The role of research synthesis in facilitating research–pedagogy dialogue: a response to Sato and Loewen (2019)


Published in:
ELT Journal

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Publisher rights
Copyright 2020 OUP. This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher’s policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen’s institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person’s rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback

Download date:15. Sep. 2023
The role of research synthesis in facilitating research-pedagogy dialogue: A response to Sato and Loewen (2019)

Sin Wang Chong

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, it has been a volatile period for the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession. With campuses closed and teaching shifted online, language teachers are experiencing an unprecedented and drastic paradigm shift in teaching and learning (Pu, 2020). This feeling of insecurity and uncertainty is likely to continue or even escalate with the unforeseeable circumstances in the coming academic year. On the upside, it is now the time, more than ever, to reconsider the research-pedagogy nexus in ELT; especially, how can instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) research inform new and emerging teaching practices of ELT professionals during this challenging time?

The article by Sato and Loewen (2019) cannot be timelier. In their case study, which focuses on a group of Chilean EFL teachers, the authors explore the feelings and perceptions of this group of teachers about L2 research. In summary, this group of teachers held very positive impressions towards research because research findings build their confidence when making pedagogical decisions. However, the findings of the study underscore some issues perceived by the teachers as barriers when it comes to reading and applying research findings in their own classrooms. These included difficulties such as lack of time to search for and read research, no access to academic journals or databases, and pressure to be not only consumers but producers of research. At the end of their article, the authors suggest a number of ways to promote research-pedagogy dialogues, including having researchers conduct workshops or class visits, devising evidence-based pedagogical tools ready for teachers to use.

While I acknowledge, as will everybody, that the aforesaid suggestions would benefit the whole ELT profession in this challenging time, these measures take time to implement; and given the current situation where social distancing is in place and face-to-face interactions are discouraged, it is unlikely that such activities would be practically possible and effectively run. In this connection, I would like to draw our attention to an existing resource we already have – research synthesis - to promote researcher-practitioner dialogues. In the subsequent sections, I would argue how research synthesis in ISLA may be in a better position than primary studies in promoting research-pedagogy dialogues by addressing the needs of English teachers documented in Sato and Loewen (2019) who aspire to consume and produce research.

Role of research synthesis in ISLA in facilitating research-pedagogy dialogue

Research synthesis as a scholarly writing genre is generally understood as a piece of written review of literature on a focused topic (Ellis, 2015). In the discipline of ISLA, research synthesis can be broadly categorised into two families: the traditional and the systematic (Norris & Ortega, 2007). Generally speaking, traditional reviews aggregate and present research evidence in a narrative manner to map the research landscape in order to identify the “knowns” and “unknowns” in a research field (Macaro, 2020). On the other hand, the systematic family of research synthesis, as the name suggests, differs from its traditional counterpart because it focuses not only on the provision of a bird’s-eye view of a research topic, but also ensures that the overview presented is appraised using a set of pre-determined protocol to minimise bias in the review process (Macaro, 2020).
It is recommended that research synthesis is a viable means to bridge the research-practice divide because it overcomes the three obstacles faced by language teachers mentioned in Sato and Loewen (2019): *time*, *access*, and *external pressure to conduct research*. In the rest of this contribution, I will justify my view that research synthesis can overcome these issues.

Time, in Sato and Loewen’s (2019) article, is a concern “unanimously expressed” by the teacher participants (p. 6). Taking into consideration the time constraint faced by many language teachers, reading research syntheses, as opposed to reading individual primary research, would be more time-effective because a research synthesis usually includes at least a dozen studies, with some comprising as many as nearly 100 studies (e.g., Teimouri et al., 2019). A research synthesis on a certain pedagogical topic summarises major studies, crystallises the development of research on the topic to provide language teachers with a glimpse of both dated and recent research, and provides more substantial research-informed pedagogical inspirations. By reading research syntheses, teachers can obtain an overview or “headlines” of important research and pedagogical implications in a topic of interest in a very short period of time. Another reason why reading research syntheses saves time is because these review articles are usually accompanied with tables and figures to illustrate the synthesised findings in a reader-friendly manner (e.g., for examples, see tables in Chong & Reinders, in press; see diagrams in Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018).

Second, research syntheses are usually easier to access than individual research. In Sato and Loewen (2019), “accessibility”, or more about the lack thereof, is a major theme in their data analysis. Since the majority of the ISLA research syntheses are written by a team of researchers and the work involved is more extensive, they are often funded to cover the open-access cost. Moreover, because these research syntheses are usually more substantial work, journals occasionally release these articles outside the paywall for a period of time to promote interest in a particular topic (something like the Editor’s Choice article of ELT Journal).

Finally, addressing the concern of teachers in Sato and Loewen (2019) regarding “pressure to conduct research themselves” (p. 6), research synthesis, especially *systematic* research synthesis (e.g., qualitative research synthesis, meta-analysis), has an explicit section on analysing research methodologies in a particular topic. When deciding on the inclusion criteria of their syntheses, reviewers often analyse and categorise methodological approaches of studies to determine their suitability to be included in a review. Through reading these analyses, language teachers who feel the need to conduct practitioner research can get a better understanding of the diversity of research tools or methods available for researching a specific topic. Moreover, those teachers who would like to be not only consumers but producers of research can benefit from reading a particular type of research synthesis – *methodological review* (e.g., Plonsky & Kim, 2016), which surveys methodological approaches, methods, and tools used to research certain topics as well as discusses methodological issues.

**Conclusion**

The academic year 2020-21 will remain a challenging time for language teachers and professionals because of the unparalleled evolving nature of teaching and learning. Yet, I contend in this short opinion piece that it is also an opportune moment for language teachers to revisit ways to inform their own pedagogical practices, remain innovative and research-informed. Addressing teachers’ concerns in Sato and Loewen (2019), I propose the consumption of research synthesis as a practical and feasible way to promote research-pedagogy dialogues in ELT, especially during this pandemic.
Bio data
Sin Wang Chong is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in TESOL at Queen’s University Belfast, UK. His research interests include feedback, assessment, research synthesis, computer-assisted language learning, teacher/learner autonomy, and the intersections of the above. He is Associate Editor of the journal, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* published by Taylor & Francis.

References


Marcaro, E. 2020. ‘Systematic reviews in applied linguistics’ in J. McKinley and H. Rose (eds.).


