Revisiting the gap between SLA researchers and language teachers

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the gap between SLA researchers and language teachers. It begins with a brief look at how SLA publications are often about issues which are not of particular interest to language teachers. It then explores why there is a gap between SLA researchers and language teachers touching on differences in status, different stances towards knowledge and membership in different discourse communities leading to different uses of language. There is the discussion of four ways in which the gap might be closed- collaborative research, action research, exploratory practice and theory-practice mediation- before the conclusion where the author expresses his fear that he is irreversibly passing from the language teacher side of the gap to the researcher side.

Key Words: SLA Research, Sociology of Academic Life, Teacher Development.

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1. Introduction

[...] there is no reason why SLA theorists (or theorists from any discipline) should be expected to make some kind of provision for practical matters. No one expects a theoretical physicist to attend to engineering nor theorists working on the Human Genome Project to attend to medicine. When it comes to human sciences, there is greater confusion. Theoretical linguists have long been arguing that their work is carried out on a level of abstraction that idealizes away from the complexities of the 'real' world, but this view has hardly gone unchallenged. In SLA, the same divisions are increasingly apparent. If SLA is to take its cue from the natural sciences (as Chomskyan linguists think linguists should do), then it cannot be guided, inhibited, or distracted by practical concerns. (Beretta and Crookes, 1993: 271)

On the one hand, this quote expresses an idea which is not in the least contentious as it seems to suggest that groups can carry on with academic endeavour independent of any practical application. I do not think that anyone could logically argue for the impossibility of such behaviour: it seems perfectly possible for a group of individuals to behave in this way and, as Beretta and Crookes point out, there are examples in a variety of academic disciplines, from theoretical physics to theoretical linguistics. On the other hand, if one thinks that knowledge is only worthwhile if it has some concrete use, then there is likely much to object to.

In this paper I shall explore the position, often bandied about at language teaching conferences and in the pages of journals like this one, that there is a lack of communication between second language acquisition (hereafter SLA) researchers and language teachers and that much of what is done under the rubric of SLA is not particularly relevant to language teachers and is not really applicable to the day-to-day language teaching and learning which goes on in classrooms. I shall first make the point that SLA publications are often about issues which are not of particular interest to language teachers before exploring three reasons why this might be the case. I shall then discuss four ways which have been proposed as a means of closing the gap. I shall conclude somewhat pessimistically with a comment about what seems to me to be my irreversibly passing from the language teacher side of the gap to the researcher side.

Throughout this paper I shall refer to SLA researchers and language teachers as two distinct and fully differentiated groups. While I am fully aware that putting individuals into categories of any kind is inevitably an over-simplification fraught with problems, I have nevertheless chosen to adopt this tactic as a way into a discussion of the SLA researcher/language teacher gap which I do believe exists (albeit in varying forms and to various degrees in different contexts). As he/she progresses through this paper, the reader should therefore read "SLA researchers" and "language teachers" as *ideal types*, as poles on a continuum, and not as any claim on my part that I am capturing the variability and complexity of the identities of individual SLA researchers, SLA/researcher/teachers, language teachers/SLA researchers and language teachers around the world.

2. The gap between teachers and SLA researchers: examples

If I examine the long and short history of SLA[1], it is clear to me that as more and more academics have devoted their time to such research, the greater the distance in many cases between this research and those most directly involved in language teaching and learning. Informal contacts over the years with

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1. This rather odd wording is in reference to a recent exchange of articles between Thomas (1998) and Gass et al. (1998). Thomas claims that many SLA researchers refer to the field of SLA as if it were only 20 to 30 years old; Gass et al. contest this notion.

teachers of a number of languages in a number of contexts reveals that few, if any, regularly read articles in journals such as *Language Learning, Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (SSLA) and *Second Language Research*. While it might be argued that one of the functions of teacher education is to get teachers interested in the reading of such literature, the hard truth in my experience is that even those who have completed MA programmes generally do not keep up with reading of academic material upon their return to full-time employment (indeed, many never really start to read such literature with any consistency in the first place!). Thus there is the paradox that the more research there is into SLA, the more disengaged from language teachers this research becomes.

Exemplary of this lack of contact between researchers and teachers is the June, 1998 issue of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* which was devoted exclusively to interlanguage phonetics and phonology. There are seven major articles by highly qualified specialists, all working in linguistics and applied linguistics departments. In the conclusion to the first article of the issue, Munro (1998: 152) relates the results of his study of the effect of cafeteria noise on the perception of native English and Mandarin-accented spoken English to practical matters in the following way:

> Finally, the results reported here are likely to be of interest to second-language teachers, who are often concerned with helping their learners improve their intelligibility in a wide range of communicative situations. Because noisy conditions are commonly encountered, it may be useful in the classroom to promote speaking strategies that counteract the potentially adverse effects of noise or other speaker-independent distortion. It is too early to identify what such strategies might be; however, further research on the effects of different speaking volumes, vocal quality, and speaking rate may lead to relevant conclusions.

However, after this beginning, which we might qualify as encouraging for those interested in keeping the links strong between second language acquisition research and teaching practice, I found a series of articles which were more concerned with pursuing puzzles which, while interesting in themselves, were primarily devoted to the improvement of SLA theory building and did not have much to say to teachers. Of course, whether or not SLA should relate to practical matters is, as is evident from the Beretta and Crookes comment reproduced above, an unresolved debate.

The conclusion which we might draw upon examining the contents of one issue of *SSLA* is obviously limited. First, I think it is safe say that the Summer 1998 issue of *SSLA* is not entirely typical of what is normally published in this journal as it is (1) a special issue and (2) about a particularly technical aspect of second language acquisition. Indeed, a quick look at other recent issues reveals more mention of practical issues, albeit fairly faint ones in some cases. Perhaps more typical is an article by van Patten and Oikkenon

published in 1996 where the authors' agenda was the replication of an ear-
lier study by van Patten and Cadierno (1993) on consciousness raising activ-
ities. Of interest here is the following passage which appears early on in the
article:

> It would seem, then, that one of the more important issues in studies on explicit
> instruction is the degree to which we can discount monitoring based on explic-
> it information provided to learners. In the studies already reviewed, enhanced
> performance may be due to explicit information's facilitative effect on the acqui-
> sition of grammar; however, because of the results we cannot rule out that
> enhanced performance could be due to monitoring with explicit information
> instead of increased acquisition. (Van Patten & Cadierno, 1996: 498)

The focus here is on two types of knowledge about language which
researchers such as Schwartz (1993) have termed *competence* and *learned lin-
guistic knowledge*. The former refers to what language learners know about lan-
guage through the activation of the parameters of universal grammar inter-
acting with positive evidence; the latter refers to what language learners know
about language through explicit instruction and negative feedback. van Pat-
ten and Oikkenon test their hypothesis that explicit instruction can lead to
the acquisition of syntactic competence and not just *learned linguistic knowl-
edge*. They would consider this hypothesis either temporarily or partially fal-
sified if they had good reason to believe that a learner's surface behaviour was
merely representative of Schwartz 's *learned linguistic knowledge*. The authors
reject what for them is Schwartz's overly pessimistic notion that all classroom
language teaching is doomed to developing *learned linguistic knowledge* and
it is their belief that through structured input, the teacher can engineer true
restructuring of a learner's L2 syntactic competence.

If we take a step back and think about this situation, we soon realise that
most practising teachers would likely accept that their students were able to
apparently use the L2 in a correct and appropriate manner. They would not,
on the other hand, quibble over whether the learner was drawing on *learned
linguistic knowledge* or true linguistic competence: the surface form would be
what the teacher would deal with. This leads us to the point that while
teachers are primarily concerned with behaviour and not underlying com-
petence, researchers are often concerned exclusively with competence. The sit-
uation thus described raises the prospect, outlined below, of individuals
working in two very distinct communities with distinct concerns.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, such a situation is not nec-
essarily a problem as academics are free to do as they please. However, in the
work of many SLA researchers there is a professed interest in keeping links
with language teachers along with the belief that research should be carried
out with practical matters in mind. Long (1993, 1998) for example, argues
that the field should unite around a unified theory and produce tangible
results so as to be able to offer advice to local educational boards (in North

America we can assume) about such issues as bilingual education or English for recent arrivals to North America. Elsewhere, Pica (1994) expresses concern at the possibility of a complete separation of teachers from the SLA research community and makes it clear that she does not think this possible, calling for collaboration:

> So urgent and important is the need for collaboration that we can no longer complain as teachers that there is nothing to apply from the research we hear or read about nor as researchers that tests of validity and reliability take precedence over practical classroom issues and applicability. (Pica, 1994: 49-50)

I would say that the good intentions of authors such as Long and Pica do not erase the very real gap existent between researchers and teachers. And I think that one of the problems is that too many authors ignore the physical and psychological space which separates practitioners around the world from academics who are currently not teachers of English as a foreign or second language themselves and above all who do not live and work in conditions which are even remotely similar (more on this in a moment). In addition, these authors are not addressing the fact that in their contacts with teachers, it is seemingly inevitable that it is the researcher who decides what is to be researched. The lack of synchrony between researchers and teachers leads inevitably to a gap between the two groups, what Clarke (1994) calls "theory practice dysfunction".

3. The gap between teachers and SLA researchers: different perspectives

Of course, few in SLA have ever fooled themselves into thinking that establishing a link between SLA research and language teaching would ever be easy. Thus we have Hatch's (1978: 138) early warning of "Apply with caution"; Lightbown's (1985: 181) later in the day suggestion that SLA research may tell us more about how not to teach than how to teach. More recently, Ellis (1997a, 1997b) and Crookes (1997) have problematised the applicability of second language acquisition research to teaching practice pointing to a psychological and professional gulf between language teachers and applied linguists[2]. Ellis and Crookes feel very strongly about maintaining their links with practising teachers because as former language teachers themselves, they would genuinely like their work to inform teaching practice in some way (I refer here to Ellis's recommendations regarding grammatical consciousness raising activities and Crookes' efforts to make suggestions about task-based syllabus design and methodology, both authors basing themselves on SLA research). Both authors call for closer ties between SLA researchers and prac-

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2. I might also add other publications such as the aforementioned Clarke (1994), van Lier (1994), Crookes (1993), Johnson (1996, 1997) and Schlessman (1997).

tising teachers. However, before jumping to proposed solutions, we might first examine how the gap between teachers and researchers has come about. In other words, why do we see a gap between teachers and researchers?

One reason for the gap, as pointed out by Crookes (1997), is that SLA researchers have relatively higher status than teachers. The relative status of the researcher is higher because as academics they occupy the upper echelons of the knowledge chain. They are the makers of knowledge which teachers are expected to process and use. On a more practical level, researchers are the plenary speakers at language teaching conferences who are meant to be listened to by most of those attending. And, despite the increasing tendency in some parts of the world for journalists and politicians alike to downgrade the role of the academic[3], those who work in university posts generally command much higher salaries and are seen by the general public to be at a higher level than teachers.

Indeed when all is said and done, many SLA researchers are what Reich (1991) calls *symbolic analysts*, while language teachers are what he calls *in-person servers*[4]. *Symbolic analysts* are the problem identifiers and solvers, a super-class of highly educated and skilled individuals who are becoming progressively less dependent on traditional local organisations and frameworks and more integrated with a developing international socio-economic and intellectual elite. By contrast *in-person servers*, such as sales staff at department stores, secretaries, hairdressers, bus drivers and teachers, are involved in repetitive tasks (controlled ultimately by *symbolic analysts*) which are carried out in the presence of those consuming their products. If in former times the teaching profession in general might well have found itself in the middle section of a continuum ranging from more traditionally blue collar services such as bus driving and hairdressing to more white collar jobs such as marketing executive and journalist, in recent years a gap has developed, abruptly separating *symbolic analysts* from *in-person servers*. With the increase in

3. In Britain an example of a journalist is Melanie Phillips and her best selling 1997 book, *All must have prizes*. The book includes several critiques of the influence of educational researchers on educational policy. An example of a politician is David Blunkett, Minister of Education, who questions the uselessness of educational research when results are not consistent with his policies. Blunkett's anti-academic stance culminated in a recent denial of the right of University lecturers to strike for better pay conditions (see front page headline story in *The Guardian* of Monday, 16th August, 1999).

4. Reich discusses a third group, *routine producers,* which I shall not deal with here. In this category are blue and white collar workers who have in common the routine nature of their work (in this sense they are similar to *in-person servers*) and the fact that it is not carried out in the presence of those who will ultimately consume its products (in this sense they are different from *in-person servers*). In the category of *routine producers* we find those who work in manufacturing contexts (both assembly line workers and managers) as well as the growing number of individuals working in data and information processing of different types (for example, those who enter information about clients onto computer data bases).

administrative control over what they do on a day-to-day basis (for example, the increasing number of teaching contexts where teachers are expected to follow closely a national curriculum), teachers find that they are progressively *deskilled* and ultimately *declassed*.

Another difference between SLA researchers and language teachers contributing to the gap is related to the stances which the two groups tend to adopt vis a vis knowledge about SLA. Rorty (1980) contrasts what he terms in somewhat unorthodox fashion epistemological and hermeneutic stances towards the acquisition of knowledge. In the former case, there is a paradigm in place with all that this entails: agreement about what is to be researched and how, and how what is researched is to be assessed as valid or not. In this model the growth of knowledge happens within well defined strictures. In the latter case, we are in the realm of exploration and speculation where knowledge growth is akin to a conversation which unfolds with developments contingent on diachronic and synchronic factors in context. Rorty contrasts hermeneutics and epistemology as follows:

> Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts. The hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but *simply* hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement. Epistemology sees the hope of agreement as a token of the existence of common ground which, perhaps unbeknown to the speakers, unites them in a common rationality. For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology- from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put- and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own. For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all the contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible. For epistemology, conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. Epistemology views the participants as united in what Oakshott calls a *universitas*- a group united by mutual interests in achieving a common end. Hermeneutics views them as united in what he calls a *societas*- persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground. (Rorty 1980: 318)

On a more general level, we may see SLA researchers and language teachers as belonging to communities with very different *Discourses*. Gee (1996) defines *Discourse* as follows:

> a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaning-

ful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role. (Gee, 1996: 131)

Ellis cites Gee's conceptualisation of *Discourses* as what are produced by members of so-called "socially meaningful" groups in order to establish and maintain their memberships in these groups, making the following point:

> Gee's theoretical framework is helpful in trying to understand why the relationship between SLA and LP is problematic. SLA researchers need to engage in a Discourse (i.e., that of the research report) that their social world (i.e., universities) values and rewards. In contrast, teachers and teacher educators have developed Discourses that address their particular practical needs (e.g., teachers often talk about their work in terms of "stories"). Both SLA researchers and practitioners of LP are likely to insist on the separateness and integrity of their own discourses. The important point is that the Discourses of SLA and LP are in potential conflict with each other because they represent different social worlds with different values, beliefs and attitudes. (Ellis 1997: 72) [LP = language pedagogy]

Thus SLA researchers and language teachers may be seen to have what in essence are different ways of life. I would add that these different ways of life are intricately tied up with the different ways in which language is used by researchers and teachers, in particular, following Barthes (1972), whether or not there is an emphasis on denotation (words stand for objects, events and concepts) towards connotation (words stand for a network of associations which are culture-bound). An often cited example of the former is blue jeans (Barthes, 1972): at the level of denotation, blue jeans can be defined as trousers made of denim or cotton; at the level of connotation, blue jeans represent youth, pop culture, a casual lifestyle, etc. SLA researchers inhabit a world where there is pressure to denotate- to name and argue that they are naming reality. Teachers, on the other hand, inhabit a world which obliges them to deal not with static carefully elaborated denotations of reality, but with the multiple connotations of reality manifested through the multi-layered and textured social interaction which constitutes classroom language teaching and learning. A parallel to this denotation/connotation dichotomy is to be found in literature on ethnography where there is much discussion of *etic* and *emic* perspectives (see Pike, 1955; Watson-Gegeo, 1988; van Lier, 1988). *Etic* refers to the use of a metalanguage adopted from academics who study phenomena not as participants but as outside observers. *Emic* refers to the use of a metalanguage grounded in the experience of participants in the phenomena under study.

In the examples outlined in the previous section we see elements of all three of these perspective on the SLA researcher-language teacher gap. The question of status is perhaps obvious in the sense that it is the researchers who published in the journals which constitute the knowledge base for SLA theory and ultimately for recommendations about language teaching. Dif-

ferent stances towards knowledge are reflected in my discussion of the van Patten and Oikkenon article: the authors are engaged in an epistemological exercise, while language teachers would see the issue of *competence* vs *learned linguistic knowledge* as less relevant as they negotiate the ongoing and contingent nature of classroom events and behaviour. As regards Discourse communities and the use of language, both the Munro and van Patten/Oikkenon articles represent artifactual evidence of different ways of life and different ways of naming: on the researcher side there is the academic concern with making a contribution to the research base of SLA where the emphasis is on denotative *etic* descriptions of classroom life; on the teacher side, there is the concern with maintaining an ongoing narrative with a group of students with an emphasis on the context based connotations of language use in the classroom.

4. Possible solutions to the gap problem

As I mentioned above, Clarke (1994) has conceptualised the researcher/-teacher gap as what he calls the *theory-practice dysfunction*. For Clarke, radical action is necessary to correct this imbalance:

> [...] the only real solution to the problems I have identified would be to turn the hierarchy on its head, putting teachers on the top and arraying others-pundits, professors, administrators, researchers, and so forth- below them. (Clarke, 1994: 18)

What Clarke suggests here is similar to the approach to research adopted by many applied linguists and educationalists who in recent years have based their publications on their collaborative experiences, during which they spend time with teachers in an attempt to better understand teaching practice. Research of this kind means engaging in activities such as sitting down with teachers to talk about why they became teachers in the first place (Clarke, 1992; Grenfell, 1998) or asking teachers to comment on transcriptions of lessons in an attempt to get at how they understand their decision making processes (Nunan, 1992; Woods, 1996) or even sharing in planning, teaching and assessing lessons with a teacher (Loudon, 1992)[5]. However, it would seem that despite the best of intentions, in all of these situations the researcher is still in control. And as can be observed in the cases of Clarke, Nunan and Loudon, it is the researcher who essentially gets all of the glory (a point I could easily make about my own published research based on collaborations

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5. For examples of studies along these lines, I refer the interested reader to collections such as Day, Pope and Denicolo (1990), Richards and Nunan (1990), Nunan (1992b), Flowerdew, Brock and Hsia (1992) Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), Edge and Richards (1993), Freeman and Richards (1996) and Bailey and Nunan (1996) and in depth books on teacher thought such as Woods (1996), Grenfell (1998) and Richards (1998).

with teachers; see, for example, Block, 1996). The real source of research questions is at best only in part coming from practitioners.

Another solution often proposed over the past two decades and a half has been for teachers to carry out research themselves. Such research is usually called "action research" (see Hopkins, 1993; Nunan, 1989; McNiff, 1993; McKernan, 1996) and it involves the teacher as exclusive actor in the complete research cycle of identifying research questions based on personal teaching experience, doing background reading on the subject identified, collecting and analysing data, drawing conclusions and then starting the entire process again. In addition, there is the expectation that the teacher/action researcher will write up the results and share them with colleagues. I have experience with action research both as a language teacher and as someone who on two occasions attempted to set up action research projects amongst colleagues in a large language teaching centre in the late 80's and early 90's, failing both times. To my mind, the entire enterprise is strong in theory but very difficult to carry out in practice[6]. One problem is the inviability of the very idea of teachers taking on the extra work that research represents in exchange for personal and professional development which is not compensated in any way in most teaching contexts. Another problem is that those who do manage to carry out action research projects will almost inevitably find that no matter how interesting their results, their studies will never have as much of an impact on the field as those produced from research carried out by professional researchers. Until such issues are resolved in different teaching contexts around the world, I do not see action research as a viable way of bridging the researcher-teacher gap[7].

Perhaps having observed the relative inviability of action research, Allwright (see Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Allwright, 1993; Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997) has outlined an approach to bridging the gap between research and teaching which may be more likely to succeed, albeit on a modest level. He proposes that research not be added to teacher's responsibilities, but that it be incorporated into classroom practice. He suggests "exploiting already familiar and trusted classroom activities as ways of exploring the things that puzzle teachers and learners about what is happening in their own classrooms" (Allwright, 1993: 125). This process begins when teachers and learners brainstorm what puzzles them about language learning and teaching. From the resultant list, puzzles might be selected for investigation, above all those which look most promising as regards their potential to improve

6. But see the occasional article which makes the case for the success of action research (e.g. Thorne and Quiang, 1996).
7. Of course, I must recognize here that one of the points about action research is that it is localized research and therefore not really intended for international consumption. However, I would say the same criterion applies to research which is published for international audiences- it is also localized, but it is localized in the right place, the place which allows it to be circulated around the world.

classroom practice through the elimination of obstacles to teaching and learning. At this stage the teacher organizes classroom activities such as group discussions, role plays, and dialogue writing which focus on the elected puzzles. Putting language learning and teaching on the classroom agenda is not a new idea (see Ellis & Sinclair, 1989); however, Allwright's approach is unique because the topics on the agenda are generated by teachers and learners and they remain in the classroom so to speak. In the end, teacher and learners learn something about language learning and teaching through classroom activities and this something could lead to changes in classroom practice. Still, the problem which remains is that such research is not likely to ever get beyond the very localized contexts in which it is carried out (unless, as Allwright suggests, exploring teachers put together poster presentations and are able to make a long journey to an international conference). I might add here that in lamenting the lack of international exposure for exploratory research efforts, I am not saying that such research need be generalisable to other teaching/learning contexts; rather, I am stating the perhaps obvious fact that it does not have an international forum which would allow it be heard by others who might determine how it resonates to their own contexts and as a consequence, it does not have the prestige afforded to less peripherally based research.

The three solutions discussed thus far all involve the teacher in the research process. There remains, however, a fourth equally teacher-centred activity which does not involve the teacher in the research process. I refer here to a model for what teachers do with research which is already done independent of their contextualised needs. Widdowson (1990) suggests that teachers take an active role in what he terms *mediation*, a process "whereby the relationship between theory and practice, ideas and their actualization, can only be realized within the domain of application, that is, through the immediate activity of teaching"(Widdowson, 1990: 30). In a more traditional form, the mediation process proceeds from a theoretical principled side where academics act, to a practical pedagogical side, where teachers act: the former is called appraisal and the latter application. Following this version of the model, when a theory is appraised, academics first interpret it and then elaborate a conceptual evaluation. When teachers are engaged in application, they first put a theory into operation and then elaborate an empirical evaluation. I present a pictorial representation of this model in Figure 1 below.

Widdowson proposes greater involvement of teachers in this process, whereby their reflection on a theory in operation will have consequences for the theoretical evaluation which in turn will work back through the appraisal process to interpretation. For their part, academics might work towards the facilitation of such mediation by selectively identifying ideas which might be of practical interest and above all, by making their work more accessible. While both parties are active in this process, Widdowson makes clear who is in charge:
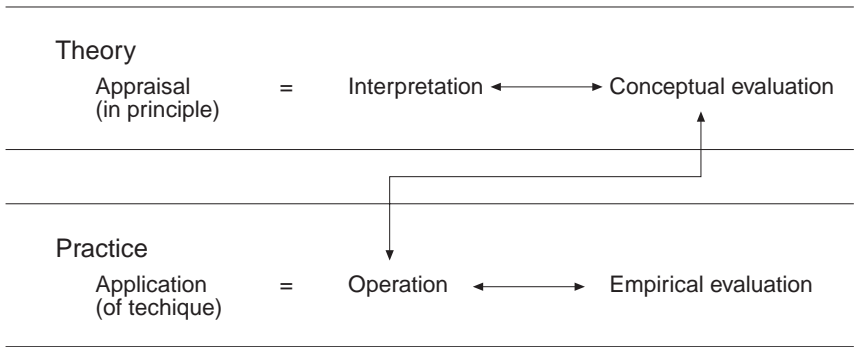
Theory
    Appraisal   =   Interpretation ←——————→ Conceptual evaluation
    (in principle)

Practice
    Application   =   Operation ←————→ Empirical evaluation
    (of techique)

Figure 1. Mediation (based on Widdowson, 1990).

> [T]eachers are in charge in the scheme of things proposed here. The applied
> linguists have the subordinate and supporting role. What they say by way of
> appraisal has no effective force unless it is incorporated into the mediation
> process enacted by teachers and under their control. (Widdowson, 1990: 33).

5. Conclusion

The relative feasibility of the four suggestions outlined in the previous sec-
tion remains to be seen. Indeed, many authors are pessimistic about the pos-
sibility of there being any bridging whatsoever of the gap between researchers
and teachers. Clarke (1994) expresses this view as follows:

> This would involve a major change in our thinking and in our behaviour and,
> however reasonable it may appear to be, I do not see this happening any time
> soon. (Clarke, 1994: 18)

In my more pessimistic moments, I share Clarke's view of the relation-
ship between researchers and practising teachers. Teaching an MA TESOL
module on SLA has taught me that the ongoing dialogue between the two
groups is full of ups and downs. As someone who worked primarily as an EFL
teacher for 18 years before taking up full-time employment in an academic
environment just three years ago, I think that I still retain a degree of cred-
ibility when I attempt to talk about classroom language teaching and learn-
ing to MA candidates. This credibility, I believe, is based on a sensitivity to
teachers' feelings which can only be acquired and retained when one works
as a teacher. As I plunge (or sink!) deeper into academic life and as a conse-
quence distance myself from my former work environment, however, I can
feel myself losing touch. The *Discourse* community to which I belong and owe
allegiance is that of academics and not that of language teachers. And the *voic-*

es with which I speak and write are now more loudly and prominently in unison with the long list of authors whom I have cited throughout this paper than with my former colleagues in the staffroom. As I become ever firmly ensconced in the upper part of Widdowson's mediation model, the key question is whether or not I will be one of those academics who, following Widdowson's suggests, work towards the facilitation of mediation by selectively identifying ideas which might be of practical interest and by making their work more accessible. On the occasion afforded by this paper, the answer to this question must surely lie with the reader.

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