Research and Teaching: The Star-Cross'd Lovers

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Language research and language teaching can and should enjoy a relationship of cooperation and respect that is, in fact, often lacking. A survey of the literature reveals how much of the friction stems from exaggerations or misunderstandings, not from any essential disaccord between the two domains. Still, that a moderate and eclectic outlook is necessary to restore harmony is far from a flaccid truism: it is a challenging requirement that entails a flexible and realistic intellectual approach to defining the learner's tasks, and a thoughtful, temperate attitude to the work of professional colleagues in related fields.

Like Romeo and Juliet, research and teaching seem to belong together, and yet to be separated by disputes and misunderstandings as obstructive as they are unnecessary. This troubled relationship has real and practical importance for our profession. Plainly, teachers have reason to hope that language research might provide one source of guidance towards their pedagogical goals; as well, language researchers can expect that their findings should have useful implications for language teaching. But such ideal harmony is rarely achieved, and it is worthwhile noting that the problem stems as much from the heat of the debate as from the actual difficulty of establishing a reasoned and beneficial rapport between the two domains.

Consider, for instance, Lado's (1957) ringing promise of direct and practical help, made in the heyday of Structuralism and Contrastive Analysis:

> Foreign language teachers who understand this field will acquire insights and tools for evaluating the language and culture content of textbooks and tests, supplementing the materials in use, preparing new materials and tests, and diagnosing student difficulties accurately. (p. vii)

This declaration may be contrasted to a protest issued about fifteen years later by Christophersen (1973), when dissatisfaction with the former tradition was reaching its peak:

> Why has linguistics failed us in this way? Why have linguists not been able to any appreciable extent to ease the task of the learner, or at least to guide him with more success? (p. 13)

Examples of such strongly opposed views are, of course, easy to

find. To some degree, they may justifiably be dismissed as the natural consequence of professional enthusiasm. But whenever such swings of the pendulum appear to characterize the *essential* relationship between research and teaching—rather than being clear-cut aberrations—there is the risk not only of cynicism within our own ranks, but also of a less than charitable interpretation from without. Thus, it definitely is profitable to reflect on what research and teaching can, reasonably, expect of each other.

Terms of Reference

"Language research" is indeed an imprecise term, and deliberately so. It conveniently embraces research both into language itself—"pure linguistics"—and into language teaching and learning—"applied linguistics". However, both these forms of study share a theoretical, research-oriented bias, in clear contrast to language teaching, with its primary orientation towards practical results. This most basic distinction between the two domains is the chief source of misunderstanding or even distrust; so, for present purposes it is desirable to take a broad view of "language research", temporarily conflating what might in other circumstances be subdivided into "pure" or "applied" work.

Additionally, it should be specified that possible frictions between language research and language teaching take two quite different forms: more *rational* or *intellectual* disagreements about the logical relationship between the two domains, and rather more *emotional* disputes concerning the relative status of professionals working in each.

Three Conceptual Alternatives

(a) The two domains are basically unrelated

It is sometimes argued that language research and language teaching simply are connected in no useful way at all. Mackey (1966), for instance, protests categorically that whenever "the linguist claims that such and such a method is the best way to *learn* the language, he is speaking outside his competence" (p. 16). This viewpoint, of course, compromises the entire project of relating the two domains. We may wish to mitigate this argument by suggesting that for the linguist to offer advice on "the best way to learn" is perhaps more an over-statement than an outright misappropriation of authority, but Mackey himself is adamant: to him, applied linguistics is the highly questionable brainchild of frustrated humanists suffering from an irrational "desire to be identified as scientists" (p. 4).

On the other hand, we might perhaps more satisfactorily argue that although current knowledge remains comparatively primitive, a closer and very profitable relationship between language research and language

teaching will ultimately be established when research findings advance further. This, of course, is the tack taken by Chomsky (1966), in his well-known essay on "Linguistic Theory". The approach recurs quite regularly in the literature (e.g. Saporta, 1966, p. 274; Howatt, 1974, p. 3; Van Buren, 1975, p. 150).

Nonetheless, one fairly strong tradition asserts a permanent and fundamental difference in *priorities* between linguistics and teaching. For Stork and Widdowson (1974), for instance, it is little more than a misleading coincidence that both "are concerned with the same subject material, i.e. language", since in fact there is an "important . . . difference in objectives" between them (p. 175). Efforts should be made to help researchers and practitioners "bridge the gap" (Lett, 1983, p. 100), but the impression at least of the "differing realities, values, and concerns of the two groups" (p. 10) can still seem to leave researchers with more or less a monopoly on the long-term, conscientious pursuit of solutions to problems, while teachers are apparently relegated to short-term crisis management. If so, the two domains are indeed deeply divided.

b) Only an eclectic view can relate the two domains

As Corder (1973) observes, justifiably bewildered language teachers have often simply "followed their noses", adopting perforce an "eclectic approach" (p. 136). In fact, the teacher's right, or even duty, to meet students' immediate needs by taking a pragmatic, eclectic view of language research has often been emphasized (e.g. by Howatt, 1974, p. 4; Ingram, 1975, p. 289). Widdowson (1973) puts it very graphically: "The language teacher cannot always wait for the dust to settle" (p. 59). Of course, it is encouraging to note the confidence in the language-teaching profession implied by assertions to the effect that—although cavalier disrespect for research is certainly not recommended—"the language teacher is concerned with teaching a skill and need not be bound by the constraints of any particular theory" (Stork and Widdowson, 1974, p. 175; see also Rivers and Temperley, 1978, p. vii).

Problems remain, however, in defining precisely how this stimulating eclectic view should be elaborated. Although not inevitable, there is the risk of slipping into a philistine disregard for serious thought about the rationale for adopting and combining particular facets from diverse theories. "Eclectic" becomes a bad word if it seems to mean "haphazard", or "faddish". And "common sense" is a notoriously misleading guide in this respect, even when large groups seem to accept its dictates (see remarks by Lett, 1983, p. 11). The committed researcher, of course, would unhesitatingly reply in the affirmative to Oller's (1983) rhetorical question—"In fact, isn't it true that what people agree on is often incorrect?"—and would certainly echo his unwillingness to "substitute voting for research" (p. 351).

Still, it would be rash to undervalue reasoned intuition and carefully considered experience. No comprehensive model of the relationship between language research and language teaching can overlook the conscientious teacher's lifetime of experience. As Diller (1978) observes, in practice the key point is to combine *well-informed* "common sense" with critical "judgement", so as to avoid a thoughtless version of eclecticism that might be "safe" by incorporating a little of everything, thereby taking no significant decisions at all (pp. 149, 151). But the basic question remains: Why be eclectic if you can be right?

(c) The two domains are closely related

Some have despaired of relating research and teaching: "despite the urgent need for co-operation, it appears as if a gulf is widening today between the work of linguists and the practical problems of language teachers" (Roulet, 1975, p. i). With others, so high a road is taken as to leave nothing of practical meaning on the day-to-day level; for instance, we have Lamb's (1977) enthusiastic endorsement of the work of Chomsky, as offering guidance in "facilitating [the learner's] cognitive functioning" (p. 118).

Krashen (1983) argues that past difficulties in relating research findings to pedagogical needs have been the consequence not of any fundamental division between the two, but rather of teachers' erroneously turning to a research model directed more towards study of the eventual *structure* instead of the on-going *acquisition* of language ability (p. 53). Krashen contends that relatively recent research—for example, that which is concerned with the order of acquisition of certain language structures—has indeed produced results corresponding closely to the experience and intuitions of language teachers, thereby reducing as never before concerns about the applicability of research to teaching (pp. 53, 55). And this feeling—that research should focus on acquisition, rather than on end-state knowledge structure alone—was a key theme in a paper on "The Influence of Linguistic Theory on Language Acquisition Research" delivered at a recent CAAL conference (Lightbown, 1985).

Theory in the Classroom

The difficulty with Krashen's (1983) call for renewed confidence in language research with an acquisition focus is his further argument that postulates derived from research are "quite testable" in the classroom (p. 60), and that "the claim that a method is successful is quite testable" (p. 62). He himself concedes the familiar point that even controlled experiments, with a single independent variable, yield results impossible to declare absolutely "proven" (p. 52), but to this must be added that

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postulating that a given theory about language should have specific consequences in the classroom amounts to making a whole *new* hypothesis—or series of hypotheses—not only that a particular theory may have a particular application, but also that the resulting pedagogical practices are good (or bad) because of the goodness (or badness) of the original theory. Unfortunately for teachers and theorists alike, it has long been observed that the classroom abounds in variables normally "neither controlled nor accounted for" (Widdowson, 1981, p. 32), all capable of influencing pedagogical success. Brumfit (1984) outlines such variables in a two-page list, regretting that his itemization is not complete (pp. 17-18).

Thus, although classroom trials of theory are obviously important, the evidence they offer is not readily amenable to the kind of *deductive* analysis possible in a controlled experiment. Cautious *inferences* can of course be drawn: for example, it may be inferred that evidence of improved learning after the introduction of new methods is at least consistent with the interpretation that the theory behind those methods is correct. This seems to be the kind of work cited by Krashen (1983) to illustrate the practical value of acquisition-oriented language research (pp. 63-64): studies of Total Physical Response by Asher (1972), and of Comprehensible Input by Swaffar and Woodruff (1978).

The problem is that many factors *other than* new methods or materials—motivation, teacher enthusiasm, the Hawthorne effect, to name a few—might account for a change in learner success. Wilkins (1972), for instance, contends that most studies identify teacher competence—not innovative methods or materials—as by far the most influential determinant of pedagogical outcome (p. 229); he protests that it is quite "possible for a teacher employing 'good' methods . . . to be unsuccessful, while [a] teacher using 'bad' methods . . . can be successful" (Wilkins, 1974, p. 86).

Thus, it may be unintentionally misleading to speak of claims for a given theory as "quite testable" in the classroom (Krashen, 1983, p. 60). While teachers plainly cannot let themselves be paralyzed for want of theoretical certitude, the need for caution with regard to inferential findings is widely recognized (e.g. Lett, 1983, p. 17). Enthusiastic overstatements of the nature and strength of claims for research applications do nothing to increase the reliability of the information available, and may well give rise to annoyance or skepticism.

A Principled but Flexible Relationship

As Lakoff (1975) observes, "it's silly to be a slave to any theory . . . and it's silly to twist facts to match some idealization of the way language ought to be" (p. 321). We need, then, a model of the research-teaching relationship flexible enough to provide practical and

credible guidance as to what can, and cannot, be expected. Corder, for example, suggests a model distinguishing *primary* from *secondary* applications of research in teaching (pp. 144, 147). Thus, he proposes that description of the language itself entails a primary application of linguistics, while selection of actual teaching points from all the items so described is a secondary application where "many other factors" also intervene (p. 151).

Wilkins (1972) also advances a multi-category model. He suggests that linguists can offer teachers "insights", "implications", and "applications" (pp. 217, 220, 222). Applications involve "notions and information from linguistics act[ing] directly upon the process of language teaching" (p. 222). Such, for instance, would be the case with the basic approach to language description followed by course planners or teachers: a more grammar-oriented model of description would suggest both a definition and a principle of ordering for teaching points, and a preference for structural exercise types, that would be very different from what might be indicated by a more broadly communicative (sociolinguistic) model of language description. Implications entail a less direct influence, as when a teacher might insist that pupils repeat words or phrases, in accord with the theory that language learning requires actual speech production (pp. 220-221). Insights are the least concrete of all: "notions that increase one's understanding of the nature of language and consequently of the nature of language learning" (p. 217); an example would be the *lanque/parole* distinction as a clarification of the language teacher's dilemma regarding the choice of more idealized or more colloquial language models (p. 218).

A flexible, hierarchical model—as proposed by Corder, or especially Wilkins—can accommodate the fact that a teacher might feel obliged to subscribe very closely and consistently to a particular application of language description, while also having sporadic recourse to localized strategies based on a heterogeneous range of less structured insights and implications from differing sources, brought together for their demonstrated utility in specific circumstances. Communicative teaching materials, for instance, seem regularly to combine an overall ordering of teaching units that reflects a sociolinguistic description of the language, with a fairly clear if less obvious grading of specific exponents for those functions in more grammatical terms. In addition, repetition drills or other sentence-length activities—of a comparatively structural sort—may be offered in occasional support of role plays or problem-solving tasks more consistent with a communicative view of language. Unless a hierarchical relationship is allowed among differing categories of input from linguistics to language teaching, such flexibility must provoke charges of self-contradiction. And this requirement also seems to apply to Allen's proposed "Three-Level Model for Second-Language

Education" (1983), founded on the principle that—depending on teacher and pupil expectations—ultimately similar learning objectives may equally well be met by following any one of a predominently grammatical, a predominently functional, or a *mixed* grammatical/functional program of study.

As an illustration of the usefulness of a flexible model, we may consider the review of Yalden's *The Communicative Syllabus* (1983), where Johnson (1984) protests the "mixture of synthetic and analytic" theories—that is, the eclectic combination of "structural" with "notional/functional" descriptions of curriculum items—which he argues "appears to be a hedging of bets rather than a reasoned compromise" (p. 94). A possible reply would be that if the curriculum in the main *clearly* reflects applications of functional/notional language description—with a distinctly analytic not synthetic or structural bias—learners will surely have every opportunity to form a coherent, unconfused concept of the basic language-learning task, as intended by the curriculum designer, with passing forays into more structural/synthetic arrangements of material—on the level of less central implications or insights—perceived as helpful but strictly localized exceptions to the dominant plan.

Sensitivities

Acceptance of a more flexible model for their proper relationship will at least *help* reunite our star-cross'd lovers, but another source of friction remains: sensitivities stemming from professional rivalries and external pressures. These somewhat emotional considerations are less "elegant" than the more intellectual issue of the logical relationship between language research and language teaching; nonetheless, they can be powerfully disruptive.

Professionalism is a delicate topic, and a good deal of sniping has gone on from both sides. If it is, for instance, hardly useful for a theorist to moralize about language teachers' supposed proclivity to abandon "all interest in the problem" of research, and to "retire within themselves", relying on parochial experience and blind "prescriptions . . . borrowed from this or that source" (Roulet, 1975, p. xi), it is downright offensive to read that

> [a] teacher who reels tipsily back to his classroom after drinking
> deeply of linguistic theory and who fuzzily applies what he thinks
> the theory states . . . is a danger to the whole notion of intelligent
> co-operation between linguistic theory and educational practice.
> (Currie, 1973, p. 62)

Equally, although "teachers cannot always wait for helpful suggestions from others" (James, 1983, p. 2), there is little justification for the over-aggressive assumption that as language teachers are "the ulti-

mate 'consumers'" of research, *their* needs and priorities alone must determine the nature and value of the "product" (p. 3). And there is surely no excuse at all for gratuitously belligerent claims that "We already know perfectly well" how best to teach language, and that much or most research arises merely from university professors' desire to "scientize their work" (Moffett, 1985, p. 52).

In particular, as Widdowson (1981) comments, the language teacher may feel insulted and threatened when cast in the role of "the humble practitioner", disparagingly contrasted to "the researcher abrim with scholarship" and "expert in abstract thinking" (p. 31). In this context, external pressures may be very difficult to resist. Even so level-headed a writer as Palmer (1922) can be heard fretting that language pedagogy is not yet a "science", and hoping the discipline may progress through a "slow evolution comparable to that which characterized the gradual perfecting of . . . devices such as the typewriter" (pp. 36, 34)! More modern exhortations to teachers to "hold themselves accountable" for the efficacy of their work may sound similarly questionable in view of the implication that financial "support for foreign-language education" should depend on some kind of ill-defined pedagogical bottom line (Valette and Disick, 1972, p. 5).

Callahan (1962) has eloquently described the growth of spurious "scientific management" in American education generally (p. 25), and Chall (1967) has documented a virtual "conspiracy" of publishers to promote profitable new reading materials by advocating a kind of "reverse science" that would force responsibility on planners to prove why untried innovations should *not* be adopted (pp. 299, 296). No doubt budgetary concerns are a legitimate part of the teacher's, or at least the curriculum planner's mandate (Kelly, 1977, p. 3). Nevertheless, language teachers—and their natural allies, language researchers—need a confident sense of professional integrity to uphold the values of their callings and to resist undue external pressures. Ill-considered rivalries will not advance that cause.

A More Comfortable Ménage?

The relationship between language teaching and language research will never be entirely free of tension, if for no other reason than the pronounced social and political overtones of this work (see for instance Corder, 1973, pp. 12-13; Richards, 1978, p. 14). Nonetheless, with moderation and flexibility, there is good reason for optimism. Ritchie (1978), for example, cites a parallel with the fruitful co-operation between biological research and medical practice (pp. 2-3), to demonstrate the *mutual* benefit: researchers' findings aiding practitioners, practitioners' observations sparking new research (p. 5). Krashen (1985), likewise, comments at length on the important contribution to

theoretical understanding made by teachers' accumulated classroom observations. Without usurping the role of the researcher, this view of the issue asserts the equally significant part that the teacher plays.

This is not—all the same—an invitation to resume old rivalries in new guises: above all, caution is necessary before endorsing such blanket statements as James' (1981) proclamation that "'Have you tried this exercise?' is a research question", and that "[t]he answer: 'Yes, and it worked' is a research answer" (p. 1). Such critical thought about teaching practice is doubtless a sign of laudable self-awareness, a key factor in responsible work, but it is misleading—and uselessly provocative—to term such activity "research" or "action research" (pp. 1, 5). We may, thus, feel a little uncomfortable with the wording even of Widdowson's (1981) recommendation to view "the classroom as the setting for ongoing experimental research, a place where ideas can be put to the test" by insightful teachers, and we will likely do well to focus on his immediate concession that the classroom can never be "converted into a laboratory" (p. 35).

In any case, if we freely accept as "excellent sources of direction" *not only* "theory" and "empirical research", *but also* "accumulated classroom experience" (Kranke and Christison, 1983, p. 644), we will be able—without tension-producing invidious comparisons—to admire with Clarke (1984)

> the pivotal role of the well-informed, sensitive, and decisive teacher . . . the only person who is in a position to take advantage of the wealth of information available and to select the appropriate moment to apply it in the classroom. (p. 592)

Of course, this vision necessarily relies on a corps of very well-prepared, inquisitive and progressive teachers (a constant theme: e.g. Corder, 1968, p. 276; Widdowson, 1978, p. 217; Widdowson, 1981, p. 30). But this, surely, is precisely what the basic insistence on due respect for our profession implies we have always been ready to accept. And on this foundation we may well be justified in anticipating that our star-cross'd lovers—research and teaching—can indeed look forward to a stable and rewarding relationship . . . and one more promising than that predicted by Dr. Johnson for many a marital reunion: "The triumph of hope over experience."

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