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PIECING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER: CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS APPLYING RESEARCH FINDINGS TO THEIR ENGLISH LEARNER INSTRUCTION

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has been highlighted for its inclusivity of reporting on the academic progress of varied English learner (EL) populations. Such expansion particularly resonates across secondary education settings with ELs from myriad countries of origin (the United States included), languages, educational backgrounds, and life experiences, not to mention those currently receiving language learning services and those who are reclassified but continue to struggle with academic language and content across disciplines. Put simply, secondary education settings illustrate the heterogeneity of EL populations, where one size does not fit all.

While ESSA emphasizes that the needs of these ever-growing diverse learners should be in teacher education across disciplines, TESOL (2015) points to the lack of specificity and clarity of how to go about this and what this education should entail. Among the many components of teacher education to consider is the research teachers are introduced to in their education programs, for teachers of ELs are expected to have knowledge of applied linguistics, i.e., English language analysis and language learning theories, and use it to inform their pedagogical practices (cf. Fagan, 2012a). While teacher education programs may introduce the concepts of language analysis, language learning theories, and pedagogy independently, they may not present them in a holistic, contextualized manner. It is this issue that has been examined in a relatively new area of scholarly work in the field, teacher research engagement, which has shown language teachers having difficulty with reconciling the nuanced findings of particular research studies with their own instructional contexts (e.g., Borg, 2013). Exemplifying this is a previous student of mine. “Sally”, a practicing P-6 special education teacher, had taken numerous TESOL courses and felt as though the research she was reading in those courses were small pieces of a large puzzle, and she wasn’t clear on what each piece represented and how they went together. For teachers to apply the research gained in teacher education programs, what needs clarification is how individual pieces relate to the whole puzzle and how they go together to make up the puzzle itself.

To address these, it is important to step back and examine the research angles of the different subdisciplines within applied linguistics (i.e., different individual puzzle pieces) as they relate to the overall language learning process puzzle; here, the subdisciplines of second language acquisition (SLA), classroom interaction/discourse analysis (hereafter classroom interaction analysis), and second language teacher education are illustrated. First, numerous SLA researchers reiterate that this work is not meant to be directly applicable to classrooms but rather used as a basis for teacher reflection (cf. Ellis, 2010). In spite of this, there has been a push for more pedagogically-relevant materials from SLA for the classroom. Case in point is the study of corrective feedback done by scholars adhering to the Interaction Approach, one of many research perspectives currently utilized within SLA. Work on corrective feedback has centered on getting individual learners to notice that errors have been made in their language production and, depending on the nature of the feedback given, cuing them towards
correction; equally important has been the focus on which feedback types lead to short-term and/or long-term retention. The nature of much corrective feedback research is to address research questions or hypotheses concerning specific linguistic structures with individual learners, often set up by the researchers in quasi-experimental settings (Mackey & Goo, 2013). Definitively, this work provides insight on the effects of different feedback types on an individual’s production of specific language components; however, concerning its direct applications to authentic classroom settings where teachers contend with numerous factors simultaneously (e.g., varied learning populations, administrative constraints, timing, etc…), there is minimal empirical research that has “practical significance to teaching and…is transparently relevant to teachers” (Lyster & Ranta, 2013, p. 181). Such insight should be at the forefront for teachers when reviewing this research, noting that the contextual factors surrounding the setup and purpose of a particular study may not be directly applicable for their particular settings.

Second, the subdiscipline of classroom interaction analysis often follows sociocultural perspectives of learning as social practice, with a focus on examining opportunities for learning. At the core of this is the view that increased interactional opportunities yields increased learning opportunities (cf. van Lier, 2008). Much of this research has investigated learner interaction in whole-class activities, namely within the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence, with a focus on how teacher initiation and feedback turns promote or hinder learner interaction. Similar to SLA, this subdiscipline has different research perspectives grounding its work. Studies using conversation analysis (CA), for example, investigate the systematic construction of sequences-of-talk by looking at how participants construct their turns-at-talk based on their orientations to others’ prior turns in the sequence; this is accomplished by examining the intricate verbal and nonverbal cues used. For example, Fagan (2012b) showed that when teachers used “okay” in the feedback turn of the IRF sequence, learners would orient to the teacher’s use of speed, increases and decreases in intonation, and elongation of vowel sounds in determining whether “okay” indicated positive or negative feedback and would respond accordingly. This nuanced look at how classroom interaction is sequentially and systematically constructed helps to “build a theory of teaching- by explicating how teacher conduct can shape opportunities of learning, or put simply, what lies at the heart and soul of good teaching beyond technical aspects such as lesson planning and classroom management” (Waring, 2016, p. 4). What must be highlighted at the onset, though, is that such research has restrictions. With CA specifically, data analysis only consists of examining the detailed transcripts themselves; no information beyond the transcript is included. As such, readers may not be getting the entire story of what factors beyond those particular moments in time in the transcripts are affecting the teacher’s pedagogical choices.

Third, the subdiscipline of second language teacher education (SLTE) provides teachers and their educators with research to boost practitioner reflection of their own teaching practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). This “meta” perspective on how teachers approach ELs provides readers of this research with insight into what factors affect pedagogical choices, including: (1) belief systems about what is means to teach and learn languages, often stemming from their own experiences as learners, prior teaching experiences, and thoughts on and potential biases of the research given in their teacher education programs (e.g., Phipps & Borg, 2009); (2) the knowledge domains they are expected to posses when teaching (e.g., Freeman & Johnson, 2005); (3) level of teacher expertise based on how teacher knowledge is implemented into practice to address the needs of the immediate classroom context (e.g., Farrell, 2013). In reviewing this scholarship, factors that might not be evident in the actual classroom practices but are affecting those practices nonetheless begin to emerge. Teachers as readers-of-research can reflect on which factors influence their own teaching and consider ways in which they can extract them from their own unconsciousness. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that SLTE research draws heavily on ethnographic data methods which get at teachers’ hindsight perceptions or generalizations about their teaching (e.g., interviews, journals, stimulated recall sessions) but may not entirely encapsulate the full thought-process of a particular action at a particular moment in time.

Overall, each “puzzle piece” discussed here has had foregrounded, to an extent, its own unique perspective on and contribution to the puzzle we call the language learning process. Teachers need to be made aware of the research foci of these different areas of scholarly work when reviewing them as well as how they come together. While the SLA research on how corrective feedback examines the effects on an individual learner’s errors with specific linguistic patterns, with an ultimate goal of documenting evidence of learning, the classroom interaction analysis research documents the systematic use of nuanced cues used by the teacher when addressing learner turns in a sequence, potentially showing how the teacher’s actions affect both the immediate and, potentially, subsequent interactions. SLTE research puts a spotlight on factors that may not be evident in the immediate discourse but nevertheless plays a large role in the teacher’s actions (e.g., teachers’ past experiences with particular activities, particular linguistic patterns, etc.). Bringing the research foci of all of these puzzle pieces together provides a more holistic understanding of not only what factors teachers (should) consider when working
with ELs but also how teachers can critically read such research and choose to incorporate the findings into their practices strategically. The language teaching field has emphasized for some time the importance of being a reflective practitioner when constructing and implementing classroom practices; this is especially important with the onset of ESSA and its emphasis on working with varied EL populations. For secondary teachers in particular, it is necessary to provide them with the tools for teaching such a vast learner population, including how to engage with the research they encounter in their own education and apply it to best meet the needs of their particular language learners.

References


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