

Reflections on English Language Teaching

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Guest Editor

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Reflections on English Language Teaching has been set up by the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) as a forum for research on theoretical and pedagogical issues which face language teachers and researchers.

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In This Issue

The teacher research movement has sufficiently developed a paradigm for educational research, particularly in literacy studies (Baumann & Duffy-Hester, 2002). Yet there has been a call for judicious selection and use of combined approaches to research in second language learning and teaching since the 1990s (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Mackey & Gass, 2005). A response to this call is shared with us by our guest editor, Jack C. Richards, for this issue of *RELT*, which focuses on teacher researchers' classroom inquiry and investigation of raters' assessment practices. The articles in this issue underscore the interconnectedness of research and classroom practice in second language contexts.

We thank Jack Richards for sharing with second language teachers and other language specialists approaches to carrying out intentional and systematic sensemaking in different teaching environments.

CELC Editorial Board

Allwright, D., & Bailey, K.M. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom: An introduction to classroom research for language researchers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Baumann, J.F., & Duffy-Hester, A.M. (2002). Making sense of classroom worlds: Methodology in teacher research. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.). *Methods of literacy research* (pp. 1-22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Mackey, A., & Gass, S. (2005). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Informing Second Language Teaching: The Interconnectedness of Research and Practice

In second language teaching, research and teaching exist in a symbiotic relationship. For teachers, research provides a source of concepts, theories, and principles that can inform classroom practice and also provides a basis for understanding and evaluating practice. For researchers, classroom practice is a testing ground against which concepts and theories can be evaluated and further developed. In the present volume, the authors have the advantage of being both teachers and researchers, and their contributions offer a valuable demonstration of the interconnectedness of research and practice.

In the first paper, Wu addresses a major issue in the assessment of student writing, namely, the processes raters employ when they are asked to assess a piece of student writing. Analytic rating scales are widely used as the basis for assessments of this kind and much is often dependent upon the ratings given, yet in an impressive study that is a model of its kind, Wu points out that little is known about the decision-making processes and strategies raters employ when arriving at such assessments. Despite the apparent objectivity of descriptors for the different features of writing, the author's research shows that there is considerable variation in how raters interpret and apply the descriptors. From her research, Wu makes important recommendations for formulating descriptors, training raters, and evaluating processes institutions employ when assessing student writing.

The second paper addresses approaches to the learning of vocabulary. Expanding students' vocabulary knowledge is a core dimension of programs in English for academic purposes. In his interesting paper, Gu examines changes in Chinese students' reported use of vocabulary learning strategies over a six-month intensive English proficiency course in an English-medium tertiary setting in Singapore, and the impact strategy use appeared to have on the development of both passive and active vocabulary knowledge. Gu attributes the changes found in his study both to the effects of the teaching and students' learning experiences in using a more strategic approach to vocabulary learning.

The third paper, by Deng, Lee, Varaprasad, and Lim, offers a carefully designed study on the impact of an EAP course on the development of students' academic writing skills. This paper is noteworthy for the robustness of its research design, which includes both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. While teachers are always hopeful that there will be clear gains in students' academic writing skills as a result of a clearly targeted course of instruction, the authors concede that some aspects of student writing—particularly in the areas of grammatical accuracy and fluency—develop over a longer time frame than is available during a relatively short course of instruction. A considerable improvement in other important aspects of writing proficiency, however, was found at the end of the course and the students themselves reported a number of both short-term and long-term benefits. Impact studies of the quality described by the authors are relatively

rare, and this paper is, therefore, a very welcome addition to the literature on the teaching of academic writing.

In the fourth paper, Liao and Wong describe a novel approach to developing students' writing skills—the use of dialogue journals in which the teacher and the student engage in written communication through a written journal dialogue over a 14-week period in a Taiwanese high school. The goal was to develop fluency, motivation, self-expression, and reflective awareness. The authors report gains in a number of aspects of writing proficiency as a result of the dialogue journal project, as well as improvements in content, organization, vocabulary, and fluency. The students also gained a better understanding of the nature of English writing and a deeper understanding of themselves as writers. This paper offers convincing evidence of the benefits of incorporating dialogue journals into a writing program, and also shows how a relatively simple curriculum innovation can have significant benefits for both students and writing instructors.

In the final paper in this volume, Chi provides an excellent example of teacher research into a troublesome issue faced by second language writers at the tertiary level—how to use words that are appropriate to the tone and style of academic writing and how to use reference resources to make appropriate word choices in writing. Chi's research goes further than simply documenting the kinds of errors in word choice found in her student data. Follow-up interviews with students enabled her to identify the strategies and reference resources students made use of when making lexical choices and the factors underlying some of the inappropriate choices they made. Based on her findings, she offers constructive criticism of available lists of academic vocabulary that are often recommended in the teaching of EAP, as well as valuable suggestions for how academic vocabulary can be effectively addressed in EAP instruction.

As a whole, the papers demonstrate the important contributions EAP teachers make through reflective practice and action research. The papers provide valuable insights obtained from careful investigations of students' learning needs in the light of the demands of learning English for academic purposes, and instructional options and resources available in teaching EAP. Above all, the research reported in this issue reflects the teacher-researchers' high level of professional knowledge and their commitment to provide instruction that is grounded in current knowledge and theory and that is responsive to the changing needs of their learners.

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