

## **Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice: Voice of Mediators**

**Mehdi B. Mehrani**  
*University of Neyshabur*

**Mehrani, M. B. (2014). Bridging the gap between research and practice: Voice of mediators. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 18(2), 21-38.**

The present study aimed to explore the strategies that could be potentially employed in the Iranian ELT context to bridge the gap between research and practice. Data were collected through conducting a 'focus group discussion' with a number of practitioner-researchers. The findings showed that to improve the relationship between researchers and practitioners both teacher and researcher reward systems should be restructured, so as to encourage teachers toward an evidence-based practice, and researchers toward a problem-based research. Developing professional and social networks, founding an organization for promoting collaboration and cooperation between researchers and practitioners, supporting the involvement of teachers in academic activities, and revising and updating educational materials are also required for improving the link between research and practice.

**Key Words:** educational practice, educational research, Iranian ELT context, research-practice gap.

### **1 Introduction**

Reflections on the relationship between researchers and practitioners suggest that research-practice divide has been an endemic feature of modern language education. Language education was a well-established practical profession long centuries before theories and research findings began to be provided. The profession was essentially considered an art, and thus, practitioners' experiences and wisdom were the only sources of inspiration, innovation, and change for improving the quality of language education. The transformation of language education from an art to a scientific discipline during the 1940s, however, opened up a new avenue for the involvement of a group of scholars (mainly linguists and psychologists) to scientifically examine the process of language teaching from an academic perspective. The idea was that scientific investigations can and does have the potential to improve the quality of instruction; therefore, language education must be given a scientific base and practitioners' practice must be guided by researcher's research. The growing acceptance of research in language education restricted the role of

practitioners and assumed a superordinate authority for researchers in making pedagogical decisions.

Since then, researchers took over the leading roles in the English language teaching (ELT) profession, and they gradually formed an elite community of professionals as efficient, competent, and expert members of the profession, by detaching themselves from other members (i.e. practitioners) who were mainly considered inefficient, unskilled, and amateur. Soon, this brought about an individually exercised and socially accepted form of a hierarchy of influence with researchers at the top and practitioners at the bottom (Stewart, 2006).

A few decades later, however, following the qualitative movement in educational research, a radical change questioned the established relationship between researchers and teachers in language education. Critics began to contend that this relationship has been embedded within a power/culture/knowledge configuration. They challenged the “outsider perspective” of researchers and argued for holding an emic perspective in educational research. This line of criticism was later coupled with a relatively new wave of condemnation leveled against the “scientifically formulated relationship” of researchers with teachers. With critical-minded scholars at the forefront of such efforts, the gap between researchers and practitioners was again challenged from an emancipatory perspective. They argued that “Teachers need to be encouraged to move out of their submissive position and to take a much more innovatory, as opposed to implementary, role ... One way to do this is to adopt the perspective of the researcher” (Gurney 1989, p. 15).

Other initiatives such as “teacher-researcher movement” have been implemented in many other countries and teachers are encouraged to conduct classroom scale research studies. The promotion of reflective teaching (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987) and exploratory practice (Allwright, 1997; 2005) can also be considered as other attempts made to close the gap between researchers and practitioners.

Although such initiatives were assumed to bring researchers into closer harmony with practitioners, a cross-sectional review of the literature reveals that the gap is still prevalent in many of educational contexts, and stakeholders in various educational systems experience the research-practice divide. This implies that previous attempts at narrowing the gap may not have led to a clear, successful, and generally accepted approach to bridging the research-practice divide. In other words, despite all attempts, the gap between research and practice seems to have widened rather than diminished.

In the Iranian ELT profession there is a growing concern about the gap between researchers and practitioners. In academic meetings, voices of dissatisfaction are commonly heard about teachers’ lack of interest in academic research findings. Researchers and university professors often criticize educational institutes and public schools for not being cooperative in

getting involved in academic research projects. The temporal and physical distance between researchers and practitioners in educational meetings, and also the fact that ELT graduate students who have been engaged in the Ministry of Education regularly leave their jobs upon graduation are further indications of the research-practice divide in the Iranian ELT profession. These signs and voices of dissatisfaction were collectively reflected in the decision made by the authorities about the main theme of the 10th annual meeting of Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI).

In 2012, TELLSI International Conference was particularly devoted to the gap between research, practice and policy. Although it was the first nation-wide attempt made to bring Iranian ELT researchers and practitioners to a closer harmony, this important initiative showed the long-lasting desire and drive of Iranian ELT community members for (re)analyzing and improving the gap between research and practice. It is now an opportune moment for a reappraisal of the long-established hierarchical relationship between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in English education in the Iranian context.

## 2 Review of the Literature

Discussions around the gap between educational research and practice are diverse. However, when it comes to the alleged causes of the gap opinions diverge. For instance, some believe that the nature of conflicting knowledge bases of researchers and practitioners is the main cause of the gap (e.g. Korthagen, 2007; Pieters & de Vries, 2007). While teachers need prompt and concrete answers to online problems, academic research studies often offer a more abstract, systematized and general form of knowledge (Eraut, 1995; Kessels & Korthagen, 1996; Korthagen, 2007; Tom, 1997). On this basis, some have argued that research outcomes need to be translated from their formal form into a more practical form (Bauer & Fischer, 2007).

Some scholars argue that the main causes of the gap lie in the complex discourse of research. For example, Zeuli (1994) states that understanding academic papers is a daunting task for teachers because they have no specialized knowledge of research. Others believe that the problem stems from the fact that prospective teachers, during their pre-service years, are not taught how to critically read and comprehend research papers. In teacher education programs “we give teachers some knowledge and skills in reading research, but not enough for them to engage confidently with it” (Gore & Gitlin, 2004, p. 51).

Another factor that is considered to be the main cause of the research-practice gap is the lack of practical results yielded by most studies in ELT (Mehrani, 2015). Ortega (2005) argues that the value of educational research ought to be judged “not only by internal criteria of methodological rigor as

understood by the particular epistemological models adopted, but also ultimately on the basis of its potential for positive impact on social and educational problems” (p. 430). However, a great deal of research studies in language teaching relate to problems that are too insignificant or too remote from the context of teachers’ interest (Block, 2000; Crookes, 1993; Nassaji, 2012). In a real language classroom, there is a rich mosaic of concerns relating to learning, teaching, culture, language (both source and target), society, technology, and so forth, as reflected in various practices ranging from ordinary corridor talks to highly specialized techniques of teaching such as un/semantically clustered presentation of vocabulary items. By contrast, however, second language researchers’ main concerns, as mirrored in the mainstream ELT research journals, are devoted to a sparse array of theories, some of them self-consciously disconnected from all of these practices (e.g. Universal Grammar, Minimalism, Connectionism, Item Response Theory, etc.). Block points out that most TESOL-related “publications are often issues which are not of particular interest to language teachers” (Block, 2000, p. 130), and thus, much current knowledge in second language research is “of limited use and applicability to practicing teachers” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 411).

From a critical perspective, Gore and Giltin (2004) vehemently contend that the power relations between academics and practitioners, whereby researchers are positioned as producers and teachers as consumers of knowledge are among the main causes of the gap. They believe that the material conditions of the work, different discourses of professionalism, and dissimilar reward structures help shape contrasting expectations and differing roles that further the distance between academics and teachers.

Examining teachers’ research engagement in 13 countries, Borg reports that teachers’ lack of time and access to educational research, as well as complexity and impracticality of research findings are among the main reasons that prevent teachers from reading research (Borg, 2009). Other practical issues are also frequently mentioned by other researchers. For instance, Allison and Carey’s study on of a group of language teachers reveals that there are both internal (e.g., lack of expertise, individual weakness in time management) and external factors (e.g. lack of institutional support/incentive, lack of time, heavy workloads) that prevent teachers from engaging in research (Allison & Carey, 2007). Gao, Barkhuizen, and Chow (2010) report similar contextual challenges that Chinese language teachers face in engaging with research: intellectual and financial resources, lack of time, heavy workload, and limited competence in English. Gore and Giltin (2004) also identify limited practicality of research, the uniqueness and unpredictability of the classroom, teachers’ doubts and disbeliefs about research, lack of time, and the difficult and complex language of research papers as other preventing factors.

Investigating the literature shows that in previous studies, the issue of research-practice gap has been approached from various perspectives, and subsequently different proposals have been suggested to tackle this problem. This has the advantage of a broad picture being presented (Korthagen, 2007); however, such mono-causal analyses can be considered as one of the reasons of the persistence of the research-practice gap (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007).

### **3 Methodology**

Approaching the problem from a multi-sided perspective, the present study explored the potential strategies that could be employed for improving the connections between researchers and practitioners in the Iranian ELT community. The researcher believes that the existing research-practice gap does not simply equate to a lack of utilization of research findings in the classroom practice, but it is the result of the interaction of a range of teacher-related and researcher-related factors that are parts of our current educational system. Thus, removing the gap between research and practice requires adopting a holistic perspective for investigating into teachers' and researchers' personal and social realities, as well as the institutional factors influencing these realities. On this basis, the researcher conducted a focus group interview with a number of practitioner-researchers, seeking their opinions about the strategies that could be employed in the Iranian ELT community to narrow the gap between research and practice. Therefore, the following research question was the focus of group discussion.

- What strategies can be employed in the Iranian ELT context to narrow the gap between researchers and practitioners?

It should be admitted that this question could ideally be answered by people who are familiar with various aspects of the Iranian ELT profession; it requires the respondents to have experienced engagement with practice and research, as well as with policy. In addition, a broad understanding of the current channels of communication among researchers and practitioners on the part of respondents could contribute to the construction of better answers. Bearing this in mind, the researcher decided that the sampling criteria for selecting potential participants should be a general understating of and a direct involvement in various aspects of the ELT profession.

Thus, through a purposeful sampling procedure, the researcher asked five applied linguists with various backgrounds in research, practice and policy to contribute to the study by participating in the focus group discussion. The participants were all males and their ages ranged from 29 to 38 years. In terms of teaching experience, they had various records from 5 to 12 years and this included teaching at different levels from junior high

schools and high schools to language institutes, and even university centers. As far as their level of involvement in research and policy-making was concerned they were variously involved in both. Table 1 summarizes their professional profiles.

Table 1. The professional profile of the participants of the focus group discussion

Participants	Policy & position profile	Research profile	Teaching experience
A	Manager of a private language institute	2 published papers 6 presented papers	12 years-private institutes and university centers
B	Editor of a private language institutes' newsletter	2 published paper 8 presented papers 1 book chapter	6 years-private institutes, and tutoring
C	Participating in two research projects about Iranian language teaching policy Supervising an ESP project for the Iranian Aviation	10 published papers 8 presented papers	5 years-university centers, and private institutes
D	Associate editor of an academic journal Dean of an academic research center in the Ministry of Science, Research & Technology Organizer of an international conference	14 published papers 10 presented papers 3 book chapters	9 years-high schools, and university centers
E	Head of English department in a state university	9 published papers 11 presented papers Two symposia	11 years-high schools, private institutes, and university centers

A focus group discussion is defined as “a way of collecting qualitative data, which-essentially involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). Discussions are normally conducted by a skilled interviewer, who encourages participants to share their views and respond to issues highlighted by a research team. In order to facilitate productive interaction, participants share homogeneous characteristics or experiences (Hennink, 2008). Normally, group members influence each other by responding to the ideas and comments of others (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

A focus group discussion should be conducted in “a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5); nonetheless, conflicts of ideas and disagreements are very likely and informants are usually challenged by others. Consequently, participants have to elaborate on ideas they express, resulting in data more elaborate than what is usually gathered in individual interviews (Wilkinson, 2004). Therefore, what makes a ‘focus group’ different from individual interviews is that its outcome is not a mere sum of individual opinions but ‘group opinion’ (Bohnsack, 2004).

Compared to individual interviews, focus group discussions are more time-effective procedures for collecting authentic data from naturalistic conversational situations for analysis and exploration (Bohnsack, 2004; Wilkinson, 2004). Depending on whether the researcher intends to collect data *within* individual groups or *between* sets of groups, two approaches toward focus group discussions are possible (Morgan, 2007; Morgan, Fellows, & Guevara, 2008).

Prior to the focus group discussion, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. In particular, he highlighted the significance of research-practice gap, and its multi-dimensional nature. The participants were then, invited to brainstorm their ideas for bridging the gap between Iranian ELT researchers and practitioners. They were encouraged to challenge and comment on other’s ideas. Throughout the discussion, which approximately lasted two hours, several suggestions were made and discussed in details. The session was audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. The suggestions were then thematically analyzed.

#### **4 Results**

It appeared that participants expressed various concerns about teacher education programs, reward systems in both academic and educational centers, educational materials, and so on. In this section, attempts are made to elaborate on each of these concerns under headings that attempt to name the threats and the opportunities that are important in both widening and closing the gap.

##### **4.1 Teacher reward system**

The first theme that emerged from the discussion was the need for restructuring the current teacher evaluation system in the Ministry of Education. The participants argued that an important aspect of the divide is teacher evaluation structure in our educational system. They contended that such a structure reinforces the teachers’ isolations from academic communities. Teachers are not rewarded for engaging in research, participating in conferences, and keeping up with current theoretical issues in language education.

Some of the participants agreed that teachers see their job as teaching and not researching. They proposed that the educational system can implement a set of incentives for getting teachers involved in research activities. The participants also suggested that a small fraction of teachers' working hours (e.g. two hours per week) could be specified for research and other activities for professional development.

Another suggestion made by the participants was that teachers could be awarded for conducting small-scale research studies in the form of "teacher research". The educational system can set research priorities and specify grants for practicing teachers to carry out such projects. Teachers can also be encouraged for sharing their experience and knowledge to other teachers and colleagues.

It should however, be mentioned that some of the participants disagreed with the above suggestions and hasten to assert that teachers in the Ministry of Education are not currently evaluated for anything at all. They emphasized that if teachers are to be research-oriented, many things, including a totally new teacher evaluation system should be designed and implemented in the country.

#### **4.2 Academic reward system**

A similar topic which was brought into focus in the group discussion was researcher evaluation system. The participants emphasized that the expectations placed on researchers in academic centers shape their scholarly activities. During the past decades, this has gradually formed their conceptions of research, which is often seen detached from practice altogether. The participants contended that many ELT researchers in the Iranian context are totally disengaged from the practice of language teaching. This has caused them to have lost the reality, yet these people continue to 'do research', 'to analyze the situation', and even to propose 'practical suggestions'.

The participants argued that the fact that university researchers are encouraged but also expected to publish in prestigious journals (that are not even known to teachers) strengthens the divide between researchers and practitioners. They criticized the researcher evaluation system on the ground that when a research is associated with practice, it is less valued in relation to other theoretical pieces of research published in international journals. Case studies, qualitative research projects, and ethnographies which often address practical problems are not often approved by research committees, especially in grant specification meetings. One of the participants expressed that:

Iranian researchers just try to publish; and the easiest way to publish is just to get rid of the complexities of practice. They just deal with theoretical stuffs, and they produce articles just



like a factory. We need to establish a sound evaluation system for practical studies that are conducted in our country... In many developed countries, researchers are given grants and research budgets to “solve problems” not to “write papers”. But I have never seen that in my own country. My research collaborator in the [United] States is currently engaged in developing a professional development program for a small town. He is the principal researcher, and he goes to schools and classrooms, talk to teachers, students, administrators, analyze the situation, and propose a program. His job is not evaluated based on the number of papers he publishes, rather based on the soundness of the solutions he proposes.

Regarding promotion and tenure positions, participants suggested that researchers can be evaluated, *inter alia*, based on how applicable and practical their research projects are. For instance, their academic profile can be evaluated based on how much ‘off-campus grants’ they annually obtain. This pushes researchers towards activities that link their academic works to practical problems in education. For instance, researchers can negotiate with language institutes and educational centers for addressing their pedagogical problems and research needs in university centers. These practical problems can in turn become topics of MA theses and PhD dissertations.

In addition, the participants expressed that ELT researchers can be encouraged to spend time in schools rather than in their laboratories, assisting teachers in their pedagogical problems. The time that researchers spend in schools without that time leading to research output can be seen as a professional or academic service.

### **4.3 Teacher education programs**

A set of strongly supported suggestions were made about our current teacher education programs. The participants argued that teachers do not read research simply because they cannot; they are not educated how to find, read, evaluate, and use research papers. When they take a course of research during their teacher education programs they are taught some theoretical discussions, and are simply expected to memorize the content of a book. This is not at all sufficient for prospective teachers to be critical consumers and even producers of research. We need to work with teachers to explore the limits and possibilities of research for their work as teachers. Simply providing them with some basic definitions and discussions about academic research is inadequate.

A similar issue was raised about the impracticality of teacher education programs. One of the participants claimed that:

There are many prospective teachers and even MA graduates of TEFL who do not know what TOEFL score means, what GRE stands for, what a TTC program is all about. They have never been to any language institutes, neither for studying nor for teaching... ELT students should start their research studies from language classrooms. They have to go and observe what language teaching means, so they can develop an idea what is going on in practice. This must be part of their courses... Look, I passed two practicum courses during both my BA and MA programs... but we were never required to observe any classrooms.

These statements were unanimously supported by other participants who suggested that prospective teachers must be required to engage in practice, observe classrooms, and do research activities in educational centers as part of their professional programs. Making an analogy, the participants argued that just as prospective engineers are often required to be engaged in industry, prospective language teachers should be required to take active parts in pedagogical centers.

Furthermore, it was argued that pre-service and in-service teacher education programs are the best (and perhaps the only) meetings where researchers (university instructors) and teachers find one another “under the same roof”. These programs are thus, the best places to implement plans for strengthening the relationship between research and practice.

#### **4.4 Organization for coordinating research and practice communities**

The next theme which was taken on board in the discussion session was the need for establishing an organization or institution for connecting researchers with practitioners. The participants contended that such an association can not only set research needs and problems but also provide research orientations for academics. The participants mentioned TELLSI in particular, and suggested that it can play a key role in bridging the gap between research and practice. For instance, language institutes, pedagogical centers and even the Ministry of Education can negotiate their research priorities with TELLSI, and TELLSI can call for research proposals to solve real problems.

Such an association can help both researchers and practitioners to develop social networks and professional links. Furthermore, it can represent both teachers and researchers’ concerns as a unified voice.

#### **4.5 Problem-based research**

Another major suggestion articulated by the participants concerned the nature of research studies that are currently being conducted in the Iranian ELT

context. The participants argued that academic research studies, more often than not, fail to address questions that are pertinent to teaching practice; they deal with questions that are too insignificant and non-practical. Such research questions are basically not rooted in real classroom problems and often originate from theoretical discussions which do not serve teachers' interests. One of the contributors asserted that:

I personally believe that ELT research should be directly linked to classroom practice. Whatever we do in our field should have a contribution to classroom practice. Paradoxically [however] the majority of the studies done in our university, our country, or even across the world are not at all like that. I see lots of MA thesis and PhD dissertations are filled with tables, graphs, and stats. With this mind, they just try to convince the reader that this is a scientific work. Professors and researchers are even worse. They never consider what kinds of problems these theses are going to solve.

Another participant suggested that ELT departments could make graduate students address real language problems in their theses. For instance, when submitting a theses proposal, graduate students could be obliged to convince the committee members that their study would intend to solve a practical problem of a school, a classroom, a teacher, etc. Gatekeepers such as journal editors and conference organizers could employ a similar pragmatic policy and push the community toward addressing problem-based issues.

The participants emphasized that although theoretical studies can be both valuable and necessary, ELT studies that are not rooted in practice, and do not have any practical contribution “are good for nothing”.

#### **4.6 Educational materials**

Another point that emerged from the discussion was the urgent need for revising and editing the textbooks that are currently used in the Ministry of Education. The participants discussed that the fact that a book has been used for more than 30 years without any minor modifications passes a sense of archaism, which is not in line with the nature of research. We should not expect our teachers to study research paper for teaching the same materials that they have been teaching during all years of their profession. In fact, many teachers had been taught the same books they are now teaching. Therefore, it is not surprising that they do not feel any need for reading and doing research.

The participants emphasized that educational materials must be regularly revised and updated. They questioned the current practice where a

group of university professors write educational materials for English courses at (junior) high schools. They also suggested that practicing teachers could be annually invited to evaluate and comment on educational materials. Even they can be asked to cooperate on preparing, compiling and writing new materials. The participants referred, in particular, to a new version of the pre-university textbook which “stirred” language teachers a few years ago. They argued that this experience showed that even those teachers who were accustomed to their old-fashioned styles of teaching responsibly felt “they need to do something”.

#### **4.7 Teachers’ involvement in academic activities**

Another major and related concern raised by the participants was the failure of many ELT academic centers to involve practicing teachers in professional meetings such as workshops, conferences, and so on. Teachers could be encouraged by both academic centers and educational institutions where they are affiliated with, to join academic and professional conventions where they can make social contacts and professional connections with other colleagues and researchers. ELT conferences could also invite teachers for sharing their professional experiences with other attendants.

Similarly, academic journals could specify special columns for teachers’ stories, narratives, forums and so on. This not only provides a space for exchanging ideas between researchers and practitioners but also extends the scope of the readerships of academic journals, which is often confined to university centers.

### **5 Discussion and Conclusion**

The participants in the discussion group made a number of useful suggestions for improving the connection between research and practice. Of the influential factors that widen the gap between Iranian ELT research and practice are the current reward systems in both our schools and universities. The analysis showed that the realities of work lives and personal lives of Iranian teachers do not easily create material conditions for engaging in/with research. At this time, the reward structures in schools and language institutes reinforce rather than diminish teachers’ distance from researchers. This suggests a need for taking an institutional step to restructure our current teacher evaluation system. One aspect of this restructuring is that teachers must be awarded for becoming critical consumers of research and also for producing knowledge in the form of classroom research projects (Gore & Giltin, 2004). A further aspect could be implementing financial incentives and encouraging teachers for sharing their knowledge with other teachers and colleagues. It should be pointed out, however, that such a change in any educational policy creates more work and requires more time on the part of

teachers (Fullan, 1991). Given teachers' intense and busy schedules, therefore, extra time could be built in teachers' work plans for doing research activities (Gore & Giltin, 2004). Without accounting for this extra work and time the academic-teacher divide is not likely to be seriously challenged.

Similarly, the participants' explanations uncovered that our academics are not valued for associating themselves with practice and spending time in schools. Therefore, for our context we can envision an academic reward system that maintains a focus on theoretical research, while also promoting practical studies. Within such a reward structure, researchers would not have to follow only the "publish or perish" policy (Neil, 2008) but, for example, they would be paid not only for working with teachers on producing new educational insights and sharing research findings with teachers, administrators, parents and students (Gore & Giltin, 2004). Or alternatively, researchers' academic profile would be evaluated, among other things, based on how much "off-campus grants" they annually receive. Tenured positions in academic centers could be given to those who are engaged in solving practical problems. These and similar changes in our academic reward structure would encourage university professors to negotiate with language institutes and educational centers for addressing their pedagogical problems and research needs in university centers.

The participants also expressed doubts about the practicality of research studies conducted in university centers. Academics very often ask questions that teachers hardly ever ask, and in which teachers would have little interest; they often conduct their studies on university students, subjects who are better understood as language users rather than language learners; they often use analytical procedures that are unfamiliar to many teachers; they often write in a technical language that is too complex for teachers; and they often publish their studies in journals that teachers "have never heard" of them (Samar, Kiyani & Mehrani, 2012).

One way to address this problem is to change the context of studies. Shulman (1997) observes that in some educational research a shift in research sites from laboratories to schools and classrooms is evident. This shift of research context involves many changes, including researchers' concerns and priorities, and their conceptions of teaching (Gore & Giltin, 2004). It also entails more collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007). When effective, such collaboration helps researchers to obtain more insights into and control over educational issues (Boostroom, Jackson, & Hansen, 1993).

A second solution is to promote alternative models of research such as action research, ethnography and teacher research. Influential commentators such as Allwright (1997, 2005), Brumfit (1987, 1997), Burns (1999, 2005), McKay (2006), and Nunan (1997) have variously articulated the advantages of these types of inquiries in applied linguistics. A common theme across these models is the need to recognize and respect research and teaching as

poles of the same continuum and the desire to work toward some form of partnership between teachers and researchers. Interestingly, such a partnership is something that Bolitho (1987) identifies as the only way to answer some of the key questions about classroom language-learning and teaching.

A further noteworthy point in the results of the study concerns teachers' lack of specialized knowledge of research. Certainly, this problem is to a great extent anchored in our inadequate pre-service teacher education programs, where prospective teachers are not given enough knowledge and skills to confidently engage with research (Atay, 2008; Gore & Giltin, 2004; Zeuli, 1994). Basically, research methodology courses offered in our teacher education programs include too much *theoretical discussions about* research rather than *practical involvement in* reading and doing research. Prospective teachers are hardly ever, if at all, taught where to find, and how to read and analyze research studies; nonetheless, they are expected to conduct research projects on their own and also to utilize research findings in their teaching. Making an analogy, Gore and Giltin contend that the urgency with which teachers are expected to know everything about research, while not being given enough knowledge and skills is akin "to inviting someone to a meeting at which they have access to the agenda but none of the background, the nuances, the politics of the committee and so on. At such meetings, where we do not have an adequate grasp of the terrain, we are effectively silenced" (2004, pp. 51-2). Thus, if practitioners are not provided with enough knowledge and skills for critically reading materials, evaluating their merits and translating them for their own purposes, they are essentially excluded from research community. On this basis, a shift toward a more practical orientation in our teacher education programs seems necessary.

The next barrier to research engagement that the results of this study highlighted mainly concerns the educational materials that are currently in use in our context. Teachers are scathing of having to teach the "old-fashioned books" they studied once they were students. Granted that our (junior) high school textbooks have not been modified for about two decades, it is not surprising to witness that teachers do not even feel any need to read research for teaching the books they have been continuously engaged with for many years. Therefore, in closing the research practice gap designing, developing and revising educational materials on a regular basis seems to be an essential step to take.

As suggested by the participants, a further step can be establishing an institutional association with the main purposes of synchronizing academic activities with practice, and promoting coordination and collaboration among researchers and teachers. Such an association either in the form of a governmental institute or a professional non-governmental organization (NGO) can also play a significant role in developing social networks between ELT professionals. Professional NGOs can play vital roles in connecting

educators, representing their voices, and improving the quality of education. Regarding the fact that the Iranian ELT constitutes a huge profession, and yet suffers from lack of any strong professional and social networks it is hoped that the establishment of such an association can open up an effective channel for ongoing collaborations between researchers and practitioners.

Collaborative activities, however, do not necessarily have to be restricted to the process of conducting research. An expanded form of such collaborations, for example, would be to invite proficient practitioners to review and comment, from a teacher's perspective, on manuscripts submitted to educational journals for subsequent publication. Teachers could also be asked to take active parts in designing, developing and revising educational materials that are produced to be used by themselves and in their own classrooms. Such activities not only improve the quality of academic research papers and educational materials, but also open up new channels for teachers' voice to be better echoed in our research community. Emphasis should be made, however, that implementing such strategies requires greater humility, respect, sense of appreciation, and recognition of realities on the part of both academics and language teachers.

## References

- Allison, D., & Carey, J. (2007). What do university language teachers say about language teaching research? *TESL Canada Journal*, 24(2), 61-81.
- Allwright, D. (2005). Developing principles for practitioner research: The case of exploratory practice. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(3), 353-366.
- Allwright, D. (1997). Quality and sustainability in teacher-research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(2), 368-370.
- Atay, D. (2008). Teacher research for professional development. *ELT Journal*, 62(2), 139-147.
- Bauer, K. & Fischer, F. (2007). The educational research-practice interface revisited: Ascripting perspective. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 13, 221-236.
- Block, D. (2000). Revisiting the gap between SLA researchers and language teachers. *Links & Letters*, 7, 129-143.
- Bohnsack, R. (2004). Group discussions and focus group. In U. Flick, E. von Kardorff, & I. Steinke (Eds.), *A companion to qualitative research* (pp. 214-221). London: Sage Publications.
- Bolitho, R. (1987). Teaching, teacher training and applied linguistics. In V. Bickley (Ed.), *Re-Exploring CELT*. Hong Kong: Institute for Language in Education.

- Borg, S. (2009). English language teachers' conceptions of research. *Applied Linguistics*, 30(3), 358-388.
- Boostrom, R., Jackson, P. W., & Hansen, D. T. (1993). Coming together and staying apart: How a group of teachers and researchers sought to bridge the "research/practice gap". *Teacher College Record*, 95, 35-44.
- Broekkamp, H., & van Hout-Wolters, B. (2007). 2007. The gap between educational research and practice: A literature review, symposium, and questionnaire. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 13(3), 203-220.
- Brumfit, C. (1987). Communicative language teaching. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 8, 3-13.
- Brumfit, C. (1997). How applied linguistics is the same as any other science. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7 (1), 86 - 94.
- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, A. (2005). Action research: An evolving paradigm? *Language Teaching*, 38, 57-74.
- Crookes, G. (1993). Action research for second language teachers: Going beyond teacher research. *Applied Linguistics*, 14 (2), 130-144.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think*. Boston: Heath & Co.
- Eraut, M. (1995). Schon shock: A case for reframing reflection-in-action? *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 1(1), 9-22.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 397-417.
- Fullan, M. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gao, X., Barkhuizen, G., & Chow, A. (2010). 'Nowadays, teachers are relatively obedient!': Understanding primary school English teachers' conceptions of and drives for research in China. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(1), 61-81.
- Gore, J. M., & Gitlin, A. D. (2004). [RE]Visioning the academic-teacher divide: Power and knowledge in the educational community. *Teachers and Teaching*, 10 (1), 35-58.
- Gurney, M. (1989). Implementer or innovator: A teacher's challenge to the restrictive paradigm of traditional research. In P. Lomax (Ed.), *The management of change*. New York: Multilingual Matters.
- Hennink, M. M. (2008). Emergent issues in international focus group discussions. In S. N. Hesse-Biber, & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 207-220). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Kessels, J. P., & Korthagen, F. A. (1996). The relationship between theory and practice: Back to the classics. *Educational Researcher*, 25, 17-22.



- Korthagen, F. A. (2007). The gap between research and practice revisited. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 13(3), 303-310.
- Krueger, R., & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McKay, S. L. (2006). *Researching second language classrooms*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mehrani, M. B. (2015). English teachers' research engagement: Level of engagement and motivation. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 3(1), 83-97.
- Morgan, L. D. (2007). Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implication of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 48-67.
- Morgan, D., Fellows, C., & Guevara, H. (2008). Emergent approaches to focus group research. In S. N. Hesse-Biber, & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 189-205). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Nassaji, H. (2012). The relationship between SLA research and language pedagogy: Teachers' perspectives. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(2), 337-365.
- Neil, U. S. (2008). Publish or perish, but at what cost? *The Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 118(7), 2368-2368.
- Nunan, D. (1997). Developing standards for teacher-research in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(2), 365-367.
- Ortega, L. (2005). For what and whom is our research? The ethical as transformative lens in instructed SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 428-443.
- Pieters, J. & de Vries, B. (2007). Preface to the special issue. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 13(3), 199-202.
- Samar, R. G., Mehrani, M. B. & Kiyani G. (2012). An investigation into the generalizability of quantitative research studies in Iranian ELT context. *Comparative Language & Literature Research*, 3(4), 193-213.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic books.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). Teaching artistry through reflection-in-action. In D. A. Schön (Ed.), *Educating the reflective practitioner* (pp. 22-40). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Shulman, L. (1997). Disciplines of inquiry in education: A new overview. In R. Jaeger (Ed.), *Complementary methods for research in education* (2nd ed.) (pp. 3-29). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Stewart, T. (2006). Teacher-researcher collaboration or teachers' research? *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 421-430.

Mehdi B. Mehrani

- Tom, A. (1997). *Redesigning teacher education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Wilkinson, S. (2004). Focus group research. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (2nd ed.) (pp. 177-199). London: Sage Publications.
- Zeuli, J. (1994). How do teachers understand research when they read it? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10(1), 39-55.

Mehdi B. Mehrani  
University of Neyshabur  
English Department, University of Neyshabur, Neyshabur, Iran  
Email:mehrani@neyshabur.ac.ir

Received: September 30  
Revised: December 17, 2014  
Accepted: December 20, 2014