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Professional Development Through Graduate Study: Using Academic Research to Inform Professional Practices

In this article, the author discusses how learning to effectively conduct, analyze, and present research has had an impact on her academic success, her ongoing development as an ESL teacher, and her proposals and protocols as the ESL department coordinator at an adult school in the Bay Area. The author triangulates these 3 areas of impact to demonstrate how the ability to employ research as a tool has provided her more knowledge and authority as a teacher and administrator.

Introduction

Adult ESL programs lack research-informed decision making. In a field in which hands-on experience is often seen as the best indicator of what works, many TESOL practitioners understand research as cumbersome, clinical, and disconnected from reality. The latest research seldom surfaces in lesson planning or in teachers' lounge conversations. In a climate of limited time and even further limited funding, most teachers prefer to implement practical, already existing materials. As an ESL teacher and department coordinator, I understand this perspective and have lived this disconnect, but after completing my graduate studies, I began to notice the effect that the absence of research has on adult ESL programmatic planning. In my MA TESOL program, I received training in how to conduct academic research, and this skill has since informed the decisions I make as a learner, teacher, and administrator.

For many years, researchers have discussed the benefits of connecting research and practice. *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly publication of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, focuses on connecting teachers with research, and researchers with the classroom. It recognizes the wealth of knowledge that teachers and their colleagues possess, but it also asserts that their practice will improve if they incorporate research findings into their work. Garner, Bingman, Comings, Rowe, & Smith (2001) have noted that many instructors do not actively search out research findings themselves but instead find out about research in a more passive manner—they are informed

by a trusted colleague, they meet a researcher, or they are invited to participate in a research study. Another study published by *Focus on Basics* shows there are five reasons adult-education practitioners are not accessing research or professional development in general: distance, time constraints, information gaps, goal mismatch, and a lack of face-to-face interaction (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Given this reality, it is clear that many ESL professionals are not accessing resources that could measurably improve their techniques. Hull (1997) makes the need for a research-practice connection clear: “Qualitative research can inspire us to action—to teach better, to imagine more helpful research, to do what we can to make our institutions more responsive” (Conclusion section, para. 1).

In this article, I discuss how I learned to use academic research in my graduate studies and how this skill set supports and moves forward my teaching and administrative careers. With specific examples, I illustrate how integrating research into my repertoire of skills helped me become a more confident teacher and department coordinator and allowed me to stay connected with the TESOL field at large.

Incorporating Research Into Professional Practices

I have taught ESL for a number of years in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2008 I enrolled in a rigorous MA TESOL program that guides us through the creation of a research-heavy thesis. It is common for students to view a thesis as purely an academic assignment, disconnected from the practice of teaching. I had a similar viewpoint in the beginning of my graduate studies. I felt removed from the research process and unsure of how it related to teacher training. I was not research “literate”—I did not understand the structure or language used in research articles. Throughout the course of my MA TESOL program, I learned how to navigate academic databases, critically analyze research articles, and integrate findings in my work in order to gather a larger foundation of support for my work. My appreciation for and interest in academic inquiry shifted how I taught ESL and administered the program. I still drew on and highly valued more practical classroom experience, but I built on that with evidence-based studies.

I have noticed many similarities between using research-based evidence to support my academic work and using research-based evidence to support my teaching and administrative work. Research served as my mentor, and it gave me access to a larger resource bank of support, advice, and “best practices” for classroom teaching and provided me more leverage to support department-level proposals in an administrative role.

Teaching Methodology

Knowledge of how to conduct research is an important skill set both in and outside of the academy. Research guided me through my graduate studies and has also helped me grow as a teacher practitioner. I now teach an advanced ESL class in the evenings and work closely with a colleague who teaches the same section in the morning. We collaborate often to design better ways to integrate more advanced academic reading and writing skills into our curriculum. Early

in the 2011-2012 academic year we began a monthlong unit combining heavy reading and vocabulary that culminated in our students' writing long essays focused on integrating new writing styles and academic vocabulary. While I felt equipped to teach modalities such as grammar and writing, I felt less qualified to teach advanced academic reading. It would have been easy enough to search online for ESL reading teaching methodologies, but I knew that basic Internet searches result in a large number of unverified resources. I preferred to draw on evidence-based methodologies rather than go through my own trial-and-error process with numerous methodologies; I looked to learn from past practitioners and researchers in the field.

This investigation began when I searched "ESL effective reading methods" in trusted research databases. I was impressed with how many results showed studies focused on evidence-based "best practices." Proven methodologies I found included prereading activities (Alemi & Ebadi, 2010; Mihara, 2011), read alouds (Goulden, 2002), and graphic organizers to accompany the reading task (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). I implemented these activities in my class and witnessed student growth as a result. In one example, I provided students with comprehension questions before their reading task. This methodology re-framed how the students absorbed the content, encouraging them to look for key information rather than spend a lot of time searching through overwhelming unfamiliar vocabulary. Similarly, the use of graphic organizers helped the students chart new information from the reading. The graphic organizer was a useful tool to help students categorize content by relationship—for example, cause and effect, argument and evidence, pros and cons, and comparison and contrast. I saw students more effectively construct arguments and draw conclusions after organizing and playing with this information. Furthermore, they more articulately expressed their conclusions in academic writing assignments. Overall, these research-based methodologies provided me and my coteacher with proven techniques to improve student reading and writing. Having access to these studies provides the teaching community, novice and practiced alike, the ability to share uncertainties and provide solutions to enhance our practice.

Materials Adoption

Research supports my work as an ESL teacher and also allows me to make more strategic decisions as an administrator. I found this skill set particularly useful when updating the teaching materials in our adult ESL program. Two years ago my principal asked me to come up with a plan to buy a new textbook series for the ESL department. A common administrative approach is to immediately ask staff to vote on their preferred textbooks, but I decided to first use a more evidence-based approach and then ask the staff to vote on a variety of evidence-based options. I searched for research articles that discussed which criteria are important to consider when adopting a new ESL textbook. Many of these articles gave examples of teacher-centered processes such as questionnaires and checklists (Byrd, 2001; Garinger, 2002; Miekley, 2005) to systematically include teacher preferences in this decision. After reviewing this information, I drafted a series of questions to guide staff members' decision making

when reviewing different textbooks. Questions asked for teachers' perspective based on their practitioner experience, while others asked them to shift their perspective to examine the textbooks through the lens of their students. All in all, this method carefully and critically guided our selection process. Research-driven questions prompted the selection team to reflect on elements of the textbooks they may not have otherwise considered.

Level Assessment and Placement

Like many, the adult school I work for aims to have clear agreements on when to transfer an ESL student from one level to the next level. We administer CASAS tests to our ESL students to facilitate initial placement into our program and to track their progress throughout the program.¹ However, because we implement only the reading component of the standardized assessment, CASAS is not a holistic indicator of student achievement. To address this issue, I researched how the field at large has implemented CASAS and resolved this problem. Research shows that there can be mismatch in the classroom between curriculum objectives and CASAS standards. The teacher might feel, as Melles (2010) calls it, "competing allegiances" in terms of what is expected to be presented in the class against what he or she as a teacher deems as ethically suitable (Deckert, 2004; Melles, 2010). I had felt these "competing allegiances" in my own teaching experience. For example, I taught ESL family literacy to a group whose goals were not to enter the workforce and therefore did not incorporate workplace ESL materials in the family-literacy curriculum. As a result of this decision, my adult learners failed to meet the industrywide standards in that content area. This type of situation can be difficult for teachers given that (a) the district often expects teachers to adhere to a standards-based curriculum, and (b) the administration most likely depends on improved CASAS results for funding and therefore insists that teachers work toward these same goals.

Drawing from the bank of research on CASAS implementation, I learned that our school was not alone in this struggle. It is a larger problem facing school districts around the state and nation. Armed with this information, the staff compared the CASAS standards against our own views of what our students needed, which may have been in direct conflict with what we were expected to teach. We used our teaching experience as a base and enhanced the discussion with research findings. We reviewed case studies that described how other districts had dealt with the problem. Rather than feel alone in this struggle, we felt part of the larger TESOL community. In the end, we decided to incorporate the standards but not at the expense of student autonomy and in-class teaching decision making. Research did not provide us the absolute solution, but it did provide us valuable models.

Enrollment

Another example of when I have found research useful in an administrative position was in deciding on open enrollment versus managed enrollment. Open enrollment has the benefit of allowing students to register and begin classes at any time during the school year. Managed enrollment also has ben-

efits; because students can enroll only on specific start dates, the teacher can scaffold content and build in new content each week rather than have to reteach material to constantly accommodate new students. At our school, we maintain a compromise between these two systems. We allow students to add classes for the first few weeks of each term. Through time, the administration began to wonder about the advantages of open versus managed enrollment and what impact choosing one over the other would have at our school. A few research studies allowed us to understand how other programs have dealt with enrollment. Yates's (2008) study of open-enrollment ESL classes in Canada highlighted teachers' and administrators' positive experiences with maintaining an "open door" to students. Yates reported that the teachers felt more able to recycle and review content and new students felt welcome in the classroom community at all times. Also, the study illustrated the economic benefits of a constant inflow of registration fees. Another study by Pugh (2011) offered suggestions on how teachers can maintain a cohesive classroom community under the challenges of open enrollment. These studies and more have informed the conversation the administrators and faculty continue to have as we work toward making a decision about enrollment in our program. We look to stay connected to others in the field by reading their testimonies and allowing their experience to carry our own conversation forward.

Implications

The skills MA TESOL students gain in their graduate programs positively affect their future pedagogy and approach to decision making in administrative roles. As a former graduate student, I now realize the significant impact that learning how to do research has had on my career. I urge current MA TESOL students to focus on the benefits of research, although it can be frustrating when learning how to engage in this process.

The implications are also great for ESL practitioners. Learning to do research shifts teaching away from an often intuitive and sometimes random process to one that demonstrates more knowledge of "best practices." Given that time is a commodity in the adult ESL field, it is essential to have quick access to proven methodologies. Additionally, since teachers often work in isolation, we tend to reinvent the wheel, which actually takes more time in the end. Finally, for those in leadership roles, access to research will better inform our decision making and is a more responsible and holistic approach to policy and change. Research not only provides us examples of what works, but it also connects us to the field at large, where we can be a listener or a contributor, so that we are all moving our profession forward in unison.

Conclusion

Data-driven decision making has become the catchphrase at local district levels and among policy makers (Honig & Coburn, 2008; Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006), and research practices are by and large considered professional activities. Given the state of economizing with fewer resources, especially in the current California climate, adult ESL programs need to ensure that the de-

isions we make are backed by evidence. It seems more pressing than ever to represent ourselves to school districts and communities as professional institutions in order to maintain credibility and receive continued financial and political support.

In this article I described how finding, analyzing, and implementing research findings has informed and shaped my teaching and administrative roles. Access to research has connected me to the larger field, and it seems essential that the teacher community continues to share proven practices. I hope this will unite TESOL dialogue and help to bridge the gap between research and the classroom. Unity is power, and working together the TESOL community can continue to advance the TESOL field locally and globally.

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Author

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Note

¹Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems—www.casas.org

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