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The myth of a theory-practice gap in education

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1. Introduction

This article, adapted from an earlier blog post (Anderson, 2021), offers the author's personal perspective on a commonly-referenced perceived disconnect between theory and practice, particularly evident in academia across discourse on education, including English language teaching. After the author's argument is presented, a number of responses to the original post are also included both to offer a range of thoughts on the issue and to encourage reflection on the topic among readers of ELT Research (see Appendix).

2. Academic theory and practitioner theory

As a teacher educator, researcher and language teacher (I claim all three identities in this article), I have often noticed that when academics refer to a theory-practice gap in education, including language teaching, what they are most often describing is a gap between their beliefs concerning how teachers *should* teach, and how teachers actually *do* teach. Most of these academics would argue that these beliefs are founded on 'research'/'evidence'/'facts', and might prefer to describe the gap as actually being between what we know (the royal 'we' that some academics use to imply that 'we' who do research in the social sciences actually do agree) and how teachers teach. But, of course, research and theory are not the same thing. Research findings and 'evidence' aren't even the same thing; evidence requires extrapolation and is an early, often unnoticed, stage of theorizing. And when one attempts to move beyond this stage to develop a theory of learning, teaching, or any aspect of either that may impact on classroom practice, further extrapolation and conjecture are required, such that all theories are inevitably influenced – to varying degrees – by the biases, opinions, beliefs and interests of the theorizer; and academics are no less susceptible to such influences than the rest of us.

Interestingly, one thing that research on teacher cognition has established beyond reasonable doubt is that all teachers also have theories (Borg, 2006), either explicit ones, or the implicit "theories in use" that govern our actions (Argyris & Schön, 1974). We have theories of learning, theories of teaching, theories of the relationship between these and everything in between. These theories may be useful, they may be harmful, they may be informed by research and be enhanced as a result, or misinformed by it and unhelpful as a result. On the other hand, teacher

theory may be informed by other sources (most often personal experience and their community of practice), which can also be either useful or not. But practitioners always have theories – in this sense, at least in teaching, there is no practice that is not underpinned by theory.

Thus, the notion of a theory-practice gap is a myth, because what is actually being invoked is a difference between what we might call ‘academic theory’ and ‘practitioner theory’, and that is a very different type of gap.

I suspect that, at this point, some academics would argue that this might be true, but that their opinions are better informed than those of teachers. However, this – critically – depends on judgement with regard to the validity of research – how one links together the three elements of research, theory and practice. The relationship might be described as follows:

1. Research shows a positive correlation between X and Y
2. Therefore, X improves Y
3. Therefore, you (teachers) should do more X (to improve Y)

But at every point in this process, the judgement itself could be faulty, meaning that the final recommendation may not lead to an improvement. Let’s examine an example from research in the field of vocabulary learning to illustrate this point.

1. Research has found that under certain (mainly experimental) conditions, when learners learn items of vocabulary in lexical sets (e.g., days of the week, colours, etc.), they retain fewer of the items than when they learn unrelated items of vocabulary (see Nation, 2000; Tinkham, 1993).
2. This leads to the seemingly reasonable theory that teaching unrelated lexical items together leads to more learning than teaching lexical sets.
3. Therefore, it might be concluded that teachers should not teach vocabulary in lexical sets.

However, 1 does not provide sufficient evidence that 2 is necessarily always true, and 3 does not necessarily follow from 2. Here are a few reasons why, in this specific case:

It’s useful to group languaging resources (lexis, grammar, functional exponents, etc.) thematically within a curriculum, primarily because it helps teachers to create appropriate contexts for meaningful language use. And this meaningful language use can enable learners to take away much more than a set of words – the ability to function with language in specific situations. To exemplify this, consider a unit found in many ‘global’ (i.e., internationally marketed) lower intermediate coursebooks on food and drink. Not only might there be several lexical sets presented in this unit (e.g., food items, cooking implements, cooking verbs), but there are also (hopefully) several useful opportunities to make use of this language, in which learners might try ordering food in a restaurant, write an interesting recipe, or tell each other about their favourite dishes, for example, and for all of these, each learner will need

elements from the lexical sets. There may also be opportunities to integrate grammatical or discourse features often used in certain food-related contexts (e.g., quantifiers). Learners are also likely to engage with the language emotively (e.g., when talking about what they like), and there is plenty of research that supports the importance of this (see Hiver et al., 2021). Thus, while it's likely that learners will not retain all the items in the lexical sets in this unit, it's also likely that learning will occur in a wide range of related areas. (Interestingly, Tinkham's later work (1997) lends support to 'thematic clustering', although continues to caution against the teaching of lexical sets). Learner intrinsic motivation may also increase as a result of their engagement with the activities. This is part of a bigger picture that any researcher who has zoomed in too far into one area of learning on a cognitive level may fail to see, such that following their recommendations may actually have a net-negative impact on learning.

This is just one of many possible examples where research appears to offer a logical conclusion for how we should teach, and yet in doing so, it overlooks—or contradicts—other important principles for how we should teach, which themselves may also be informed by research. Being informed is also not simply a matter of knowledge about research, it's also a matter of understanding the application of this research in specific contexts, and almost every teacher is better informed about their own context of practice than the academics and teacher educators who seek to influence them.

3. Teacher theory is also informed by research

It can be observed that teacher theory, like academic theory, is also influenced by research. This may sometimes include the more formalized types of practitioner research frequently advocated by academics (e.g., action research or exploratory practice), but it *always* includes a less frequently noticed type of research originating in classroom experience that informs the extensive, complex, integrated knowledge base underpinning a teacher's practice; a knowledge base variously described as Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Shulman, 1987), Personal Practical Knowledge (Connelly et al., 1997), Knowing-in-Action (Schön, 1983) or the Wisdom of Practice (Shulman, 2007). It is my contention that many teachers, particularly the more effective ones among us, are no less capable than academics of collecting, analyzing and acting upon data that they collect every day in their classrooms (see, e.g., Anderson, 2019) – an ability we might refer to as 'research-in-practice'. The 'data collection' process involved is surprisingly well-known, just rarely described as 'teacher research', because it is conceptualized most often as 'formative assessment'.

4. Assessment for teacher learning

Formative assessment is often paraphrased as assessment for learning (William, 2011). Most of us are aware of what this means with regard to the learning of our students – we carry out assessment in order to know what learning has occurred and what we need to do next: Do I need to reteach something? Should I teach something I hadn't originally intended to cover? Can I proceed as planned, or should I skip

something I was planning to do? These questions are the typical, very important, foci of discussion of formative assessment.

Yet we often overlook how formative assessment impacts upon the learning of teachers. I know from personal experience that every time I notice what learners have learnt in a lesson or unit of study, I also learn something important about what has or hasn't 'worked' in my classroom. Over time, providing this learning is accompanied by critical reflection (Anderson, 2019, 2020), this learning builds up into a more solid awareness concerning the efficacy of specific practices in my classroom. For example, technique A usually seems to be effective but is rather boring; technique B is always fun, but time-consuming; technique C is fast, fun, and seems to be effective, but not for all the learners, et cetera.

Granted, on an individual level, the data collected may not always be reliable, and is rarely conclusive. Granted also that there is little 'systematic analysis' of this data (an ostensibly academic concern). But as it builds up over months and years, this awareness develops into an intuitive understanding of what works in one's own classroom that is arguably deeper, more connected and more contextualized than any piece of academic research could ever be. And it has the highest level of ecological validity because it is longitudinal research conducted under real classroom conditions as part of one's normal day-to-day practice.

In this sense, effective teachers are also effective researchers.

5. Conclusion

I would like to emphasize that, in the reflections offered above, I am not arguing against the usefulness of academic research for teachers. I believe that it can be of great use for them, providing they have the time, opportunity and support required to access it (see Millin, 2021). I am arguing the following:

1. Academics aren't the only source of theory, and the theories they produce are neither neutral nor necessarily suitable to the practice of any given teacher who might have access to them.
2. Practitioner theory, if based on appropriate research-in-practice, is potentially the most relevant and valid theory for *that* practitioner's context.
3. Formative assessment, if it contributes to a teacher's knowledge base, is an often underacknowledged part of research-in-practice that may be of critical value to teacher effectiveness.

Thus, it can be argued that there is no theory-practice divide, just a difference between the personal theories of practitioners in two very different communities of practice: academia and teaching.

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Appendix: Responses to the blog post and author replies

Judie Hudson (December 3, 2021): Interesting thoughts in this blog, Jason. This so-called gap has been hanging around for a long time, possibly contributing to the space getting wider and wider. Context gets a good rap here and I remember how, during my MA decades ago, we were encouraged to defend our observations in light of our teaching contexts. As the context changes, so a teacher or trainer needs to adapt their ideas and even beliefs. What do you think?

Author reply to Judie Hudson: Many thanks Judie for your thoughts. Yes I agree, and would even go so far as to say that these ideas, theories, beliefs all evolve with us, both across spatial contexts (i.e., different jobs within or between countries) and temporal contexts (students and schools change too). All of this is of course contingent on us learning from these experiences, primarily through reflection. The following much repeated illustration is expressed well by Penny

Ur (1996, p. 317): “It has been said that teachers who have been teaching for twenty years may be divided into two categories: those with twenty years’ experience and those with one year’s experience repeated twenty times.” [Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge University Press.]

Anonymised reader (December 6, 2021): I have forwarded this post to many as I think it resonates in various teaching contexts. I think your comments are extremely useful to validate the practice of teachers, many of whom, despite a wealth of experience and ‘success’, suffer from imposter syndrome – a point discussed at CETA. I think often this lack of faith in one’s practice evolves from studying in an academic context with great worship of the gods of research and little acknowledgement and value being placed on informal, personal, contextualized reflective practice.

Elena Ončevska Ager (July 13, 2022): Hi Jason, thanks for a very insightful article. Your suggestion of practitioner theory made me think of the distinction Malderez and Wedell (2007) make between public and personal theories. While all of us, teachers and teacher educators, engage with public theories, only some of them resonate with us strongly enough to make their way into our very custom-made, personal theory-bases. I wonder what the implications are for teacher development? How can teachers be supported to make their personal theories more robust and their implicit research habits more systematic? I feel critically examining our apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) for why we do/value what we do can be a good start to a more extensive reflective process. Simon Borg suggests some useful ways of exposing pre-service teachers to public theories in this blogpost: <http://simon-borg.co.uk/research-evidence-and-l2-teaching/>

Sandy Millin (July 18, 2022): I like the distinction between ‘academic theory’ and ‘practitioner theory’ which you mention here. As Elena says, I wonder how we can help teachers develop the skills to make their gathering of practitioner theory more systematic. I suppose we can help them by teaching them different ways to reflect on their practice, and by helping them to get more out of formative assessment by making those connections you mentioned between assessment outcomes and the teaching techniques used in the run-up to the assessment. She also mentioned the apprenticeship of observation – this is something I’ve become more and more interested in, especially now that I’m reading Tsui’s book *Understanding Expertise in Teaching* (2004), as it seems to have such a huge influence on teacher practice. The data we collect as students also informs our teaching, and allows us to draw conclusions about what may or may not work. Thank you for sharing the example of why vocabulary learning in/not in lexical sets could be beneficial – this is something I’ve often wondered about, and is a great example of how everything we learn about as teachers should be filtered through our own knowledge of our contexts, our students and our teaching style, and followed by reflection when we do try out different ideas.



Dr Jason Anderson is a teacher educator, educational consultant, award-winning author, and researcher, working in both language teaching and mainstream education. He has supported teachers in over 30 countries worldwide, pre-service and in-service, for national ministries of education and organizations including UNICEF, the British Council, and the University of Warwick. His interests include teaching methodology, multilingualism, and the contextual challenges of primary and secondary teachers working in low- and middle-income contexts, where he has spent much of his career.