

# **‘Only Connect’: Researchers and Teachers in Dialogue**

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## **1. Introduction**

Medgyes’s (2017) discussion of researchers and research is important not only because of what he says, but also because he seems to represent a very specific zeitgeist: his is the latest in a series of papers (e.g. Maley 2016, Richards 2006) problematising – if not casting doubt on – the relationship between research in applied linguistics and TESOL and teaching. Some of the points made by these scholars are obviously right. Most teachers are clearly not interested in research; indeed, Borg’s (2009) finding that only 15.6% of teachers read research regularly is probably inflated by self-selection. It is also clear that teachers should not spend time reading primary research: it is not part of their job description, they are not allocated the time for it, and understanding much of this research often requires highly specific and technical expertise. And I agree that research and teaching are two distinct activities, often requiring different types of thinking. But Medgyes presents an extreme ‘no interface’ position, suggesting that the differences between research and teaching mean that ‘never the twain shall meet’ (Maley 2016). Medgyes goes on to claim that teachers ‘are better off if they heed their own (and their fellow professionals’) experience and intuitions’ (p.XX). It is this insistence on the impossibility of meaningful communication between researchers and teachers that I wish to contest.

In this paper I therefore focus on ways in which research can – and should – inform our teaching. I first discuss the nature of experience and intuition, and the limited extent to which human beings are able to learn from them. I then define research and what it involves and requires from its users, connecting it to issues of critical thinking. I go on to present examples where research has contributed to our understanding of language learning and has important implications for the classroom. I conclude by suggesting ways in which we could ensure that researchers and teachers continue to dialogue, with the aim of taking our profession forward.

## **2. Experience and intuition: The vicious circle of received wisdom**

As noted above, Medgyes urges teachers to rely on experience and intuition, both theirs and others, later claiming that ‘disregarding trendy concepts and buzzwords, most teachers kept doing whatever they thought worked best for their students’ (p.XX). The first issue that arises here concerns the source of the experience that Medgyes suggests teachers should learn from. The implications of this model of teacher learning are that the student-teacher on an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme will be learning from their university tutors’ and their school mentors’ experiences; the tutors and mentors will, in their turn, have learned from their own tutors’ and mentors’ experience – and so on. But what is the validity of the experience of these different tutors and mentors? Are all experiences equal, or are some experiences more equal than others? How do I know which fellow professionals I should rely on? There are criteria for judging research (see below) – but how can I assess or judge someone else’s experience? Maley (2016) rightly warns us of poor quality research, which he calls ‘pseudo-research’ – but how can I assure myself that the experience of a fellow professional is not, similarly, actually some sort of ‘pseudo-experience’? And what are professionals supposed to *do* with their experience? In fact, we know that teachers do learn from experience, and that often they rely on their own experience as learners, in the phenomenon known as ‘the apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie 1975). This permeates all areas of teaching. Macalister (2014), for example, points out that teachers often teach reading in the way that they were taught. But this can lead to the danger of entering a vicious circle of received wisdom which is never questioned, and which blocks change. The simple recycling of experience from one professional to another cannot be the way the profession progresses.

### **2.1 The precariousness of experience and intuition**

Questioning received wisdom is particularly important because what teachers *think* works best for their students is not necessarily what will work best in reality: there are many ways in which intuition is wrong. To take a simple example, our intuition and senses tell us that the earth is flat, and that the sun revolves around it. Our knowledge

that the sun does nothing of the sort and that the earth is *not* flat comes from external sources, based on rigorous and cumulative scientific research. Why would our intuitions about teaching and learning be more reliable than our intuitions about our physical environment?

In fact, we now know that our ability to analyze and understand experience is highly precarious. Kahneman (2012) provides a wide-ranging (and extremely accessible) discussion of the ways in which we subvert and manipulate our experience in our thinking processes. He talks about issues such as the halo effect, ‘where favorable first impressions influence later judgments’ (2012: 231), illustrating it through explaining how he realised that the halo effect was biasing his marking of student essays (the mark he was giving on the first answer on an exam paper was influencing his view of the student’s subsequent answers); he talks about the way in which we overestimate rare events and their effects (more people die in car accidents than in terrorist attacks, but we are much more worried about the latter rather than the former); and he talks about confirmation bias, where we tend to remember and bring up those instances which confirm what we believe or wish to believe is true. Importantly, Kahneman (2012) suggests that it is extremely difficult, if not outright impossible, to overcome these cognitive issues, unless we take very conscious steps to combat them.

English language teachers are not immune to these contradictions. Lee’s (2009) research on teachers’ beliefs and behaviours when correcting student writing has shown that there are mismatches between the two. For example, teachers may believe that feedback should cover both positive and negative areas of the student’s work, but their actual feedback responds mainly to weaknesses in the students’ work. Ur (2017:138) discusses lexical sets research, which suggests that we should not teach lexical items in sets. She points out that this is a counterintuitive finding, and yet it ‘has the potential to influence writers and lead to significant improvement in the lexical component of materials’. So clearly, intuitions and beliefs are not reliable when complex issues such as teaching and learning are concerned. This is where a research oriented, or evidence based approach to teaching comes into play.

### **3. What is research?**

Research is a way of collecting information in order to enable us to reach decisions about future action, in ways that are appropriate and relevant to these decisions. This

is not a particularly complex definition, but it does demystify research and allows us to understand a variety of human activities as involving the collection of evidence and therefore as types of research (Dörnyei 2007). Choosing a doctor, buying a car, deciding which university to apply for: for each of these we need to collect relevant and appropriate evidence in order to make an informed decision. Of course, we can make these decisions without research, or with a very small engagement with evidence, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we increasingly look at data and evidence to inform our decision making. The more complex the activity, the larger the amount of evidence we are likely to engage with to inform the decision.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) suggest that research has three characteristics: it is systematic; it is empirical (but not necessarily experimental); and it is self-correcting – researchers build on previous research to come up with more refined answers, and sometimes with totally different answers, as new evidence comes to light. The latter characteristic is crucial: no one study can supply us with the answer to a question, especially in education. Answers are complex, and understanding any phenomenon in education is constructed through different studies, some of which refine previous ones, some of which replicate them. Of course, this sometimes leads to conflicting evidence, as Medgyes points out. But this does not mean that the research is worthless: rather, contradictions help us construct complex answers to complex phenomena, though of course they may sometimes lead us to reexamine evidence and possibly reject it.

#### **4. Critical thinking**

This focus on the way we think highlights another crucial aspect of teaching and learning which has recently come to the fore in ELT: critical thinking. In our context, Onosko and Newmann's (1994) definition of critical thinking as constituted of three elements is particularly interesting. The first element they define is in-depth knowledge, which in itself consists of three components – substantive knowledge (knowledge of the content area), analytic knowledge (recognizing what is a good argument, distinguishing between poor evidence and good evidence), and metacognitive knowledge (understanding and monitoring thought processes). The second element is intellectual skills, which are domain specific. The third element is

attitudes and dispositions of reflectiveness, which Onosko and Newmann (1994:30) define as:

a persistent desire that claims be supported by reasons (and that the reasons themselves be scrutinized); a tendency to be reflective – to take time to think problems through for oneself, rather than acting impulsively or automatically accepting the views of others; a curiosity to explore new questions; a flexibility to entertain alternative and original solutions to problems; and a habit of examining one's own thinking processes.

This understanding of critical thinking can permeate language classrooms and materials. In the context of the current discussion what is important is the relationship between dispositions of reflectiveness and the other components of critical thinking, mainly in-depth knowledge. A teacher who can only reflect on their own classroom and has no substantive knowledge to bring to bear on their reflection will be engaged in a futile exercise, going round and round in the vicious circle of replicating experience which is described above. Teachers need to know not only about other classes, but also about theories of language learning and language teaching in order to move beyond received wisdom; they need to know about findings of research; they need to understand the way in which arguments are constructed in applied linguistics and in TESOL. And they need to reach the point where they question the authority of their mentors and tutors as well as attempt to confront their own biases and intuitions.

## **5. What can research contribute to language teaching?**

In spite of the complexity of applying research findings to the classroom, there are certain areas where, slowly but surely, we are amassing enough evidence to help us structure our teaching. One such area is one where we have known, for many years, what we should be doing: extensive reading. This area is extremely difficult to research, partly because it is difficult to isolate variables from each other, and partly because it requires studies extending over a long period. Because it is difficult to conduct longitudinal studies in education, there are few such studies to support using extensive reading, and Macalister (2014:388) concedes that the research is 'of variable quality'. But as Grabe (2009) points out, there is now sufficient evidence from a variety of studies within both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms

for us to confidently claim that extensive reading is a major contribution to language learning in various contexts, with positive effect on reading fluency, reading motivation, and probably some increase in vocabulary knowledge. Extensive reading is an interesting example of a case where our intuition, our experience, and research all converge; and yet, as many scholars have pointed out, extensive reading has still not made the inroads into ELT practice that one would have expected.

But just saying that ‘extensive reading helps’ is not enough. What should learners read? Should we ask them to read books that are slightly beyond their level? And should we ask them to do something with their reading, for example, discuss it orally or write book reports? Or test them on their reading? Researchers have tackled all these questions, but the most interesting research is a study by Beglar and Hunt (2014), who examined the reading progress of readers over one whole year. They found that the readers who progressed most were those who were reading material at a substantially lower level than their current proficiency would have suggested. This is an insight which to some extent is counter-intuitive, but which a well-designed study has shown to be the case.

This extended example shows the complexity of applying research findings to the classroom – the general principle of extensive reading is well attested by research *and* intuition; yet research into some of the more specific elements of ER programmes also brings up counter-intuitive findings. This highlights the importance of understanding the research and what it tells us about possibilities for ELT practice.

Space prevents me from providing additional detailed examples, but here I summarise examples where there is ample evidence from research as to what we should be doing. Research has demonstrated the importance of narrow reading (ie, reading a number of different texts on the same topic) for vocabulary learning; and it has shown that guessing vocabulary from context is more difficult and more complex than we thought, and may not be as important a strategy as we used to think (showing, again, the limits of received wisdom). Ur (2017) provides examples of evidence-based approaches to teaching vocabulary, some of which are applicable not only to materials writers but also to teachers, such as not teaching lexical sets, and using the L1 for quick translation when teaching vocabulary rather than insisting on explaining in English or guessing from context. Research has shown us the importance of teaching learners *how* to listen, rather than just testing them on what they have listened to, and we know that although teachers agree that this is important, they do not actually do

this in their classrooms (Graham 2017). We know that it is important to allow learners to plan before they carry out a task (and teachers often do that), and that it is important to allow learners to repeat a task (and teachers very rarely do that) (Goh 2017). And we know that we should be providing less feedback on our learners' writing than we normally do, and that our feedback needs to be more focused (Lee 2013). All these cases illustrate the way in which research into language learning and language teaching has provided us with insights that our intuitions might not have led us to.

## **6. Maintaining the teaching-research link**

However, even the small number of examples of research in the previous section are beyond what we could realistically expect a busy language teacher to access and engage with. How, then, can we maintain the conversation between researchers and teachers and translate research findings into classroom practice? Below I discuss different ways of doing this: through Initial Teacher Education (ITE); through the materials teachers use; throughout teachers' engagement in continuing professional development (CPD); and finally, through helping teachers research their own practice in systematic, informed ways, ensuring throughout that both researchers and practitioners take account of each other.

### **6.1 Initial Teacher Education (ITE)**

Firstly, wherever possible what is taught on ITE programmes must be based on evidence. We would not expect a doctor's training not to be based on research: why do we allow teacher training to do so where research is available? In courses such as a one year Post Graduate Certificate in Education, or the three to five years of a teaching degree that is common around the world, student-teachers should be made aware of the research that underpins the practices they are taught. At the same time, they should be made aware of what is common practice and **not** evidence-based, but is rather ideological or argument based. And then they should be made aware of those common practices which are in fact contrary to evidence. If student-teachers are socialized into the profession in ways that value research, they will take this with them on their professional journey. Ensuring that, from the beginning, teachers are aware of these different sources of knowledge and their at times contested validity

will enable them to base their teaching on substantive knowledge (Onosko and Newmann, *op cit.*); use their analytical knowledge to become sophisticated, critical users of research; recognize where research is available and where it is not; and develop dispositions of reflectiveness (Onosko and Newmann, *op cit.*) to demand that what is presented to them is based on evidence.

## **6.2 Research underpinning materials**

Secondly, research must underpin what materials writers do. Most teachers use coursebooks (though this may vary between contexts), and materials writers must therefore be responsible for linking research findings and classroom practice. Indeed, in spite of his reservations about the research-teaching link, Richards (2006) acknowledges ‘the primary relevance of language and language learning research to materials development’, suggesting that this can happen through applying research ‘to syllabus design issues and as a source for instructional principles that can inform the design of instructional materials’ (2006:23). Ur (2017:142), too, suggests that research has much to offer to materials writers, although she also reminds us that market forces often dictate the extent to which materials writers and publishers are willing to depart from tradition. However, many coursebooks now rely on corpus evidence to inform the language they teach, and some coursebooks are beginning to take other research findings into account – for example, understanding the importance of bottom up processes in reading (Grabe 2009) and listening (Graham 2017). There is some hope that if coursebooks start building, incrementally, upon what other coursebooks have achieved in terms of relying on research, we might, within not too many years, begin to talk of ELT as an evidence-based profession.

## **6.3 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

Teachers who have already qualified need to keep updating their skills and their professional knowledge. Making CPD compulsory is one way of doing this, and in some countries teachers do need to re-certify and provide proof of their CPD; in others, there are financial benefits for teachers who complete specified amounts of CPD. One way forward would be to ensure that CPD programmes that lead to recertification or to salary rises include at least some research-based and evidence-based elements. Introducing such suggestions is not a quick fix; and some teachers may resist this. But as teachers and trainers ourselves, we know that we can’t always

give our learners only what they want. And, of course, if teachers are socialized, through their ITE programmes, into viewing teaching as an evidence-based profession, then implementing research-based CPD will only become easier in the future.

#### **6.4 Teacher research**

One powerful connection between research and teaching is the way in which teachers can research their own practice. Teacher educators conceptualise this in different ways (e.g. Action Research, Exploratory Practice) and the viability of such routes is contested (see Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo 2014 for a succinct summary). For me, this does not mean that teachers need to ‘become’ researchers, but it does mean that teachers need to learn to think about their teaching and examine what they are doing in ways that may be different from what they were used to. This is well illustrated in Smith et al’s account of an ambitious, large scale teacher-research project with secondary school teachers in Chile. They report on the way in which one of their participants needed to be reminded by her mentor ‘of the importance of collecting evidence (...) systematically’ (Smith et al 2014:127) – one of the characteristics of research stressed by Cohen et al. (2000), and a good exemplification of Onosko and Newmann’s (1994) view of the importance of evidence.

#### **6.5 Maintaining communication**

Increasingly, research journals routinely engage in thinking about practice: *Language Teaching* has a regular section, *Thinking Allowed*, which focuses on research and practice (eg Goh 2017, Graham 2017, Lee 2013, Macalister 2014); the *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy* requires researchers to provide a box entitled ‘Take Action’, spelling out the teaching implications of their research, thus encouraging them to orient their thinking to what teachers can gain from their work. In the same way, teachers’ journals should include regular sections in which researchers with appropriate practical background, or teachers and trainers with appropriate research background highlight ways in which research could be useful for teachers.

Conversely, there may well be space in research journals for informed practitioners and teacher educators to write about the areas that **they** would like to see researched, and where they feel research could contribute to teaching. Allowing the teaching

profession to influence the research agenda would be an important step forward for both constituencies.

Of course, journals such as the *ELT Journal* already focus on the research-teaching connection. But it may well be the case that the connections may need to be made explicitly, as in the examples I have provided above. There is also, of course, the issue of how teachers gain access to such journals, though there are now strong pressures on journals to move to open access.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, I suggest that the issue is not that research is not relevant to teachers, but rather that we – practitioners and researchers alike – have failed to maintain the dialogue between us. Worse, we have taken these two different ways of knowing and pitted them against each other. Rather than working with teachers (and student teachers) on both ways of knowing (i.e. experiential and research-informed), we are in danger of rejecting evidence *a priori* and prioritizing experience and intuition. As a result teaching might become merely the transmission of self-perpetuating, unsupported beliefs and prejudices, based on experience that is never examined.

One of the arguments made by some scholars has been that teachers can teach well without the support of research. Ur (2017:135) states that ‘the mission of teachers is to bring about or facilitate learning; they are under no obligation to use research findings in order to do so’. This sounds a plausible argument; but as pointed out above, we would never imagine saying something like this about doctors. All things being equal, a teacher whose teaching is congruent with research findings must be more effective than a teacher whose teaching is not. Of course the students of the latter teacher may be successful: learners are quite resilient, and in many cases they learn in spite of the teacher, rather than because of the teacher. But we cannot take the exception and make it the rule.

The implications of my argument are that teachers and teacher trainers must have an understanding of sources of knowledge about the profession; of what evidence is needed for such knowledge; how to evaluate the different types of evidence; and where to go if their own personal knowledge is not sufficient to evaluate the evidence. Here the function of the ‘go-betweens’ – authors such as Maley, Medgyes, Ur themselves – is crucial; their role thus is not only to convey research findings to other trainers, to teachers and to student-teachers, but also to find

ways of influencing the research agenda through constructive dialogue with researchers..

In terms of the implications for teacher training, student-teachers should be taught how to understand research, and more importantly, how to think along research-oriented lines. At the same time, they need to be taught how to navigate in areas where research does not provide answers. In an era where information is available everywhere, one of the most important skills professionals – and indeed everyone else – needs is tools for assessing what information is valid and valuable, and which is not. It is our duty, as educators, to combat the post-fact, post-expert tendencies of the era in which we live; provide our trainees with the knowledge that we have; and help them to develop ways in which they can assess and evaluate such knowledge, and judge for themselves whether it is for them or not.

Finally, there are implications for educational systems around the world, where research findings are routinely ignored in a climate of politicised educational debate. Easy solutions (start earlier; teach curriculum subjects in English) which have been shown not to work are preferred in an environment where what matters is the next election.

It is easy to lambast researchers for what they have not found and for their constant toing and froing, which sometimes can become quite acrimonious. The main thrust of my argument is the importance of communication: our research should look at ways in which we can improve our teaching; and teachers, trainers, and the ELT profession should seek ways of enabling meaningful communication, ensuring that improvements in teaching are based on solid research evidence, rather than on self-perpetuating intuitions and perceptions.

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