem solving where language plays a role. On the other hand, (Kramsch, 2000; Block, 2000; Ellis 2010) argues other than some applied areas of SLA research, how far rest of the research has influenced language teaching is a question to be asked.

The assumption of a probable problem was always there among the researchers, about the uses of SLA theory in practice. Even during the founding years of SLA, it was a major concern of the research that how far they are applicable in the pedagogy. In 1979, Evelyn Hatch expressed her remark on the relationship between research and practice by flipping the coin of "Apply with caution" (Hatch 1979). However, by refuting the dichotomy between research and practice, Ellis (2009) explains research and practice as a separate entity and the main differences between researchers and teachers should be made based on the knowledge they practice. The knowledge of researchers have the explicit and technical knowledge of particular cases; one the other hand, teachers have the practical and implicit knowledge of specific cases.

Detachment of SLA research and practice: the rationale behind the gap?

The commencement of SLA was by some of the practicing language teachers, who wanted to know how learners of the second language learn a second language (Ellis, 2010). So gap was not there initially, as what they used to research, were related to practice. However, Ellis further explains as the days progressed, the path became distinct among the researchers and language teachers. Researchers were more focused on the testing of SLA in the laboratory setting, very less focus had given on the impact of classroom instruction in SLA. So, moreover, this is the reason of such creation of gap. Now, this division is the result of the long distinct practice of the field SLA as a field of research and second language teaching. Thus, researchers have researched and still researching why such division took place (Light & Gnida, 2012; Erlam, 2008; Ellis, 2010, 2008; Nunan, 1990, 199). Four hypotheses that Kennedy put forward may enlighten our discussion:

(a) The research itself is not sufficiently persuasive or authoritative; the quality of educational studies has not been high enough to provide compelling, unambiguous, or authoritative results to practitioners.

(b) The research has not been relevant to practice. It has not been sufficiently practical; it has not addressed teachers' questions, nor has it adequately acknowledged their constraints.

(c) Ideas from research have not been accessible to teachers. The findings have not been expressed in the ways that are comprehensible to teachers.

(d) The education system itself is intractable and unable to change, or it is conversely inherently unstable, overly susceptible to fads, and consequently unable to engage in systematic change.”(1997, p. 4)

This hypothesis is a short but effective summary of the reasons for the emerging gap between theory and practice. The reasons are rooted very deep in the problem surface and diversely discussed in the literature. Here, these reasons are discussed into segments for the better understanding of the problem.

Research is not related to practice

Perhaps it is the first and most important reason for the gap between SLA research and practice. Teachers are mainly reluctant about research, due to its lack of conclusiveness and the practical result (Broekkamp and van Hout-Wolters, 2007). Klein (1998) claims, SLA research far more theoretical than practical; therefore, research of such kinds hardly can contribute to the pedagogy, especially, changing teachers' preparation, materials, teaching learning in the classroom, etc. One other important problem with these piloted research in the field of SLA is, many of the researches in SLA has been done as a general research that is applicable to most of the contexts, and however, teachers only can concentrate on what will work in their classrooms (Stenhouse, 1975). Ellis (1997, 2001) also agreed the fact that, much of the research conducted in SLA is not directly related to language pedagogy and these studies has much implication in classroom pedagogy.

Complex Nature of Research paper

The research itself is a highly complex system, where so many aspects are related. For example- Philosophy, style, inquiry type, etc. However, more or less the too strict technicality, formality and ambiguity of the research process and also research paper, makes it hard to read and implement. So the nature of the research paper is also an important factor that creates distance among the research and practice.

Proposed theoretical contrast is one such example. What will be the preference among the top-down process (theory- then- testing) or bottom-up process (Research-then-theory) empirical evidence for establishing the existence (Jordan, 2004)? For instance, a structural researcher will take the bottom-up process; however, the generative grammar school linguist will go for top-down processing for research.

Epistemological consideration, as Hulstijn, (2014) suggests, is another criterion that differentiates one research from another. Research method can vary; between positivism and interpretivism. So, they are distinct in nature. One teacher may understand and work comfortably with one, but not the other type, for others, it could be a vice versa. Hence, very understandably teachers' have to be classroom selective.

Hulstijn (2014) also points out some additional things as the barriers in using research in the classroom. For instance, the coherence of theories, the testability or validity of theories, the scope of research that the research opted for, the fruitfulness of the research, the simplicity of research. So the type or nature of research paper is an

essential issue to be taken into consideration, as many of practitioners and language teachers often face ambiguity in reading and understanding.

Cross professional practice

Teachers have very little involvement in research. Moreover, the research fraternity is hardly welcoming teachers in the arena of research. So a clash always has been there between researcher and practicing teachers. “Many researchers who have never taught in a classroom setting are mystified by the strong, negative responses they encounter from classroom teachers when it comes to research. The natural reaction is to assume that classroom teachers are simply narrow-minded, inflexible, unintelligent, or unwilling to experiment with anything that might challenge their existing practice” (Montgomery and Smith, 2015, p.2)

Accessibility for language teachers, to be a researcher, is really limited (Erlam, 2008; Ellis 2010, Montgomery and Smith, 2015). All renowned journals in the field of SLA, TESOL or Applied Linguistics primarily are written by university teachers, which ultimately narrow down the chance of a practicing language teacher to become a researcher (Borg, 2010; Witherow, 2011).

Apart from above mention problems that have created the distance between research and practice, some others issues are also related. Like- teachers’ busy schedule of teaching keeps them away from research (Anwaruddin and Pervin, 2015), the freedom of research application in the curriculum (Kennedy, 1997), the teachers' specialization (Nassaji, 2012), etc. contributed to the gap between research of SLA and SL teaching.

Bridging the gap: blending research with practice

Many experts have expressed their diverse views, to contribute to the reduction of the gap between researchers and practitioners and blending research and practice in a single line. However, to bring research and practice together, researchers and practitioners should start some pragmatic practices.

Mutual and contextual understanding of research and practice

Perhaps the first step that teachers and researchers can take to solve the hurdles among them, to bring the research and practice together, begin to see research through the eyes of others who work in another context (Montgomery and Smith, 2015). Teachers often perceive problems that they encounter in their classrooms are unworthy of research. On the other hand, researchers are more likely to focus on generating research question for their investigation without thinking about the prospective readers or audiences. Whereas both the practices are equally isolated. Both, teachers and researchers should do the opposite. Teachers should investigate and share their experiments on the issues they are encountering every day in their classrooms and researchers too, need to focus on the issues that have the direct audience or readers, which means investigation or research should be piloted that closely related to classrooms and practices.

Sharing research findings to practitioners or teachers

Researchers tend to confine their research activities only to get scholarly accreditation; getting a promotion or publishing journal is one of such kind. No doubt, these are the very important element in the advancement of a researcher's professional career, so that his hard work can pay off. However, certainly, a study must not end up only getting published in journals or assisting in the professional advancement of a researcher. Nevertheless, it is the prior most duty of a researcher to share his findings among the practitioners, so that the research finding could be accessible for them. Hence, the question arises, how the researchers will share their findings? Ellis (1997, 2010) talks about preparing the summary and telling stories of the classroom related research finding. In this comprehensible manner to the teachers. Telling a story, according to Bygate, is a great way to make research finding accessible to teachers (2005). Narrative discourse also allows teachers to make sense of their work more closely (Freeman 1994).

Presently, researchers have plenty of scopes to share their findings on different platforms. Personal platform: Researchers often can meet language teachers among their acquaintances and can discuss their research finding orally. It may not be a formal meeting or seminar, but could be an interesting and effective way of transforming research finding to the practitioners. Discussion among colleagues is a simple but effective way of spreading research among practitioners. Colleagues from universities could be language teacher too or know other language teachers, so through discussing these findings may help them to relate to their experience. For instance, during my MA in TESOL program, I got the chance to interact plenty of practitioners from different schools and EFL training centers. We used to share our research findings with each other, and very surprisingly all of us could relate our classroom experiences with research findings.

Newspapers and Magazines: Unlike other academic journal, newspapers and magazines are more popular, not only among teachers or practitioners but among common masses too. People do read the newspaper or magazine once in a while in a day, so, article or editorial on research finding could be a wonderful idea to make it accessible to practitioners. It also will increase the consciousness and the importance of language learning among the people of the community.

Blog, social and educational platforms: By the blessings of technological advancement, principally for internet, numeral virtual sites have evolved. For instance, different personal blog sites such as Word press (<http://wordpress.com/>), social platforms such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>), tweeter (<http://twitter.com/>) and professional, educational and research sharing platforms like LinkedIn (<http://linkedin.com/>), Slideshare (<http://www.slideshare.net/>), ACADEMIA (<https://www.academia.edu/>), Research Gate (<https://www.researchgate.net/>), can give enormous support in sharing research among the fellow research community and also language teachers or practitioners. It will be easily accessible for the teachers and practitioners to visit and find recent happening in the world of research and can relate

them to their practice. Through that, a strong network of researchers and practitioners will be created, what will certainly help to reduce the gap between research and practice.

The role of educators and designing SLA course effectively

Educators or teachers trainers can play a really crucial role in blending research with practice. Wallace describes educators as the medium of transmission between research and practice (1997). Educators can raise the awareness among the young or future language teachers to do research in their classroom (mostly action research) and also using SL research in their teaching and can shape their perception of language teaching and learning. In their study, conducted during their teachers training program for language teachers, Angelova (2005), Erlam (2008) and McDonough (2006), have shown, the knowledge about SLA can shape the belief of language teaching among the trainees and make them well aware of the contemporary theories and research in the field of SLA. In their qualitative research, Tavakoli and Howard (2012) found, those with higher academic qualifications and higher professional qualifications, e.g., MA and diploma, were keener to engage with research activities and generally more positive views about the supportive role of research.

To be a language teacher or trainer in EFL/ ESL context, teachers must have university degrees, such as- BA or MA in TESOL/TEFL/ELT or certification like CELTA/ DELTA. However, SLA has been studied as a full pledge and separate subject in all these post-graduate programs or certificates. Now, the optimal use of such courses can play a crucial in the reduction of the gap between research and practice by choosing and using research contents of the course curriculum, which are the related classroom to classroom implications. Ellis (2010), prescribed 11 principles for designing SLA course. These questions are primarily deal with the “what” and “how” question between research and practice of SLA. Here “what” means the topics related to teaching and “how” means the relationship between this technical knowledge of SLA research with the practical teaching context. However, by choosing classroom related research for an SLA course, common ground can be established, where future teachers or trainee teachers can understand technical aspects of teaching language that researched and can be implemented by them.

Role of Government or educational institution

Around the world teaching English has been a key issue in second or foreign language speaking countries. Government and educational institutions provide training to the language teachers, to develop their teaching skills as a language teacher. However, an extensive research workshop on recent developments or findings of language teaching, supported and funded by government or individual educational institution can be really fruitful. One such mentionable example took place in New Zealand in 2006 (Erlam, Sakui & Ellis, 2006). A project was commissioned by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, in the aim to connect the theory with practice, with the believe that connecting research with practice will help teachers to improve their teaching practice of primary

and secondary students (Erlam, Sakui & Ellis, 2006). The project was divided into two parts. In the first part (Part A), the goal was to present a 'set of general, research-based principles that can serve teachers as a guide to effective language teaching and as a basis for evaluating their own teaching' (Erlam, Sakui & Ellis, 2006: 2). In the second part, classroom research was conducted, to see the evidence of the principles that had been identified in Part A of the project in teaching practice. The impact of the project was found very encouraging. The access to the research for the practitioners really found helpful to be used in the classroom. Such project also can be initiated by the government of other native and non-native English speaking countries or even individual institution in a small scale for their teachers.

A proposed framework: How should all the stakeholders work together?

To make research work in the classroom, especially in SLA, we need to assure the participation of all stakeholders that have been discussed above: Researchers, language teachers' trainers, SL language teachers and institutions/government. Based on the discussion as mentioned earlier, a framework of collaboration has been formed, where roles are specified accordingly. Without the collaboration of these stakeholders, full attainment of SLA research into the SL pedagogy would not be possible in the full meaning (see Figure 1).

CONCLUSION

The key goal of this article was to investigate the reasons for the gap between research and practice that has been evolved from the decades of detachment between researchers and practitioners in the field of SLA and to find out some feasible solutions to reduce the gap and bring research and practice as close as possible. However, in summary, without building an inter-communal relationship between researchers and practitioners and feeling the urge of both, research and practice, by the researchers and practitioners, the bridging of the broken bridge is impossible. In fact, linking theory and practice and that learning needs to be conceived of as a subject that must be created, rather than as a created subject (Korthagen *et al.*, 2006). The solutions what have been discussed above, if not entirely, at least, will work positively to make the situation healthier.

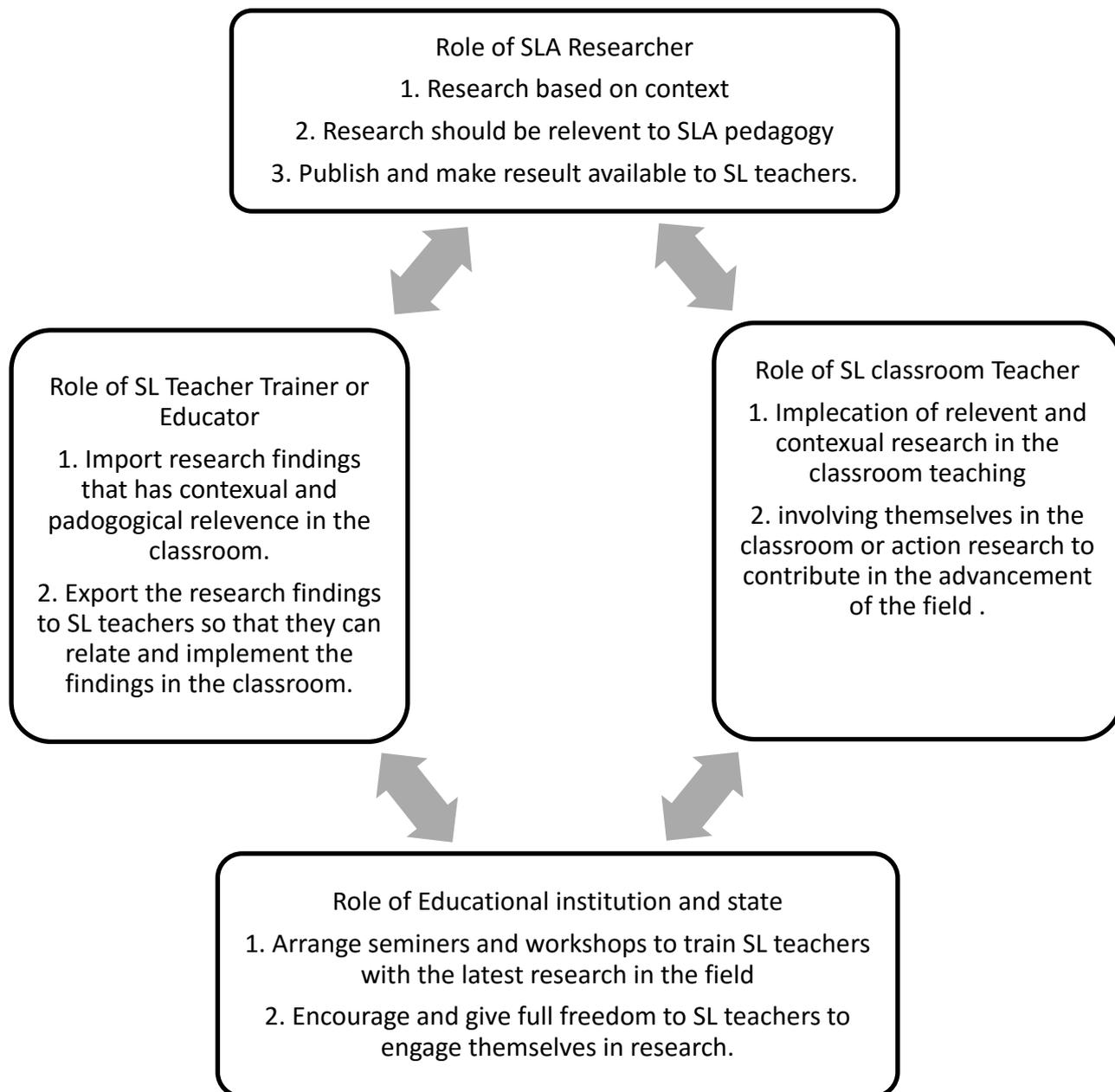


Figure 1. A Framework to Combine Different Stakeholders of Research and Practice to work together

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