FOCUS TOPIC

Connecting Research to Our Practice

By Anne Cummings Hlas and Cori Crane

Linking Research and Practice

The link between research and practice is thought to be bidirectional, with each contributing to the other and working in synergy toward the goal of improving world language teaching and learning. This collaborative relationship benefits and advances practice as well as our research foundation, moving theory forward and helping us to articulate our practice to ourselves and others. When we work to link together theory and practice, we become a stronger profession and are better able to tackle pressing inquiries in tandem.

Connecting research and practice on a regular basis, however, can be a challenge for language researchers and practitioners, as well as for the many of us in between who see ourselves as professionally engaged in both activities simultaneously. Why is it sometimes difficult for these two areas (which some might argue are merely two sides of the same coin) to inform each other? And what models and strategies currently exist to help us link the two together in meaningful ways?

The Process of Inquiry

It goes without saying that teachers lead extremely busy lives. This can make staying up-to-date with the latest research in the field—let alone actually conducting research—a challenging endeavor. In addition to a lack of time, factors such as limited resources, lack of expertise, or finding professional communities nearby can prevent practitioners from regularly seeking out new knowledge and reflecting on what that knowledge means for one's own pedagogy.

Borrowing a term from James Gee's work on second language acquisition (SLA), researcher Rod Ellis suggested in 1997 that the chasm between SLA researchers and language educators can be traced back to the different *Discourses* in which these two professional communities have been socialized. Gee's Discourse (marked by a capital "D") refers not merely to the words we use, but also to the ideologies and assumptions that underlie our preferred ways of talking and communicating with one another, reflecting particular social networks with particular values. In describing how researchers and practitioners differ, Ellis (1997) notes the distinct professional needs and values traditionally found in these communities:

> SLA researchers need to engage in a Discourse (i.e., that of the research report) that their social world (i.e., universities) values and rewards. In contrast, teachers and teacher educators have developed Discourses that address their particular practical needs (e.g., teachers often talk about their work in terms of "stories") (1997, p. 72).

Since Ellis's seminal article, there have been active efforts on both sides of the researcher-practitioner continuum to bridge the divide, seen especially in classroom-based and practitioner research in world languages, but also in the wider Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) literature that reaches educators across disciplines. Today, classroom-based research comprises a sizeable amount of work in the field of SLA, having contributed important insights on topics such as error correction, task-

based language teaching, and classroom discourse. Indeed, this body of research has been most helpful in shaping the work of high-leverage teaching practices (HLTPs), which are increasingly used in teacher education programs to help novice instructors develop evidence-based practices in their teaching.

More experienced teachers also need to continue to develop research-based teaching practices. They may utilize a variety of practitioner research models while exploring their questions about teaching and learning. Judith Hanks, who has written extensively on teacher inquiry in the language classroom, defines practitioner research as a type of inquiry that "includes the notions of purposeful, systematic, and thoughtfully critical investigation" (2017, p. 51). For Hanks, the starting point is "purposefulness in research—not to find 'the answer' but rather to understand *why things are as they are*" (p. 51).

Taking Hanks's lead, this issue of *The Language Educator* highlights the process of inquiry—the experience of asking questions that are relevant to teachers, not merely focusing on the product, or findings, of research. Together, the articles highlight how we can build strong connections between researchers and educators that will foster the development of a deeper understanding of our classroom practice in sustainable and personally meaningful ways.

Hot Topics and Critical Issues

The following five "hot topics" represent key pathways for world language teachers to help make research on teaching and learning relevant for themselves and their learners. Each topic further identifies critical need areas in our field that can strengthen the connection between research and practice.

- **Supporting Research Pertinent to Educators.** Within research communities, real problems in the classroom need to guide research. To this end, ACTFL launched the Research Priorities Initiative in 2012. It outlines five specific areas of interest to support work relevant to practice: Immersion/Dual Language Programs; In-Service and Pre-service Language Teacher Development and Retention; Assessing Learning Outcomes in K–16 Settings; Equity and Access in

Language Learning; and Intercultural Learning. These priorities are a beginning as we seek to address our field's "grand challenges"—unsolved problems that can lead to significant advances and help us move forward together in a united effort (Hlas, 2018). With the right kinds of questions—ones that can potentially change public perception of language teaching and learning—our unified research efforts can influence public debate and advocate for language learning within society at large. In general, more work is necessary to continue defining our field's shared priorities.

- **Access to Research.** While efforts exist to disseminate research to multiple audiences, including these themed issues of *The Language Educator*, accessing the research in academic journals can be challenging and the sheer volume of it can be overwhelming for busy educators. A new initiative that is helping to address these barriers is Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies, or OASIS, a searchable database containing one-page descriptions of research articles that have been published in peer-reviewed language journals. Another effort in a different medium is *We Teach Languages*, a podcast and blog that often features prominent researchers discussing their areas of expertise and projects. Each episode can be searched by subject. The Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon offers yet another searchable archive of research-based solutions to materials creation, program implementation, and evaluation and assessment. *InterCom* is the CASLS weekly email digest that provides access to the database in easy-to-digest portions. In fact, all 16 Title VI Language Resource Centers (LRCs), including CASLS, AELRC, and PEARLL, are valuable research repositories. With the growing collection of databases available (see a handy guide to these and other resources on pages 34-35), a better understanding of how resources are accessed, vetted, and used is essential to establishing future directions.

- **Making Informed Decisions in the Classroom.** Processing research can also be challenging and overwhelming, especially when a great deal is written for specific audiences

using field-specific language. This makes the discussion and implications of research articles all the more important. In light of these challenges, there is a need to clearly articulate the *So what? Now what?* Research may not make much of a difference if educators do not have a clear idea of how to bring theoretical frameworks or empirical findings into practice. More studies are therefore needed to understand how research actually informs practice. That is, how do teachers process research articles and other forms of dissemination? Is there a common architecture to a discussion or implications section that could better support and inform practice? Discovering answers to these questions will not only help teachers make informed classroom decisions but will also guide classroom-based researchers to make their work more accessible to practitioner audiences.

- **Connecting Research and Practice in Teacher Education.** It is important for the profession that pre-service teachers begin learning to dissect research and examine research-based practices while in teacher education programs. A focus on high-leverage teaching practices—a set of teaching practices that promote higher gains in student learning—is particularly promising. Initial work in this area has identified core practices ranging from providing comprehensible input, facilitating the interpretation of authentic texts, and giving effective feedback (Glisan & Donato, 2017). More practice discussing, observing, and analyzing these student-centered practices early in teacher education programs can contribute to the future success of teacher candidates. In addition, methods courses may consider the inclusion of tools to link research to practice, such as action research projects, four-column lesson plans, and reflection on pedagogy. Following teacher candidates and novice instructors with this training through longitudinal research can help us better understand the impact of evidence-based teacher education.

- **Practitioner Research.** A number of models under the larger heading of practitioner research exist to help teachers investigate learning and teaching in their classrooms. Action research, with its goal of improving practice, has been a dominant model in our profession, empowering teachers with the tools and knowledge to carry out investigations in their classrooms and curricula, including collaboratively with colleagues (e.g., Burns, 1999). Other types of practitioner research, such as reflective practice (e.g., Schön, 1983) and exploratory practice (e.g., Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Crane, 2015), offer teachers more process-oriented approaches to researching their classrooms by focusing on the journey through extended reflection. In exploratory practice, for example, the goals of improvement and efficiency in instruction are abandoned in favor of working primarily to understand classroom life. Thus, rather than viewing the classroom as made up of problems that need to be fixed, practitioners are encouraged to investigate "puzzles" about teaching and learning. In the model, teachers are joined by all who have a stake in the learning–teaching experience—especially learners! To make practitioner research accessible to future teacher–researchers, more studies are needed that capture the learning experiences of practitioners: identifying the questions they ask, the resources and people that are part of their inquiry, and the strategies used to maintain a regular practice of reflection.

Bridging research and practice requires collaboration and partnerships. These combined efforts are mutually beneficial, as research can inform practice and practice provides a foundation for research. Ultimately, the hot topics and critical issues above strive to break down the division between teachers and researchers as separate groups with separate interests. These initiatives work to guide efforts to link research and practice, taking the perspective that teachers are indeed interested in research and what it means for their practice, and that collaboration is critical to moving research forward in world languages.

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What Can I Do Now? Ideas for Connecting Research and Practice

Connect with colleagues.

- Join or create a reflective teaching group that meets regularly within your department, face-to-face outside of school, or virtually.

- Set up a working group to develop pedagogies or assessment tools collaboratively.

- Read scholarship that explicitly addresses ways to make research on language learning and teaching meaningful to you and your colleagues (e.g., *Foreign Language Annals*; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; VanPatten, 2017).

- Join an ACTFL Special Interest Group (SIG), become a SIG officer, and/or contribute to an online community on a topic of particular interest to you.

Do assessment work.

- Work with your school or institution's assessment team, if there is one, or make assessment the focus of your department meetings. Investigating student learning outcomes can be a meaningful way to engage in classroom-based research.

- Work with your department chair or district supervisor to develop an assessment team.

- Involve your students through the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* to reflect on evidence indicating growth along the proficiency continuum. (***www.actfl. org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements***).

- Higher education practitioners should look into the annual meeting of the Consortium on Useful Assessment in Language and Humanities Education (CUALHE) ***sites.google.com/cas.uoregon.edu/cualhe-2018*** which will be held in Washington, DC in September 2019.

Serve as a mentor.

- Support colleagues who are new to the profession or seek mentorship from more experienced teachers. Sharing wisdom through one-on-one conversation is a great way to develop perspective on one's practice.

- Participate in ACTFL's mentoring program (***actfl.org/professional-development/career-resources/mentoring-program***).

Join an organization.

- National, regional, and state language professional organizations offer access to journals, conferences, webinars, and more. For a list of all ACTFL publications go to ***www.actfl.org/publications***.

- Participate in online communities facilitated through our language organizations.

Connect with researchers.

- Listen to podcasts such as "Talkin' L2" with Bill VanPatten (***classroomtapas.com/talkinl2***).

- Attend summer institutes like those offered by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (***carla.umn.edu/institutes***) or the Language Resource Centers ***nflrc.org***.

Participate in a grant or initiate a research project.

- Collaborate with researchers and offer your classroom as a research site.

- Consider submitting a proposal for ACTFL's Research Priorities Initiative. The deadline this year is June 4 (***actfl.org/assessment-professional-development/actfl-research-priorities***).

Conduct action research in your classroom.

- For a good introduction to the action research model, read *Using Action Research to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Sellers, 2012) as well as contributions in this issue of *The Language Educator*.

Learn more about high-leverage teaching practices.

- Read *Enacting the Work of Language Instruction: High-Leverage Teaching Practices*. Glisan and Donato take readers through a process of first outlining the research and then deconstructing and rehearsing related core practices.

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