HOW RELEVANT IS SLA RESEARCH FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING?
A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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1. Research, teaching, application, relevance...
Borg’s (2010) on language teachers’ research engagement:

**engagement IN** teacher research (i.e., by doing it)

**engagement WITH** research (i.e., by reading and using it)

Often, a **technical** approach: offering tools for doing/reading research

**Also technical** solutions for researchers: strategies for dissemination/translating research
My focus today:

Teachers’ engagement with research

Researchers’ support of useful research

**goal**: offering tools for thinking more positively about the topic…

Reciprocally, teachers & researchers
Larsen-Freeman (2009):
“[…] when arguments are made for teaching and research to be more aligned, usually it is for the purpose of encouraging teachers to make use of what researchers have to offer teachers by way of insights into language or its learning. […] however, […] researchers would benefit from viewing learning the way that teachers do. […] In a true relationship, there is reciprocity.” (p. 5)
Researchers and Teachers of Language: How do they view each other?
Teachers...?

- Action-oriented
- Practical
- Specific, concrete
- Experiential knowledge
  - An art

Researchers...?

- Thought-oriented
- Theoretical
- General, abstract
- Detached knowledge
  - Science
How relevant is SLA research for L2 teaching?

Teachers: Little-to-no use, difficult to access/understand, enjoy, believe, adapt-adopt…

e.g., Clarke (1994), Borg (2010) and much of the research cited there

Although also Allwright (2005), Erlam (2008)…
How relevant is SLA research for L2 teaching?

Researchers: Famous “Apply with Caution” dictum by Second Language Acquisition founder Evelyn Hatch

Also: Clarke (1994), Han (2007), R. Ellis (2010)
Whence the mistrust and caution?

Partly, from the metaphor of “application”
The metaphor of **application**: Top-down

**Teacher** = responsible technician:
Pedagogy knowledge is “less”
Research knowledge “improves” it

**Researcher** = well-intended but cautious expert:
It is good if research has some social value

• make it “reach” teachers through “translation” efforts

But

• Too much attention to application may harm research
• Faking application value into research may be dishonest
A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE...
For me, application is a counterproductive metaphor, and “relevance” needs to be taken seriously.

Apply with caution    Search for relevance

With caution    With critical agency and reciprocity
Some assumptions

Teachers and researchers must negotiate their relation from a position of difference-in-equality (or reciprocity)

Teachers are agentive (Roberts & Graham, 2008) and deliberative (Scarino, 2005)...

... they have good & critical judgment to critically appraise the relevance of research
Second Language Acquisition
Research can...

1. sharpen teaching
2. invigorate teachers
3. fall short of really being relevant (yet)

Motivation

Aptitude

Error Correction
Instead of struggling over application

Teachers & Researchers: Search for relevance with critical agency!
2. Research can sharpen what teachers already know and do best...
e.g.,

L2 LEARNING MOTIVATION

teaching-research synergy
TEACHERS ATTEND TO AND KNOW BEST HOW TO MOTIVATE THEIR STUDENTS…

AND RESEARCHERS KNOW IT!
Research on teacher motivational strategies... Guilloteaux & Dörnyei (2008)

- 27 teachers, 1,300 students, South Korea, no special teacher training

- Creativity and fantasy to connect with students’ interest
- Personalizing opportunities to express, experiences, feelings, opinions
- Setting tangible task products (poster, brochure)
- Giving feedback free from irritation or personal criticism

- Teacher motivational practice strongly related to student motivational behavior ($r=0.60$ or 37% of variance)
BUT ALSO, STUDENTS ARE MOTIVATED BY SURPRISINGLY DIFFERENT THINGS

AND RESEARCH CAN HELP TEACHERS MAKE BETTER SENSE OF THESE DIFFERENCES
Illustrations from my own students in third-year Spanish at a U.S. university, enrolled in a grammar & composition course in the late 1990s (Ortega, 2009a)

Journal writing: (1) Accomplishments thus far and goals until the end of the semester; (2) Their language learning strategies
"Tengo que aprender mucho para ser más capaz de comunicar bien con hispanohablantes. Mi sueño es tener un dominio del español semejante a un hispanohablante."

"I need to learn a lot to be better at communicating well with Spanish-speaking people. My dream is to attain a mastery of Spanish similar to that of a Spanish speaking person."
Instrumental motivation...

“... I’ve been lazy ... and this has damaged my grades in this class, whereas I had good grades at the beginning of this class. I want to repair my grades. And the concrete things I can do to help myself in this case is to do my homework with more passion and interest so I can learn.”

Mike:

“... He estado perezoso ... y lo esta perjudicado mi nota en este clase, cuando tuvo una buena nota al principio de este clase. Yo quiero reparar la nota. Y las cosas concretas que puedo hacer para ayudarme en este caso es hacer mi tarea con mas pasion y intereso para puedo aprenderlo.”
Anything else, beyond the integrative – instrumental motivation dichotomy that most teachers know?
Advancements in L2 learning motivation theory (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Gardener/Canada</th>
<th>Self-Determination Noels/North America</th>
<th>Ideal Self Dörnyei/Europe</th>
<th>Investment Norton/Immigrants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td>Intrinsuc</td>
<td>Image of self as L2 speaker + Imagined instrumental value</td>
<td>Imagined value of L2 for material and symbolic improvement</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>(Ideal self image versus real self and desire to narrow the gap between the two)</td>
<td>(particularly in contexts of power differential)</td>
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<td>Introjected</td>
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<td>Amotivation</td>
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<td>(language &amp; sociopolitical attitudes, educational experiences)</td>
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“Me gusta este clase mucho porque me gusta escribir. La gente piensa que yo estoy extraña pero es la verdad. No me gusta escribir estoy escribiendo. Pero cuando estoy terminado, me gustalo!”

“I like this [Spanish grammar and composition] class very much because I like writing. People think I am odd but it is true. I don’t like writing while writing. But when I am done, I like it!”
“Yo sé que los estudiantes de español no les gustan el pretérito y el imperfecto, pero es importante practicarlos para mejorar. Creo que es muy mal que todavía no puedo distinguir entre el pretérito y el imperfecto bien después de estudiarlos por casi dos semestres. Es muy difícil, y por lo tanto quiero conquistarlos!”

“I know Spanish students don’t like the preterit and the imperfect, but it is important to practice them in order to improve. I think it is really bad that I still cannot distinguish well between the preterit and the imperfect after having studied them for almost two semesters. They are very difficult, and therefore I want to master them!”
Research ➔ Different students will “be moved” by specific different qualities of motivation

Relevance! Teachers must be alert towards identifying what motivates different students and cater for variety in their motivational practices
3. Research can invigorate teachers where they may feel powerless…
e.g., L2 LEARNING APTITUDE research guiding practice
TEACHERS OFTEN FEEL POWERLESS TOWARDS NATURAL ‘GIFT’ / ‘INABILITY’ FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING… AND RESEARCHERS CAN HELP!
Intuitive notions that may contribute to teachers’ feelings about aptitude:

- Language aptitude is genetic (we’re born with it)
- It has to do with intelligence, good memory, or a musical ear
- It’s fixed
- It’s “either or”: Either one has it, or one doesn’t

So… there is little teachers can do about it…!? 
Some research insights
(summarized in Ortega, 2009b):

- True, natural talent exists: Aptitude differences are a considerably good predictor of ease and rate of formal L2 learning \((r=0.40-0.60, 16\%-36\% \text{ variance})\)

- It is quite related to verbal talent in the L1 (e.g., Dufva & Voeten, 1999; Sparks, 2006)

- But also: Two important facets are memory ability and analytical ability

- That is, aptitude is multidimensional (Robinson, 2005; Skehan, 2002)
Aptitude is multidimensional (Ortega, 2009b):

Benefits must be qualified:

- Lexical acquisition in early stages (Masoura & Gathercole, 2005) and grammatical acquisition in later stages (O’Brien et al., 2006)
- More useful for formal regularities than semantic learning (Williams, 1999 vs. 2005)

Much less studied than memory
Is it related to academic training/education/literacy?
“Aptitude complexes” (Robinson, 2005; Skehan, 2002)
"I try to analyze each new word by dividing it into syllables or known parts in order to find a meaning. I always look for similarities and differences between Spanish and English and also for the structure in phrases."
Puedo recordar el vocabulario muy facilmente y conservar el. Pero con gramática, y cuando para utilizar ciertos verbos, yo tengo uno muy, muy difícil tiempo recordando cuando para utilizar “la que” y si necesito “a” o “les” tengo que ser escribe.”

“I can easily remember the vocabulary and retain it, but with grammar, and when to use certain verbs, I have a really, really difficult time remembering when to use “la que” and if I need to use “a” or “les” when I write.”
IF LANGUAGE APTITUDE IS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON, NOT BINARY OR CATEGORICAL…

…TEACHERS DO HAVE SOME ROOM FOR ACTION!
Teacher’s action, Profile 1:

• Include diverse activities and tasks that take advantage of excellent memory (e.g., Internet CMC, vocab games…)

• Give assignments/roles in assignments that capitalize on good memory and holistic approach

• Fine-tune explicit grammar instruction to help noticing, understand, etc when analytical skills are weak

Ortega (2009a)
Teacher’s action, Profile 2:

**Exactly the reverse tactics:**

- Play to their analytical skills and grammatical sensitivity (e.g., grammar games, inductive activities, translation...)

- Support them with training in vocabulary learning strategies and compensatory communication strategies

Ortega (2009a)
Teacher’s action, Profile 3:

- Understand their goals and help them evaluate goals/achievements realistically while inspiringly.
- Turn to motivation, find how to support them motivationally even more.
- Assess and praise considering effort and individual achievement, not just outcomes and group norms.

Ortega (2009a)
Teacher’s action, Profile 4:

• Provide them with sufficiently challenging instruction, or they may get demotivated and uninterested!

Ortega (2009a)
Research ➔ Aptitude is not monolithic, binary, it’s multidimensional (memory + analysis)

Relevance! Teachers can diversify pedagogy to cater to students with different combinations of strengths and weaknesses
4. Sometimes, research must be critically put aside by teachers...
e.g.,

ERROR CORRECTION

research falling short of being relevant to teaching (yet)
MOST TEACHERS DO ERROR CORRECTION, BUT MOST ALSO WORRY ABOUT IT…
Error Correction

But contemporary language teaching ethos: CLT?? Native speaker myth defunct??

Motivation!

Central part of every teacher’s job

Time!

Does it really work, and how do I know?

Am I overdoing it / underdoing it? Am I doing it right?
MUCH RESEARCH EFFORT GOES INTO ERROR CORRECTION, BUT NO FIRM ANSWERS CAN BE OFFERED TO TEACHERS…
What’s the research evidence on the effectiveness of EC?

Arguments for pessimism:
- Or skepticism at least
- Mackey et al. (2000)

Arguments for optimism:
- Bitchener (2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2010; Bitchener et al., 2005)
- van Beuningen et al. (2008, forthcoming)

But the sum of research is inconclusive about the how’s, what’s, and why’s of EC!
“8. Teachers should be prepared to vary who, when, and how they correct in accordance with the cognitive and affective needs of the individual learner. In effect this means they do not need to follow a consistent set of procedures for all students.”

No principle at all, then?

(2009, p. 14)
And… a bit of “teacher bashing”?

Zamel (1985): Teachers give written comments that are too vague for students to understand.

- Be careful with run-ons
- Word form
- Wrong word
- Can you say this more concisely?
- What do you mean?
Lee (2004): Teachers give many unnecessary extra corrections! (58 Hong Kong high school teachers on same essay)
Official, unchallenged story among instructed SLA researchers for decades now: The empirical evidence suggests language teachers behave inconsistently when correcting errors during oral classroom interactions (e.g., Chaudron, 1988, p. 149; R. Ellis, 1990, p. 73).
Recasts: They are by far the preferred way for teachers to correct orally, but they may be ambiguous and ineffective in the classroom! (Lyster, 2004; Nicholas et al., 2001; Sheen, 2010)

Recast:
St: Where I can find informations about driver’s license?
T: Where can I find information about a driver’s license?
St: Yes.

(Schachter, 1981)
• How can teachers be so wrong?
• Is error correction a blind spot of professional practice?
NO, THIS RESEARCH IS UNACCOUNTABLE TO THE COMPLEXITY OF ERROR CORRECTION PRACTICES… WHICH SOME OTHER RESEARCH HAS BEGUN TO SHOW
Socially oriented perspectives and research on EC in L2 writing:

Error correction in context

Identity
Agency
Affect
Identity

From an ESL teacher’s journal:

“Once I had a student who kept saying “I came from Korea.” I tried to correct her grammar by saying “if you are originally from Korea, you should use present tense when you refer to it.”

She said “Since I don’t want to go back to Korea and identify myself with American, I’d rather say I came from Korea and wish to be an American one day.””
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Agency
From Cohen & Robbins (1976):

Eva (China born, moved to Australia at 16 and to the US at 19):

“I have never start anything from ABCD. Everything is always skip, skip, skip since I’ve been going so many places... I wasn’t taught the way a person is supposed to be taught. I wasn’t taught in the right way, so that is why some of the grammars were never drill into me”
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“At the first time I think that my writing is good because friends always say that it’s good. But my teacher say that I have to have a lot of writing because it’s not so good and at the first time I feel confident of my writing because I think that my grammar—my tense and my plural and verb use with plural, with singular is OK. But when the feedback come out, teacher doesn’t look enough in that grammar. The grammar is not the most important thing for her, so she check in the coherence, in introduction, in something else. And I haven’t got good marks so I think that I am poor in everything of writing. [....] I think that my grammar is good but I didn’t get any comments that ‘oh your grammar is good, but you still have to, you still have to correct about something like this’ But all the comments come that my writing is not so good, so I feel that everything is poor. [....] I think that at least she should admire me some points. [...] From that time I discouraged a lot and I feel don’t like writing.”

Affect:

Samorn, Thai graduate student over 30, doing a degree in business:

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Teacher’s correct errors relationally, guided by what they know about identity, agency, and affect for each of their students as a whole and at the moment of correction!
Most of the EC research does not factor any of this complexity in... Only external behaviors and language products/tests are considered.
Research ➔ Inconclusive answers, doubtful relevance if complexity is not tackled

Critical mistrust! Teachers must put aside the EC research, however interesting, as relevance is not demonstrated yet…
...some modest usefulness may remain: Rankin & Becker (2006): in their case study of a German FL teaching assistant, reading error correction research “prompted a deeper level of analysis regarding [his own] feedback behaviors, partly by providing the words to describe them” (p. 365)
But in general, I recommend a healthy dose critical mistrust!

... Error correction must be taken as a rich journey of professional self-discovery for teachers...
5. In conclusion
What do these three cases show?

Teachers and researchers must negotiate their relation from a position of difference-in-equality and reciprocity.

Teachers will find research to have no fixed value for them, researchers will find no guaranteed goodness for teaching in their research.

“Relevance” is hard fought and hard won, from teaching to research and back!
Do we want to promote researchers’ generation of useful SLA knowledge, and teachers’ useful engagement with it?

Yes...

Application, technical solutions?

- e.g., Tools for doing/reading research for teachers
- Translation/dissemination strategies for researchers
Instead, teachers can think of a critical relevance check:

Q: Does it amplify, augment, invigorate what I already know? Does it resonate with my practice?
A: Yes, then apply as I see fit!

Q: Does it open new understandings and options where I was at a loss of ideas, powerless?
A: Yes, then apply as I see fit!

Q: Does the relevance leave me unconvinced?
A: Yes????… then withhold application!
And researchers can consider ways to strive for educational relevance when generating L2 research (Belcher, 2007, p. 399):

- “considering pedagogy early in one’s research plans (long before the implications are written up)”

- “conceiving of research problems as nested in a number of research and real world contexts”

- “contemplating the needs of an audience that includes those eager to make the most of our field’s partial knowledge on Monday morning”

- “respect teachers as research audience and users”

Contextualize
Research can have relevance for teaching when it produces insights in synergy with teacher knowledge. When the relation between researchers and teachers is truly negotiated in reciprocity, it empowers teachers in areas where their efficacy is low.
Instead of SLA researchers and language teachers struggling over “application”…
The search for teaching relevance in research, aided by critical agency and reciprocity, is worthwhile.
Thank You
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References


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