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PLENARY SPEECH

Navigating the research–practice relationship: Professional goals and constraints

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Abstract
In this article, which is based on my AAAL 2023 plenary talk, I argue that researchers may be contributing to widening the never-ending gap between research and practice. At least, there is such a possibility given that researchers, including myself, have rarely investigated their own beliefs and practices related to classroom teaching. In the first part, I overview research of the research–practice relationship and problematize the epistemological clash between two groups of professionals, that is, teachers and researchers. In the second part, I focus on researchers as a profession who have significant potential in contributing to education. In the third part, I share concrete ways of tackling researchers' obstacles in communicating with practitioners if, and when, they wish to be useful for real-world education, including: (a) adjusting the nature of research, and (b) improving communication methods. In conclusion, I propose a model in which the research–practice relationship can be more equitable, effective, and mutually beneficial.

1. Introduction

I was recently having a beer with a friend who happened to be a researcher. He is an accomplished researcher at a research-oriented (R1) university in Canada and his research area is Bridge Engineering. As my plenary talk on the research–practice relationship in Applied Linguistics was approaching, I decided to ask him about the research–practice relationship in his field. Without any knowledge of bridge engineering research, I suspected that there would be a productive research–practice dialogue because bridges are for people regardless of their backgrounds, just like education. Everyone needs bridges, and everyone needs education. Indeed, he told me that there was a bidirectional dialogue between practitioners and researchers, with a common goal of constructing safe, durable, economically viable, and good-looking bridges. Research areas in Bridge Engineering include materials, safety, environment, economics, and advanced statistics. Research evidence helps practitioners make informed decisions. For instance, the contractor examines the potential bridge's feasibility and economic performance. Engineers decide whether a piece of research evidence is materially usable rather than purely theoretical (e.g., a new concrete mix). The owner of the bridge, which is usually the city where the bridge is to be built, evaluates the cost of the bridge based on economic forecast research because it will be covered by the taxpayers' money. Those practitioners communicate their concerns to researchers so that future research will incorporate the practitioners' needs. At this point in our conversation, I thought that I had found a great example for my plenary talk: if Applied Linguistics researchers and language teachers engaged in this type of reciprocal communication, the quality of education would improve. Also, I would feel better about my job (i.e., professional well-being) because I would feel I am contributing to the real world more directly.

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Then I told my friend that I was going to give a plenary talk at the most prestigious conference in my field (partly to impress a fellow researcher in a different field with my professional achievement) and that my plan was to problematize the research–practice relationship. His tone changed. He started sharing the realities in his field. He told me that:

- what practitioners want from researchers are immediate and practical solutions;
- not all bridge engineering research is applicable to real-world issues;
- it is often difficult for bridge researchers to meet practitioners' needs;
- some researchers are interested in theoretical research for their intellectual exploration; and
- funding is usually given to novel research that is more likely to result in academic publications, as opposed to practically-relevant research that is more likely to resolve practical problems.

Clearly, I was naïve to believe that bridge research – a research field directly connected to industries – would be a perfect model for education research IF it intends to contribute to education. What surprised me even more were my friend's accounts of the professional lives of bridge researchers, accounts that I was painfully familiar with. He said that:

- there is constant pressure to publish in top journals;
- citations are very important for bridge researchers; and
- publications are the indicator for researchers' professional success.

We tend to dismiss the possibility of an equitable research–practice relationship in the field of education because education is not – and should not be – a money-making enterprise. However, the conversation with my friend made me realize that, first, the research–practice relationship is an issue not only in social sciences such as our own, but also in core sciences. Second, there seems to be something going on in our profession, that is, amongst researchers. A profession whose responsibility is to advance our understanding of a phenomenon and/or to contribute to society. In the current article, I will explore researchers' occupational issues while situating myself as: (a) an educational researcher, (b) a professional who primarily belongs to the researcher community, and (c) a person who struggles with the meaning of his job.

2. The objective

My objective in writing this article is NOT to tell readers what to do or what to think. To be clear, I am a mid-career researcher with merely 11 years of experience who does not even know why he received the honour of delivering a AAAL plenary, meaning that I am nowhere near a stage where I give advice to my fellow researchers. Rather, my hope is to create a little spot in your soul that tells you that your research should be used in education (more). "You", in this case, includes researchers of any research topic, theoretical orientation, or methodological framework. Similarly to my objective, Ball (2012) at her presidential address at AERA 2012 asked the audience to "personally reflect on the meaning and importance of the statement 'to know is not enough'" (p. 283). "To know" in this quote means the type of knowledge produced by research usually shared via academic publications. Ball's aim was to question how USEFUL researchers are for resolving real-world educational issues. My aim is similar, especially in that the focus of the current article will be on researchers rather than practitioners. I believe that researchers' "god-like authorial positions" (Ushioda, 2023, p. xi) may be the prime suspect of the never-ending gap between research and practice. I suspect that the gap is never-ending because we have been looking at only one side of the research–practice relationship (i.e., practitioners) by asking them what they think of research and how much of it they use.

Before going any further and discussing RESEARCHERS (i.e., the primary readers of the current article) and by extension potentially irritating and upsetting the audience, which would be counterproductive for my objective, a few disclaimers are in order. First, I believe theoretical research is not only

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important, but also necessary (see Kramsch, 2000; Widdowson, 2000). For conducting rigorous and pedagogically relevant research, a researcher needs to use theoretical knowledge. Take second language (L2) knowledge, for example. Without the theoretical information of how L2 knowledge (implicit vs. explicit) is acquired and measured, an instructional effect study cannot probe the participants' L2 development and discern whether it was potentially caused by the intervention. (Sidenote: I do theoretical research as well.) Second, when I say "researchers", this professional group is situated in a variety of occupational settings. The primary setting would be universities or research institutes where researchers' responsibilities include conducting and disseminating research. There are university faculty members who assume a practitioner role by teaching L2 classes as well (e.g., English academic writing for international students). In addition, there are school-level teachers who are involved in action research. Regardless of professional settings and interests, the primary targets of the current article are researchers who hope to contribute to improving education. Third, I do not mean to generalize the tendency that researchers feel they are expected to disseminate their findings in high-impact journals. I am aware of researchers who actively collaborate with practitioners. For those inspiring researchers, the research–practice relationship may not be an issue. In fact, my research line related to the research–practice relationship was motivated by those who take concrete actions in communicating with practitioners. Fourth, I do not suspect that researchers are intentionally widening the research–practice gap; rather, their actions (and perhaps their beliefs) are governed by the professional culture and expectations. With these caveats, I would argue that developing a framework in which ANY researchers or practitioners can share their knowledge and experience should be a welcomed effort for all (unless one does not care about education at all).

In exploring how researchers position themselves in relation to practitioners, I will address two groups of questions. The first group concerns the research–practice relationship itself. I always have a hard time explaining that the research of the research–practice relationship is research on its own rather than a conceptual framework. Paradoxically, it is even harder to explain this to researchers who conduct pedagogically relevant research such as instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) research. This is perhaps because those researchers believe that their research is already useful for classroom teaching because it involves teachers and students in real classrooms. However, the actual use of the findings in the classroom should be questioned. The second group of questions narrows down to researchers as a group of professionals. Who are they? What do they believe? How do they position themselves in relation to classroom practices? I am asking researchers to engage in the difficult task of self-reflection. As I am also a researcher, I will start to question myself.

3. Who am I?

The purpose of beginning my article by talking about myself is not to engage in self-promotion but to invite as many researchers as possible to participate in the movement of changing our epistemological beliefs and identities. After all, my argument will be that it is researchers, not practitioners, who must reconsider their roles in the research–practice relationship.

I learned my first L2 (i.e., English) in Japan. I learned the language with textbook grammar-translation methods, which formed my LEARNER IDENTITY. This learning experience motivated me to pursue my graduate studies in Applied Linguistics; originally, I wanted to learn about better L2 teaching methods because of my L2 learning experience. Between my M.A. and Ph.D., I taught English in Japan as a full-time instructor. At the beginning of my university career, I taught English classes to pre-service English teachers in Chile. So, I have a TEACHER IDENTITY as well. My main teaching responsibility as a faculty member has been to train pre-service and in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers (TEACHER EDUCATOR IDENTITY). However, I have been "fortunate" enough to be able to focus on my research production for the majority of my working time (RESEARCHER IDENTITY). As the Editor-in-Chief of an international journal (*Language Awareness*), I am a gatekeeper of research as well. I assume that the readers of this article share some of these identities (i.e., learner, teacher, teacher educator, and researcher). This means that we should be able to talk about the issue together.

I am also curious to know how the readers of the current article perceive their professional well-being. First, let me make it clear that I like my job: there are so many benefits to being a researcher. No boss to listen to, flexible working hours, job stability, decent salary, free trips, and so forth. But, most of all, researchers receive respect. When you tell people outside the academia that you are a language teacher, you get, "Oh yeah?". If you say you are a researcher, you get, "Oh yeah?!" (with an exclamation point). I remember this change in my social status when I went from being a language teacher to a language researcher and the ways in which people perceived my job and, by extension, me. In what other occupations do titles change, in our case, from Mr./Mrs/Ms. to Dr.?

Despite these professional benefits, my professional well-being is not very high. First, I constantly feel pressure to publish more when there is no external motivation: my university does not require me to publish a certain number of articles per year, and my mother does not care whether I published three articles or ten last year. Most likely, the tenth article was unnecessary to advance my career. So, why do I feel pressured? Second, when I reflect on my research activities, I do not feel good about my work. This is simply because I rarely feel my research is making a change in education; rather, one more publication is merely one more line on my CV (which gives me a sense of achievement, paradoxically). I am 42 years old, and the readers could rightly dismiss my unhappiness as a sign of my midlife crisis. However, I am willing to improve my professional well-being, and writing the current article is one way of doing so: if another researcher joins the movement to make the research–practice relationship more equitable and productive, I will have made a positive change.

4. The research–practice relationship

So, if the main topic of the current article is not instructional effect studies (e.g., ISLA studies), what is the type of research we are talking about here? The research–practice relationship is an independent research field examining "the use of research" in practical settings. The relationship is sometimes called the "gap", "link", "nexus", or "praxis". The examination of the use of research knowledge can be found in any given research field such as medicine, engineering, social work, and education (see Head, 2010). The issue is often coined "evidence-based practice", "evidence-based policies", and "knowledge mobilization". Relatedly, the fields called information science or implementation science explicitly examine how human knowledge is shared in our society.

I prefer using the word "dialogue" in discussing the potential future of the relationship: I am hoping that the field reconceptualizes "the use of research" – which denotes a single directionality of knowledge flow from researchers to practitioners – and considers bidirectional exchanges of knowledge and experience by researchers and practitioners. Practitioners in this sense include policy-makers, school principals, program directors, curriculum developers, pedagogical consultants, textbook writers, educational bloggers, media content producers, Youtubers, and, most importantly, teachers. As such, the research–practice relationship is a meta research field because it is relevant to any specific topics related to L2 teaching and learning. Perhaps, other meta fields in L2 research include secondary research (e.g., meta-analyses), research methods, replications, and open science practices, all of which investigate meta-level issues for the broader research field, that is, Applied Linguistics.

It is important to be clear that this research is not new at all. Researchers in different fields have been debating, but not necessarily investigating, the limited use of research in practice for a century. This research started with medical science: simply speaking, what is the point of developing a new medicine if it is not used by people but, instead, solely for satisfying researchers' intellectual curiosity? Social sciences, including education, started to investigate the gap between research and practice around the 1960s when social sciences research established its "scientific" status (Levin, 2013). This research is not small either. For instance, Estabrooks et al.'s (2008) bibliometric analysis with keyword searches, such as "knowledge mobilization", located over 5,000 articles, and this analysis was conducted for the time period of 1945–2004, almost two decades ago. Governments are also understandably concerned about the utility of research because they are the primary funders of research grants. In the UK, for instance, the Research Excellence Framework, which collects reports (called impact case

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studies) summarizing the impact of empirical studies on society across different fields (Life Sciences; Engineering and Physical Science; Social Sciences; Arts and Humanities), received 6,781 reports in 2021. The reports are submitted by UK universities only and each report contains dozens of individual studies related to our lives.

So, why is this research important for our field? The historical and current argument focuses on improvement of teaching efficacy (hence, the focus on teachers in empirical studies), but I believe its importance is better debated with references to other stakeholders. First, for teachers, research may help in moving beyond dated and ineffective teaching methods IF over the years they have developed the habit of re-using materials and techniques that are ineffective for student learning. Research on teacher cognition and beliefs has shown that they often rely on their intuitions, colleagues' advice, and their own learning experiences in making pedagogical decisions (Cooper et al., 2009; Paran, 2017). Those information sources might well be reliable; however, research evidence can help them further improve their teaching efficacy, especially when the information sources are unreliable. Second, for researchers who aim to contribute to classroom instruction, communicating with teachers may help them avoid pursuing research questions that are ultimately irrelevant in the classroom. It may sound obvious, but if researchers actually communicated with teachers, they could avoid sharing their research only amongst researchers (i.e., the ivory tower: see Rose, 2019). Third, and most importantly, only with collaborative work among teachers and researchers can students receive the most effective and efficient instruction (see Clarke, 1994; Hwang, 2023; Labaree, 2003; Ortega, 2012; Sato & Loewen, 2022: but also see a counter-argument in Medgyes, 2017).

The findings of research examining practitioners' use of research have been relatively consistent: although practitioners are generally supportive of using research in their teaching and tend to see researchers as being socially higher, they do not use research findings to a great extent, at least from the researchers' point of view.

The first set of obstacles to teachers' use of research are practical in nature (see Borg & Liu, 2013; Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017; Sato & Loewen, 2019a). For one, teachers may not have physical access to journal articles because academic publications are behind costly paywalls. For another, they may not have training in interpreting research papers written with jargon and complex statistical information. Even when they have physical and conceptual accessibility to research, they are often too busy to incorporate it into their classes. In addition to their multiple responsibilities, in order to use research in their classrooms, they must: (1) accurately identify specific pedagogical issues; (2) find time to think about using research; (3) actively look for relevant research; (4) successfully locate useful research; (5) understand and interpret a research article; (6) carefully adopt research findings to their own teaching context; and (7) finally, develop a lesson plan and teaching materials that incorporate the new evidence-based practice. With these requirements, it may be impractical or even unethical to expect teachers to voluntarily incorporate research into their teaching. Besides, there rarely is sufficient professional reward (e.g., salary increase) for them to communicate with researchers. Those practical reasons require changes at the institutional level (e.g., time release for teachers, financial support for participating in academic conferences, and professional rewards for engaging with research). Individual researchers may not be equipped to make those changes.

The second set of obstacles are epistemological and emotional in nature (see Guilfoyle et al., 2020; McGarr et al., 2017; Sippel & Sato, 2022; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). I believe that teachers' epistemological obstacles are what individual researchers can work with. First, some teachers believe that educational research is less trustworthy than other types of research (e.g., medicine). Second, many teachers feel that research findings are pointless and irrelevant to their own teaching context. Third, and most detrimentally, some teachers perceive researchers to live in an isolated world and impose authority on teachers. A teacher in Tavakoli and Howard's (2012) study said: "I doubt most theoreticians have any understanding of the daily workload teachers face" (p. 237). In his interview study, Shkedi (1998) identified "doubts about the authenticity of the researchers" (p. 568) among the teachers, indicating a trust issue. Imagine that someone comes to your workplace and tells you that what you have been doing for years is simply wrong. In addition, this person does not have as

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much professional experience as you do. How would you react? Would you say, "Thank you very much for your advice. I will change what I've been doing"?! I am not saying there that this is how researchers treat teachers; rather, some teachers perceive researchers in such a light and, thus, their negative reactions to researchers may be "natural emotional reactions of human beings to the threat of losing certainty, predictability, or stability" (Korthagen, 2007, p. 305).

5. Maybe it's us

Researchers have examined thousands of practitioners in many educational contexts. Researchers have been concerned about the limited use of research in the classroom for decades (see Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Ellis, 1997; Larsen-Freeman, 1995; Lightbown, 1985; Nunan, 1991; Spada, 1997). Yet, the current research–practice relationship seems far from being equitable or productive. Hence, my hypothesis is that it may be US who are hindering the relationship that WE are promoting. Minimally, there is such a possibility because previous research on the research–practice relationship has exclusively examined practitioners. Although more research on researchers has been emerging in recent years (e.g., Amutuhaire, 2022; Anwer & Reiss, 2023; Barkhuizen, 2021; De Costa et al., 2022; Ion et al., 2019; Merga & Mason, 2021; Rose & McKinley, 2022; Sato et al., 2022), we still do not know much about researchers' approach to the research–practice relationship. Over ten years ago, Levin (2013) pointed out that the irony related to the research–practice discussion is that "the debate over the use of research is itself not well informed by research" (p. 4). This persistent lack of research, which signals researchers' reluctance to investigate themselves, results in two issues. First, we cannot know what researchers do (or do not do) to contribute to the research–practice relationship. Second, without such an inquiry, we cannot know how researchers can facilitate the research–practice dialogue. This hypothesis is also supported by professional development studies showing that encouraging teachers to use research tends to result in some positive changes in teachers' belief systems but not as much in their teaching practices (e.g., Chung & Fisher, 2022). Without self-reflection by researchers, practitioners may understand researchers' efforts as: "Why don't YOU change your attitudes?!" and "Why don't YOU use my research?!". Researchers often encourage teachers to engage in reflective practice, but, why shouldn't researchers do the same?

So, who are L2 researchers? There are a couple of studies that investigated researchers' identities in relation to teaching (e.g., De Costa et al., 2022; Rose & McKinley, 2022). In our study (Sato et al., 2022), we collected demographic data from 217 researchers across the globe. The original survey invitation was sent to the first authors of presentations at five major international academic conferences. The invitation letter stated that the study was about researchers' perceptions of teaching. The response rate prior to data screening was 35% (313 responses among 897 invitations) which shows a reasonable level of interest in the topic. The results showed that: (a) the majority of participants were L2 learners themselves; (b) 95% had taught (or were teaching) an L2, with average teaching experience of 14.37 years ($SD = 9.98$); and (c) they frequently trained pre-service teachers, indicating many of them belonged to teacher education programs at their institutions. They reported that they had been researchers for an average of 16.78 years ($SD = 9.86$) and 89% of them were tenure-track or tenured professors (the rest being doctoral students). Though based on a single study, the tendency is clear: L2 researchers know how difficult it is to learn a new language, they have experience with challenges in classroom teaching, and they are constantly in touch with (pre-service) teachers. This profile, which is identical to mine, seemingly promises their favorable and empathetic attitude towards the research–practice relationship.

So, what do they think of the research–practice relationship? There have been several studies, albeit in general education fields, that investigated researchers' perceptions of the use of research in teaching (e.g., Cherney et al., 2012; Ion et al., 2019; Merga & Mason, 2021; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Overall, this research has shown that researchers are supportive of the research–practice relationship and are generally confident that their research is useful for improving educational practices. In Sato et al. (2022), we found similar results. However, the most interesting finding in Sato et al. (2022)

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was perhaps how researchers distinguished their research from other researchers'. The factor analysis resulted in two distinct factors, one explaining their own research (e.g., "My research findings have a direct impact on classroom L2 teaching") and L2 research(ers) in general (e.g., "L2 researchers understand classroom L2 teaching"). This finding suggests that researchers tend to distance themselves from the group they belong to when referring to the research–practice relationship. Accordingly, we summarized L2 researchers' attitude as: "MY research is useful for teachers and it is MY responsibility to make sure that MY research is used by teachers" (p. 642; emphasis in original). This finding begs an important question: When researchers refer to research use in education, whose research are they talking about? Research in general or their own research?

The next question then is to explore how individual researchers express their interest in contributing to education. Where do researchers express themselves? Publications, of course. To this end, Rose and McKinley (2022) surveyed L2 researchers' bios in journal articles. Based on 400 bios, they found that researchers prioritized their researcher identities while downplaying their teaching experiences and credentials. However, the questionnaire data showed their clear interest in influencing pedagogical practices via their research. We (Sato et al., in progress) also conducted an analysis on the abstracts of empirical articles published in 11 highly-ranked journals for the five-year period of 2017–2021 ($N =$ 1,721). We looked for statements explicitly showing researchers' intention to influence practice (e.g., "Pedagogical implications are discussed"). The result showed that 64% included such statements, although the analyzed studies included broader Applied Linguistics issues other than L2 teaching-related issues as well as theoretical L2 topics. (Sidenote: I include these statements in my papers all the time.) An important question here is WHY researchers do this when: (a) journals do not necessarily require pedagogical perspectives in submitted manuscripts, and (b) researchers know that the vast majority of the readers of their papers will be their fellow researchers, not teachers. I speculate three possibilities: (a) researchers are genuinely interested in educational practices; (b) researchers feel they need to say something about teaching; and/or (c) researchers believe that saying something about teaching is beneficial for their publications and/or career.

A caveat for studies of researchers, however, is the possibility that researchers' responses and what they write in their papers are misleading or even pretentious. It is more likely than not that L2 researchers would say YES when they are asked whether they care about L2 education. Perhaps, a similar possibility should be considered for teacher survey studies as well in which they are asked whether they care about L2 research. This methodological issue (i.e., Hawthorne effect) needs to be resolved in future research.

6. What happens to us?!

Early evidence suggests that L2 researchers possess multiple identities, including teacher identities, and are highly interested in engaging with the research–practice relationship (De Costa et al., 2022; Rose & McKinley, 2022; Sato et al., 2022). Yet, rigorous efforts by researchers in initiating and facilitating a dialogue between researchers and practitioners have rarely been reported. Although it is probable that such an effort by individual researchers tends not to be visible because it is not reported in the form of academic publications, it is true that L2 communities are not equipped with a profession-wide framework whereby researchers and practitioners exchange their professional knowledge and experiences. So, WHAT HAPPENS TO US? Do we forget about classroom teaching once we receive a Ph.D.? Do we stop caring about our former colleagues (teachers)? Or are we professionally constrained in communicating with teachers (see Sato & Cárcamo, under review)? Although I have been critical of researchers' attitudes so far, I would like to defend them (and myself) here by discussing researchers' practical obstacles for engaging with the research–practice relationship.

First, educational researchers are said to be responsible for two commitments: (a) to advance our understanding (i.e., "knowledge") of learning phenomena (e.g., "How is an L2 learned?"; "What factors influence L2 learning processes?"; "How can L2 learning be facilitated?"), and (b) to make a positive change in society (see Sandoval, 2014). These two commitments often conflict with each other for

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several reasons. For one, researchers are busy too (see McIntosh et al., 2022; Shields & Watermeyer, 2020)! With the constant pressure to get published, researchers tend to use their available time, after deducting hours for many other duties including teaching and service, to work on their research. If a researcher can devote 20% of their working time for research, they are probably among the “lucky” ones. Consequently, making time to engage with practitioners is pushed down even further in their wishful to-do list. The readers may agree that it is often difficult to explain why we are so busy to non-academic friends who trust that researchers are doing research all the time. Teachers also might believe that we spend the majority of our working time on research (a notion I have never heard from my researcher friends). For another, empirical research is conducted with a specific group of learners in a specific context, which is one of the reasons why teachers rarely feel that research evidence is relevant to their classes (Biesta, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2015). This is a necessary evil in producing methodologically rigorous research, and researchers cannot do much about this.

The most problematic of all, however, is the publication culture. Due to the current publisher and higher-education business model, universities around the globe now consider journal publications to be the most important indicator of researchers’ professional achievement (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). Although there often is a practice-focused evaluation criterion by universities and grant agencies such as “knowledge transfer” or “outreach” (partly synonymous to the research–practice relationship), the weight given to this criterion is incomparably lower than that for journal publications. Consequently, for a researcher to be professionally successful, they must focus on publications. Hence, publish or perish (what a phrase …). Besides, publications are “the mark of success, bringing congratulatory praises from colleagues and the university” (McKinley, 2019, p. 877), meaning that publications give researchers something emotionally fruitful too. To this end, it is deeply concerning that an increasing number of universities now require graduate students to publish in order to obtain their degrees. On the one hand, this policy prepares graduate students for the publication-driven academia professionally. On the other hand, it exacerbates the research–practice gap because graduate students form the future of an equitable research–practice relationship. In short, in the current professional setup, publications lead to professional rewards while engagement with teachers does not. This systemic and structural issue is hard to change through individual efforts no matter how much one, including myself, wishes it to vanish.

However, just like my arguments regarding teachers’ practical constraints and epistemological beliefs related to the research–practice relationship, what researchers can work on now may be their own epistemological beliefs. Over decades, researchers collectively decided to frame the research–practice relationship as an issue related to the use of research in practice, as opposed to an issue related to educational problems that researchers and teachers can resolve together. In this framework, researchers are considered to be the knowledge producers and holders while practitioners are conceptualized as the knowledge consumers and recipients. Hence, terminologies such as “evidence-based practice” and “knowledge mobilization” come into play. We, including myself, often use terms such as “theory and practice” and “from research to practice” all implying the flow of knowledge starting from researchers to practitioners. I am not saying these terms are somewhat wrong: these terms actually make sense because they were created by researchers who are concerned about the utility of their products, that is, knowledge created by research. However, I beg the readers to join me in reconsidering this framework here. I believe that if researchers considered the research–practice relationship as a venue where two groups of professionals bidirectionally exchange their KNOWLEDGE and experience, all stakeholders would be motivated to talk to each other (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reconceptualization of knowledge flows

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7. The way forward

So far, I have discussed: (a) the possibility that researchers are contributing to the widening research–practice gap, and (b) the difficulties researchers face when they wish to contribute to education. In the current landscape where higher education and publisher industries dictate how researchers conduct themselves, I am left with two choices for my future career. The first choice is to be subsumed in the current academic system and enjoy the social prestige that I have achieved. The second choice is to work around the current academic system and be proud of my job. I am currently working hard to choose the latter. One of my efforts has been to conduct research on researchers. Another has been to operate a platform that connects researchers and teachers (I will talk about *TESOLgraphics* later). Yet, another would be to talk to researchers and invite them to the movement. The current article falls under the last purview, and I would like to share some ideas for tackling researchers' obstacles to an equitable research–practice relationship.

The bottom line is a collaborative mindset (see Sato & Loewen, 2022). That is, without a collaborative mindset, any specific efforts would result in furthering teachers' negative perceptions of researchers. I believe that a collaborative mindset can be nurtured by acknowledging a few FACTS. The first is that researchers and teachers possess different types of professional knowledge (Biesta, 2014; Ellis, 2010; Fenstermacher, 1994). Teachers' knowledge is often described as procedural knowledge, a type of knowledge that develops by participating in and reflecting on one's actions. However, I would argue that teachers possess much more than something procedural: they are the ones who have direct and concrete experience with L2 learning challenges that students face and L2 teaching challenges that hinder effective teaching. In other words, researchers could acknowledge that researchers are not the sole holders of KNOWLEDGE. This acknowledgement requires modification of the concept of knowledge itself (as in "knowledge mobilization"). The second fact, which is self-evident, is that researchers' and teachers' jobs come with different professional responsibilities and expectations. Although I am aware of the risk of dichotomizing and separating the two groups, validating each other's different professional realities would ease the tension between the two groups. The third fact is that teachers and researchers share a common goal of student learning (see Spada & Lightbown, 2022). Researchers and teachers would have an easier time working together if they prioritized a goal-oriented approach. If researchers and teachers succeed in acknowledging these facts, the epistemological clash between the two professional groups may be deconstructed. Then, the research–practice relationship can become more bidirectional, collaborative, and mutually beneficial.

With a collaborative mindset, there are several ways of achieving the common goal of student learning, including: (a) adjusting the nature of research, and (b) improving communication methods.

7.1 The nature of research

First, researchers can be strategic in selecting their research topics. Research on teacher perceptions has repeatedly shown that teachers tend to feel that research findings are irrelevant to their job. One reason for this feeling may derive from the research topics themselves. Researchers often justify their topics based on research gaps, saying: "Previous research has not addressed … " or "Scant research has investigated … ". Such justification is legitimate because science develops incrementally, and new research must be based on previous research. However, such justification may not lead to research topics that address teachers' current needs. The best way to solve someone's problems is always to ask them (see Hargreaves, 2000; Pica, 1994). If a research topic derived from teachers' concerns, the findings from the study would be more useful for classroom teaching. Additionally, if a research study is initiated by teachers' voices, the findings may face less emotional rejection from teachers. Based on this thinking, I conducted a survey last year with 186 Chilean EFL teachers and asked them a simple question: "What are your primary pedagogical challenges?" Alas. The data were a mess. It was too messy to publish a paper on it. Although there were some tendencies (e.g., many teachers were concerned about student motivation), arriving at a reliable coding scheme was impossible. The takeaway from this unpublishable study was perhaps that teachers and researchers speak different languages. If researchers devised a method with which they would operationalize teachers' needs, the research–practice relationship would be more bidirectional and mutually beneficial.

The second way of adjusting the nature of research is simpler: increase the study's ecological validity so that research findings are more likely to be useful in the classroom. Naturally, the best way to increase ecological validity is to conduct a study in the real classroom with constant consultation with teachers (see Spada, 2019). Teachers should be involved not only in topic selection, but also in the development of research tools (e.g., intervention materials) by incorporating the existing curriculum and students' current needs in the specific educational context in which the researcher is situated. Again, if a teacher were invited to contribute to the development of research, they would be more willing to incorporate the findings into their teaching. It is true that an increase in ecological validity comes with a risk of reducing other types of validity (e.g., internal validity). However, balancing scientific rigor and ecological validity can be achieved with the researcher's careful and tactful decisions (see Sato & Loewen, 2019b).

In an effort to create a viable framework for an equitable research–practice relationship, we (Sato & Loewen, 2022) proposed practice-based research (PBR), rather than pushing evidence-based practice any further. In PBR, researchers and teachers collaborate with each other at every step of a research project. It begins with deciding a topic together and then conducting the study together at all stages, including materials development, data collection, and data analysis. The findings of the study are fed back to the classroom of the participating teacher. The teacher most likely would find issues either with the findings themselves or with the feasibility of implementing the findings in the classroom. Those issues are then taken up by the researcher again. Hence, PBR is a cyclical model in which researchers and teachers work together by using their different but equally important professional knowledge and experience. Again, the by-product of PBR is the teachers' reduced apprehension toward research(ers). Possibly, teachers' increased acceptance of research findings is the most important aspect of PBR.

And publish! Earlier, I criticized the current academic system and pointed out that the most problematic aspect is the publication culture. Unfortunately, individual researchers are not powerful enough to change the system. This system will not change anytime soon and it will probably still exist when I retire. I also argued that publications give emotional rewards to researchers despite the harms that the publication culture inflicts on the research–practice relationship as well as on researchers' well-being. Given those realities, the ideal professional choice would be to contribute to education AND publish, that is, accomplishing the two conflicting commitments that educational researchers face at the same time. I happen to believe that this is possible. Say a researcher conducted an empirical study within the framework of PBR. The resulting findings can be published in an article (which is what researchers regularly do). At the same time, the researcher can publish another paper that details the process of conducting the study within the framework of the research–practice relationship, evidence-based teaching, knowledge mobilization, research–practice partnership, or design-based research. So, not just one, but two publications! Just to give an example, Goldstein et al. (2017) "investigated … whether prior vocabulary knowledge or special education status moderated the effects of academic vocabulary instruction" (p. 3237) and reported on the instructional effect study. Based on this study, among others, Goldstein et al. (2019) reported "some of the challenges and rewards of establishing an RPP [research–practice partnership] using an example of a project" (p. 38) and explained, for instance, how the researchers and practitioners decided to take different roles in the project, how they wrote a research grant together, and how the researchers sustained the practitioners' engagement throughout the project. The same can be done in Applied Linguistics.

7.2. Communication methods

In addition to adjusting the nature of research to increase the chance of a more equitable research–practice dialogue, researchers can consider how they (we) can communicate with practitioners. The goal is still the removal of the epistemological and attitudinal barriers between the two professional communities. I will discuss two options which are not mutually exclusive: (a) adding dissemination methods to the traditional academic publications, and (b) maximizing the effectiveness of existing venues or creating new venues for communicating with practitioners.

According to teacher perception research, one of the major sources of teachers' hesitation in trying out a new teaching method is context. Since all research is conducted with a specific group of learners in a specific educational context, teachers tend to feel that the findings are not applicable to their own students. One way to reduce this concern is to collect studies that show similar instructional effects via a meta-analysis (see Plonsky et al., 2023) or narrative review (see Chong et al., 2023). With empirical evidence showing the effectiveness of a specific teaching technique with different groups of learners in different contexts, teachers may become more willing to try out the technique with their own students. Of course, an additional benefit of using secondary research during a researcher–practitioner dialogue is researchers' increased confidence when making pedagogical recommendations to teachers. The same logic applies to replication research (see Porte & McManus, 2019).

Yet another issue that teachers have with research(ers) is the language of communication. Simply, teachers are not trained (and have no reason to be trained) to consume research articles written with technical jargon, philosophical arguments, and complicated statistics. If a researcher agrees with me that teachers should not be expected to fully understand an academic publication, they must also agree that researchers need to change their language to communicate with practitioners more effectively. L2 researchers have put forth some efforts on this front. In particular, *Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies* (OASIS; oasis-database.org), with a spirit of "making research into language learning, language teaching, and multilingualism physically and conceptually accessible" (Alferink & Marsden, 2023, p. 1), has archived 1,300+ summaries of empirical studies written in an accessible language. Some academic journals have followed suit and added summaries of studies that are open to the public (e.g., Plain Language Summaries in *Language Awareness*). Though the actual impact of those summaries on classroom teaching are unknown, this effort removes a major obstacle to the research–practice relationship concerning conceptual accessibility.

Research evidence can be shared in other ways using social media, podcasts, websites, and so forth, in which a person communicates research findings with practitioners in accessible language. While those media are more likely to be accessed by teachers, the mediator, however, may not be trained to interpret research findings. Hence, there is a risk of delivering inaccurate or twisted research evidence. Ideally, therefore, research findings should be explained by researchers (as per their professional duties). To this end, Sin Wang Chong (University of St Andrews) and I manage a website designed to create a platform where researchers and teachers talk to each other by using secondary research (i.e., meta-analyses and narrative reviews). It is called *TESOLgraphics* (tesolgraphics.com). Our overall objective is to dismantle the ivory tower and involve practitioners in shaping the research agenda. For example, we create infographics of secondary research. Importantly, the evidence included in infographics is chosen by teachers who decide which evidence is relevant to classroom teaching. At this point, we have more than 100 infographics from which practitioners can get the gist of the most important findings of a specific teaching issue (e.g., grammar teaching). We host a Research Talk Show, which is co-hosted by a teacher and a researcher rather than a teacher interviewing a researcher or vice-versa, in which two professionals discuss a specific research topic using their expertise. This way, the knowledge flow is more bidirectional. We also host a Reading Group where a researcher explains secondary research to a group of teachers. In addition to those monthly activities, we are currently developing a scheme in which teachers and researchers convert secondary research into teaching materials. Just like accessible summaries, we do not know the actual impact of our effort on the real classroom. However, I am certain that if more researchers spend time communicating with teachers, the research–practice relationship will be more meaningful.

With a collaborative mindset, research with high practical relevance, collective evidence, and accessible summaries, researchers would be more equipped to communicate with practitioners. Instead of waiting for practitioners to reach out, researchers could use existing venues to facilitate the research–practice dialogue. The most available venue for L2 researchers to establish communication

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with researchers is in their pre-service teacher education courses (as shown in the survey by Sato et al., 2022; see also Nguyen et al., 2022). The second venue is professional development workshops (see Abbott & Lee, 2022). Unlike pre-service teachers, however, in-service teachers possess their professional knowledge and experience (see McGann et al., 2020). Hence, instead of transferring research findings to teachers, which exacerbates the unidirectional flow of knowledge from researchers to practitioners, researchers can reconceptualize the opportunity and create an equitable dialogue. In this way, not only would teachers benefit from the researcher, but also the researcher may arrive at a new theoretical perspective to ponder, a new research topic to pursue, or a new research project to conduct with the teachers at the workshop (e.g., PBR). Finally, the creation of new venues is welcomed. In initiating a new project, researchers should be mindful of the potential epistemological clash that may be invisible yet detrimental to the mutually beneficial opportunity. One idea is to organize a professional development workshop in which teachers train researchers so that researchers' awareness of classroom teaching is raised or woken up.

8. Final remarks

In the current article, I have made a case for reconceptualizing the research–practice relationship by easing the epistemological clash between the two professional groups: practitioners and researchers. I have laid out the professional realities of researchers and teachers and discussed potential ways towards an equitable research–practice relationship. Four out of six reviewers of the current article, who were presumably researchers, complimented the article by saying it is "thought-provoking", which I highly appreciated as a researcher. However, a reviewer who identified themselves as a teacher said that the pieces of information were "well-known 'facts'" (emphasis in original). This difference may underscore the current status quo of the research–practice relationship and call for an epistemological shift on the researchers' part. As my objective of writing this article was to communicate with researchers, I hope that some researchers nodded while reading it and decided to take concrete action for communicating with practitioners.

Figure 2 depicts different ways of envisioning the research–practice relationship. Models A and B, as I see it, illustrate what is currently happening. In Model A, two groups are separated and there is a thick barrier between them. This model is apparently ineffective and exacerbates the idea that: (a) teachers should heed their intuitions and experience in making pedagogical decisions, and (b) researchers should stay in the ivory tower and keep publishing articles that do not reach teachers. Model B is better because there is an overlapping area where teachers and researchers communicate with each other; however, the problem is that only a handful of like-minded professionals – researchers who exert extra effort in communicating with teachers and teachers who actively engage in and with research – benefit from the research–practice relationship. Model C is different in that there is no hierarchy among different professionals, and it is goal-oriented. Who you are does not matter as long as your job is related to L2 teaching and learning. Together, we strive to achieve the common goal of student learning. If more researchers are able to put aside their Ph.D. badges and actively work on involving practitioners in their research, the research–practice relationship will be more equitable, productive, and useful for a wider society.

Within Model C, there are several directions that researchers can take in the circle. The first option is to forget about the research–practice relationship. This is an important option because we need theoretical research although its findings may not directly contribute to education. The second option is to produce pedagogically relevant research via, for example, ISLA research and PBR. The findings can be circulated within the circle. The third option is to do something with the research–practice relationship itself. There can be multiple types of research including teacher perceptions and actions, researcher perceptions and actions, and interventions to improve the relationship. While I focused on research of L2 learning and teaching in this article, the research–practice relationship can be examined and facilitated in many other Applied Linguistics topics such as individual differences, learner and teacher psychology, language testing, learning difficulties, translanguaging, or even more critical

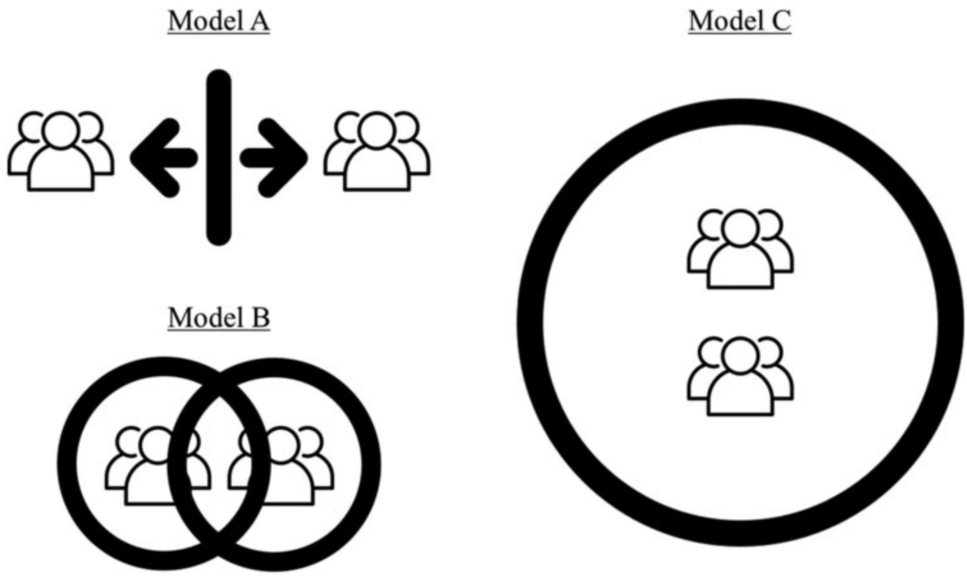

Figure 2. Models of research–practice relationships

issues such as race and gender. The final option is to focus on communicating with practitioners at the cost of publishing less. Personally, the last option is the most appealing yet themost difficult. On the one hand, I would contribute to education most efficiently if I used my working time, for example, for writing accessible summaries, developing websites, and giving professional development workshops. On the other hand, I would not advance my career if I did not keep publishing. Hence, in the current system, I would keep publishing in a way that most likely makes a change in education. I started the current article by inviting the readers to self-reflect on the meaning of their job. I hope I have succeeded in forcing as many researchers as possible to at least take a moment before planning their next project so that their professional well-being would be higher as a result of contribution to an equitable research–practice relationship.

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