



Investigating Iranian TEFL Teachers' Perspective towards the Relationship between SLA Research and ELT

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating Iranian TEFL teachers' perspective toward the relationship between SLA research and ELT. The sample of this study consisted of 80 female and male TEFL teachers at different institutes and schools in the city of Tehran. The main instrument was a questionnaire designed by Nassaji (2012). It enabled researcher to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings of this study reveal information on different areas like teachers' familiarity with SLA research, the reason for lack of interest, and the main source they appeal to get the required information for their professional development. The findings indicate that the pedagogical ambience is far from ideal as far as teachers' involvement with SAL research is concerned. The pedagogical implication is that to improve the quality of EFL teaching and learning we are bound to bridge the gap between EFL Teachers and SLA Research.

Keywords: Relationship between research and pedagogy, SLA research, Teachers' perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Relationship between research and practice has evoked a debate for a long time. This has led to this fundamental question whether researchers must justify themselves to practitioners or practitioners to researchers. This debate has also influenced the field of applied linguistics, leading to pervasive debates and discussions among teachers as well as researchers about the role and utility of SLA researches in language pedagogy.

Some SLA researchers have expressed their

concern regarding applicability of their findings to language pedagogy. Scholar like Hatch (1978) goes even further to claim that incorporating the findings from the realm of research to realm of pedagogy often necessitated a quantum leap in logic which needed to be taken into consideration seriously. Some scholars were even more cynical regarding the ultimate usefulness of SLA research in teaching and learning language. McDonough and McDonough (1990), for example were skeptical about this issue and stated this skepticism by the possibility of dichotomization between theory and practice or creating two sepa-

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rate worlds; one in which teachers talk to teachers about techniques, the other in which researchers and theorists talk to each other about research and practice (p.103). Block (2000) states that 'much of what is done under the rubric of SLA is not specifically relevant to language teachers and is not really applicable to the day-to-day language teaching and learning which goes in the classroom' (p. 130). Another point in this regard has been put forward by Klein (1998), for example that SLA research has always wanted to discover the underlying principles of SLA, and that such theory-building endeavors have had little influence on L2 teaching in terms of changing teachers' course preparations, materials development, and the way learners learn and process materials in the classroom.

Because of the intervention of plethora of factors involved, the field of SLA has inevitably witnessed accumulation of knowledge and practice from the early years to the present time (Hashemi, 2011). It can be claimed that theories of language teaching and pedagogy immersed as early as the first teacher started pondering about the different possibilities in teaching language and according to Savignon (2007, p. 207) this can be traced back to centuries ago if we acknowledge the fact that "language teachers have been with us as long as there have been languages".

Over the years there has been good deal of disagreement among scholars over the relationship between SLA research and language pedagogy. According to Block (2000), the bane of the contention seems to be the lack of communication between second language acquisition researchers and language teachers, a point which is refuted by Kumaravadivelu (2003) in his post-method era in pedagogy. The reason for this unbridgeable gap might be the assumed inapplicability and inappropriateness of SLA research findings to day to day language teaching and learning which goes on in classrooms from language teachers' perspective. The other reason might be the dichotomized role assumed to be played by either the researchers or the teachers

with either one sticking to their ground with researchers living in the ivory tower and occupying the higher ground of theorizing about the EFL with little concern about the practicality or relevance of their pure theorization to down to earth world of pedagogy on the one hand, and as Kumaravadivelu put it, teachers or practitioners who are expected to use those theories handed down to them from the lofty and seemingly unreachable position of the researchers and stick to them like sacrosanct and holy scripture. However in reality one can see that the field is far from this crystallized dichotomy. In fact, according to Kumaravadivelu, one of the myths which led to the death of method was this simplistic assumption about these roles. Teachers do not obediently and necessarily accept the theories or theoretical concepts put forward by the researchers in the Journals and books. Though this by no means can be a pretext for teachers to avoid studying the related journals in their field and keeping themselves updated, the matter of fact is that the situation seems to be less than ideal as far as familiarity with the latest developments in the related are concerned.

Scholars like Ellis (1997) and Crookes (1997) doubt the relevance and applicability of SLA studies in pedagogical practice pointing to available professional and theoretical chasm between language teachers and applied linguists. Similarly, Nassaji (2012) cautions against the simplistic assumption about the straightforwardness of the relationship between SLA studies and language pedagogy as well as the utility and practicality of such research for classroom teaching. The same caution has been expressed by Hatch (1987) who advocates that any amassed research result must be applied with caution. Perhaps because of this, many scholars like Block (2000), Crooks and Ellis have been unanimous on this point that although SLA research has made significant progress, there is little that teacher can rely on in terms of practical issues.

The inevitable consequence of the points mentioned is that although a bulk of research has been done in different realms of language teach-

ing and pedagogy, consensus about these discoveries may be far more difficult to achieve. So, why do language teachers need to know about theory, recent advances in applied linguistics and, SLA, especially if it seems improbable that we can reach agreement about how language learning and acquisition take place? McLaughlin (1987) states that the function of applied linguistics is to "help us understand and organize the data of experience...bring[ing] meaning to what is otherwise chaotic and inscrutable" (p. 7). According to Ellis (1985) every teacher already has a philosophy of language learning, but many teachers may have never articulated what that theory is (p. 2). It might be due to this point that some second/foreign language teachers become involved in SLA research out of a desire to improve second/foreign language teaching because they see SLA as potentially playing an important role in second language pedagogy (Crookes, 1997, p. 93).

Swift growing body of research in SLA has also mounted this concern whether we should apply these research findings in language pedagogy without critical appraisal because as Nassaji (2012) states, although majority of studies in SLA are fruitful for language pedagogy, some of them are heavily constrained in many ways including their scope and methodology. Besides scope and methodology, Cook (1999) proposed a more comprehensive body of guiding principles for practicality/impracticality of research in SLA in teaching. According to Cook, to be applicable in teaching English, SLA researchers must consider the following points about their research:

1. The research to be applied should be valid (i.e., have a sound methodology, adequate data, and sound conclusions).
2. The research must be ethical (e.g., it is not appropriate for the research to have exploited learners by placing them in a context where they are not expected to succeed).
3. The research must be of sufficient generality to allow for extrapolation to different contexts.

4. There needs to be a match between the language(s) investigated in the research and the language being taught.

5. There needs to be a match between the profiles of the learners being investigated and the profiles of the students being taught.

6. The coverage of the language learning areas needs to accord with the instructional goals.

Regarding these six principles, it is not surprising to face the current situation in teaching in which very few, if any SLA research is taken seriously by the teachers. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the reason for this is that teaching is not simply transferring information to target learners as it used to be the case on the heydays of audio-lingual methods, a point emphasized by Kumaravadivelu (2003) in his discussion on the myth and death of method

What was mentioned might be augmented in the EFL context in a country like Iran with its unique features and insular conditions. Therefore, based on what mentioned, this study attempts to address the significant dilemma and aims at investigating Iranian TEFL teachers' perspective towards the relationship between SLA research and ELT and elucidating the potential bridges between these two camps. Accordingly, the following questions, studied by Nassaji (2012) in an ESL situation in Canada and EFL situation in Turkey, are aimed to be addressed in Iran and with Iranian EFL teachers. The niche which can be considered to fill in this research is the special condition in which Iranian EFL teachers find themselves in Iran due to insular situation of the country:

Q1: To what extent are EFL teachers familiar with SLA research?

Q2: How easily can EFL teachers access SLA research, and what sources do they consult?

Q3: To what extent do EFL teachers read research articles and, if they do not, what are their reasons?

Q4: How do EFL teachers judge the rele-

vance and usefulness of SLA research for classroom teaching?

Q5: What are EFL teachers' expectations of SLA research?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 80 male and female qualified practicing EFL teachers with the age span of 24-50 teaching at different institutes and schools in the city of Tehran. They were chosen randomly. The participation of the teachers was voluntary solicited through personal contact. The identity of the participants remained anonymous. Along with the questionnaire, they were informed of the purpose of the study and also notified them that their participation in the research would be voluntary. They included both TEFL and non-TEFL graduates from different universities and taught English at varying levels. They taught both children and adult learners. They had a range of teaching experience, from two years to 23 years, with a mean of 10 years. The main criterion for teaching in advanced level was the years of experience rather than merely graduating in TEFL.

Instrumentation

The main instrument adopted in the present research was a questionnaire designed by Nassaji (2012). It sought information on the sex, years of experience, the qualification obtained besides TEFL if possible, the level and learners taught. It was divided to different groups seeking information on different areas on EFL teachers' opinion and the rationale for choosing a particular answer. It contained both qualitative information through Lickert scales and qualitative information through open-ended questions.

Data collection procedure

In order to collect data, 80 written questionnaires were distributed to 100 teachers. The questionnaire was designed to maximize eliciting both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data were obtained through close-ended ques-

tions, while quantitative data were obtained through open-ended questions. The data gathered through the close-ended questionnaire items were analyzed quantitatively using frequency and percentages. Additional qualitative analyses were conducted on the open-ended questions. Since the respondents to the questionnaire were TEFL teachers, the English version of the questionnaire was used rather than the translated version.

Data analysis

Reliability Statistics

The SLA Research questionnaire with 26 questions in this study was checked in a pilot study with 35 EFL teachers with similar characteristics of the main participants of this study to estimate its reliability index. The results of this piloting study showed that the reliability of the questionnaire with this sample was estimated .78 through Cronbach Alpha which met the minimum requirement.

Investigating the First Research Question

The first research question of the current study asked to what extent teachers are familiar with SLA research. The frequency and percentage of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire were calculated and are provided in Table 1. It indicates that 53 of the teachers (66.3%) mentioned that they were familiar with SLA research, therefore, leaving 27 out of 80 teachers (33.8%) stating that they were not familiar with SLA research.

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage of Teachers' Familiarity with SLA Research

Choice	Frequency	Percent
No	27	33.8
Yes	53	66.3
Total	80	100.0

To investigate whether EFL teachers' familiarity with SLA research is statistically mean-

ingful or not a goodness-of-fit Chi-square was run. The result is shown in Table 2 and Table 3

Table 2
Chi-square Goodness-of-fit test for EFL Teachers' Familiarity with SLA Research

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
unfamiliar	27	40.0	-13.0
familiar	53	40.0	13.0
Total	80		

Table 3
The Result of Chi-square Goodness-of-fit Test for EFL Teachers' Familiarity with SLA Research

	Familiarity
Chi-Square	8.450 ^a
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.004

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 40.0.

A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicates that there was significant difference in the proportion of those who were familiar and those who were unfamiliar with SLA research identified in the current study with the expected 50% which was hypothesized quite leniently to be the case, $X^2_{(1, n=80)} = 8.45$, $p \leq .00$. Therefore, EFL teachers were significantly and meaningfully familiar with SLA research.

Investigating the Second Research Question

The second research question of the present study inquired how easily the EFL teachers could access SLA research, and what sources they consulted. In order to answer this research question, the teachers' responses to the item of the questionnaire concerning the accessibility to SLA research was analyzed. Table 4 shows that 62 teachers (77.5%) said that they could easily access SLA research, nonetheless 18 (out of 80) teachers (22.5%) mentioned that they did not have easy access to SLA research. This result can be compared to Nassaji's (2012) result based on which 82% of the participants (including both EFL and ESL teachers combined) had easy access to SAL journals. This is a quite acceptable level for EFL teachers in Iran, considering the

facilities and accessibility of these kinds of journal. In fact, it seems better than one could expect.

Table 4
Frequency and Percentage of Teachers' Accessibility to SLA Research

Accessibility	Frequency	Percentage
Access	62	77.5%
No Access	18	22.5%
Total	80	100.0%

To find out if the degree of EFL teachers' accessibility to SLA research is statistically meaningful or not, a Chi-square goodness-of-fit was run. The result is shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 5.
Chi-square goodness-of-fit Test for EFL Teachers' Accessibility for SLA Research

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
access	62	40.0	22.0
no access	18	40.0	-22.0
Total	80		

Table 6
The Result of Chi-square goodness-of-fit Test for EFL Teachers' Accessibility for SLA Research

	Accessibility
Chi-Square	24.200 ^a
df	1
Asymp. sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 40.0.

A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicates that there was significant difference in the proportion accessibility and no accessibility to SLA research identified in the current study with the expected 50% which was hypothesized quite leniently to be the case, $X^2_{(1, n=80)} = 24.20$, $p \leq .00$. Therefore, EFL teachers were significantly and meaningfully had access to SLA research.

The second part of question 2 asked what sources the teachers consulted. The results in Table 7 indicate that the most frequent source that the respondents mentioned in the questionnaire was the 'Internet' selected by 58 teachers

(41.7%). In the case of ESL teachers in Nassaji's study who were in Canada, this figure is 93% which shows a staggering difference. This is not surprising regarding the fact Iran has one the slowest but most expensive Internet services in the world. The second most frequent one was 'Books' chosen by 47 teachers (33.8%). This is another shocking difference between this study and Nassaji's. In his study, the percentage of accessibility for the books was as high as 98% which is totally incomparable with the present statistics. This might be due to deplorably low level of reading in general in Iran. And the least frequent source was 'Journals' selected by 34 (out of 139) teachers (24.5% vs. 51% in Nassaji's study).

Table 7
Frequency and Percentage of Sources to Access SLA Research Articles

Sources	Frequency	Percentage
Books	47	33.8%
Journals	34	24.5%
Internet	58	41.7%
Total	139	100.0%

Investigating the Third Research Question

The third research question of the current study asked to what extent EFL teachers read research articles and, if not, what their reasons were. In order to answer this research question, the teachers' responses to the item of the questionnaire dealing with the extent the teachers read research articles were computed and provided in Table 4 showing that only 6 teachers (7.5%) stated that they never read research article which is near the statistic in Nassaji's study in which 3% of EFL teachers and 2% of ESL teacher said they never read ESL research. similar low frequency was observed at the other end of the spectrum with only 4 (out of 80 or 5%) stating that they always read research article and again a similar statistic is seen in Nassaji's finding in which 5% of ESL and 0% of ESL teachers said that they always read ESL research. Between these two extreme points fell 28 respondents (35.0%) choosing 'Rarely' (compared with 36% of EFL and 60% of ESL teachers in Nassaji's study); 27 (33.8%) opt-

ing for 'Sometimes'; and 15 teachers (18.8%) choosing 'Often' to indicate the frequency of their reading research articles.

Summing up the near options in the Lickert scales in the previous section to have a better understanding of the frequency of EFL teachers reading research articles, it can be said that in general, 34 (42.5%) teachers mentioned that they never or rarely read research articles, whereas only 19 (23.8%) teachers (out of 80) stated that they often or always read research articles showing that the balance is tipped in the favor of those EFL teachers who do not read research articles, a sad point.

Table 8
Frequency and Percentage of Choices to Read SLA Research Articles

Choice	Frequency	Percentage
Never	6	7.5%
Rarely	28	35.0%
Sometimes	27	33.8%
Often	15	18.8%
Always	4	5.0%
Total	80	100.0%

The second part of question 3 inquired what the teachers' reasons were in not reading SLA research articles. Analyzing the teachers' answers to this section of the questionnaire (see Table 9) revealed that 72 teachers offered their reasons for not reading SLA research articles. According to Table 5, the most frequent reason for not reading SLA research articles was not having enough time to do so mentioned with 22 (30.5%) frequencies. This can be contrasted with 73% of EFL teachers and 93% of ESL teachers in Nassaji's study which seems to be poles apart with the result of the current study. The second most frequent reason was not having access to sources to read them stated with 15 (20.8%) cases. The third most frequent cause was lack of interest in SLA research articles expressed with 13 (18.0%) of the respondents. This can be compared with 23% of EFL teachers and 33% of ESL teachers in Nassaji's study. The fourth most frequent reason for not reading research articles was difficulty

level of SLA research articles mentioned with 12 (16.6%) of the teachers. This can be compared with 37% of ESL teachers and 43% of EFL teachers in Nassaji's study which seems very strange. The fifth most frequent reason was perceived uselessness of SLA research articles cho-

sen with 6 (8.3%) of the teachers which is very similar to EFL and ESL teacher in Nassaji's study. And finally the least frequent reason for not reading research articles was other reasons stated with 4 (5.5%) of the teachers.

Table 9***Most Frequent Reasons Not Reading SLA Research Articles***

No.	Reason	Frequency	Percentage
1	No time	22	30.5%
2	No access	15	20.8%
3	Not interested	13	18.5%
4	Very difficult	12	16.6%
5	Not useful	6	8.3%
6	Others	4	5.3%
	Total	72	100.0%

Investigating the Fourth Research Question

The fourth research question of the present study inquired how the teachers judged the relevance and usefulness of SLA research for classroom teaching. The frequency and percentage of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire were computed and are represented in Table 10. It shows that one of the teachers (1.3%) mentioned that SLA research was 'not useful at all' for classroom teaching; but 23 of the teachers (28.8%) regarded SLA research 'Somewhat useful', summed up, these two options reach to 30% which can be contrasted to 60% with EFL and ESL teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing that ESL research was not relevant to EFL teachers in Nassaji (2012). In the present study, 38 of the teachers (47.5%) stated that SLA research was 'Useful' for classroom teaching. Eighteen teachers (22.5%) selected believed that the research in SLA was 'Very useful'. Summing up useful and very useful options we reach 70% which is near the statistics reported by Nassaji with 79% of EFL and ESL teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing that knowing about SLA research improves second language teaching.

Table 10***Frequency and Percentage of Teachers' Opinions about Usefulness of SLA Research in Teaching***

Choice	Frequency	Percentage
Not useful at all	1	1.3
Somewhat useful	23	28.8
Useful	38	47.5
Very useful	18	22.5
Total	80	100.0

Investigating the fifth Research Question

The fifth research question of this study was what the EFL teachers' expectations of SLA research are. The main reason for this part as expressed by Nassaji (2012) was that in order to improve the relationship between SLA research and language pedagogy, it is important to know what teachers expect to gain from SLA research and what topics they consider important to be investigated. To answer this research question, content analysis was done on the teachers' responses to this open question.

The majority of the teachers wrote that they expected to learn the more modern teaching methods and practical techniques from second language research to facilitate the teaching process and solve the learners' problems. This seems to be in line with the majority of the teachers' in

Nassaji (2012) who indicated that SLA research should focus on identifying effective instructional strategies. However few of the teachers stated that they had passed TTC course run specifically by the institute where they were teaching and whatever they learned in that course met all the requirement of teaching in that institute and consequently they felt no need to expand their pedagogical knowledge by reading SLA articles, quite a utilitarian and pragmatic attitude.

Discussion

The findings of the present study about the access of EFL teachers to SLA research articles in which the Internet, books, and journals respectively were the most popular means of getting information is in contrast with Crookes and Arakaki's (1999) finding which was conducted in an intensive English program in the USA. The participants in that study were 19 English as a second language (ESL) teachers who stated that they used teaching experience, consultation with colleagues, and pre-service training and workshops to get the needed information. However, many reported that they do not consult published research. As stated by Nassaji (2012), this is an indication that teachers' perception about research is context dependent and is affected by contextual factors. This is confirmed by the difference we find in the study reported by McDonough and McDonough (1990) who found that most teachers believed that they made use of research findings in their teaching and that they had opportunities to conduct research in their institutions. This finding in turn is in opposition to Borg (2009) in which most of the teachers did not feel involved in SLA research because they viewed research as an activity that is highly objective, test hypotheses, and produce true and valid results. Borg also found little evidence for teachers' engagement with research.

EFL teachers' perception about the usefulness of SLA research in the present study is in line with what Nassaji (2012) in which most teachers believed that knowing about SLA research is useful and that it can improve L2 teaching. Howev-

er, a high percentage indicated that the knowledge they gain from teaching experience is more relevant to their teaching practices than the knowledge they gain from research. This agrees with what EFL teachers stated in this present study who believed that whatever they needed to teach successfully they had learned in the specific TTC course in the institute and through their day to day teaching experience.

The other finding of the present study about the not having enough time as the reason for not reading SLA research is in line with Nassaji (2012) in which along with lack of interest, difficulty of the research article, lack of time was the very reason for not reading SLA research. One of the reasons for the lack of interest might be the point Ellis (2001) mentioned that important progress has been made in SLA, but 'much of the research is no longer directly concerned with pedagogic issues' (p. 45). However, the results about lack or shortage of time is not surprising and confirms the concerns that have been expressed in the field of teacher education in general (e.g. Fullan & Steigelbauer, 1991; Hargreaves, 1990), and in the field of SLA in particular (Crookes, 1997). Therefore, it can be emphasized that as Nassaji (2012) mentioned, to improve the situation, language teaching institutions should consider ways in which teachers can be provided with the necessary time and resources to consult professional and research literature to improve their teaching.

The problem of difficulty of SLA research stated in 16% of the cases in the present study is another concern for EFL teachers in other studies. This problem has been discussed by some SLA scholars in the field such as Brown (1991), Crookes (1997), and Ellis (1997a) stating that the language used by these scholars to communicate with each other seems difficult to follow and communicate by most of the EFL teachers. The inevitable consequence is the unbridgeable gap which has separated the two parties.

To ameliorate the situation, scholars have made some suggestions to improve the communication between EFL teachers and SLA re-

searchers. Crookes (1997), for example, proposed that researchers should use a more informal format of reporting data. He also proposed conducting studies that follow a qualitative design rather than a quantitative design. Hedgcock (2002) proposed facilitating teachers' access to the shared knowledge of the discipline through increasing their ability to read texts with awareness and critical reflection. Brown (1991) suggested increasing teachers' knowledge of statistics. He argued that many studies on language learning and teaching use statistics; therefore, in order to understand these studies, teachers need to have some knowledge of statistics.

In conclusion, it can be stated that though many teachers believe they do not feel the need to read SLA research, reading and being familiar with it can play a role in professional improvement. However, it must be kept in mind that bridging the gap between EFL teachers and SLA research needs the incorporation of many parties but regarding the positive and beneficial effect one can expect in wider scope, it is worth the effort.

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