

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION IN TESL

Teachers as interpreters of research results

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There is a longstanding criticism that academic research is not sufficiently utilized in language teaching. This so-called gap between research and practice is well documented. For example, Borg's (2009) study with English language teachers from 13 countries identified a low level of research utilization. Many teachers participating in Borg's study reported that a lack of time, inaccessibility of published research, and a lack of practical relevance of research results were among the key reasons why they did not turn to academic research for professional learning and development. Borg concluded that research utilization by teachers was a rarity in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Since the time of Borg's study, we have seen many initiatives to make research more accessible to teachers. Such initiatives include publishing research articles in online open-access journals, organizing research-based webinars for teachers' professional learning, and supporting teachers to attend academic conferences so that they can learn about latest research in their area(s) of teaching. Yet, a recent international study that investigated language educators' exposure to research has painted a picture which is "rather bleak" (Marsden & Kasprovicz, 2017, p. 613). Against this backdrop, I present some insights drawn from my own studies of knowledge mobilization in TESL. First, I define knowledge mobilization; second, I briefly introduce two of my projects; then I describe five actors in successful knowledge mobilization. Finally, I underscore the important role of teachers as interpreters of research results.

Knowledge Mobilization

There is a growing interest in the dissemination and utilization of academic research. The primary goal is to make academic research more accessible and usable for practitioners in various social fields so that research can have a positive impact on people's lives. There are a few slightly different terms—for example, research dissemination, research exchange, and knowledge mobilization—that are used to describe this kind of work. In Canada, the term knowledge mobilization (Kmb) is preferred. The government of Canada is committed to increasing the impact of research and improving the quality of life. The government defines Kmb as a reciprocal and complementary exchange of research-based knowledge between researchers and practitioners, not just within academia but in the greater society (SSHRC, 2019). In my work, I build on the Canadian model of Kmb and ask the question: "How can research-produced knowledge be better 'mobilized' among users such as practicing

educators, policy-makers and the public communities” (Fenwick & Farrell, 2012, p. 1)? More specifically, my work is concerned primarily with how language teachers interpret and utilize academic research.

Project I: How do teachers read research?

In this study, I explored language teachers’ reading of research by analyzing their responses to a selected research article published in a peer-reviewed journal. As part of this study, twelve in-service language teachers joined a wiki-based reading and discussion group. The participants read the research article and exchanged opinions through threaded discussions on the wiki. These discussions were the first source of data for this study. The second source of data was individual in-depth interviews conducted with the participants at the end of the wiki project. While a detailed discussion of teachers’ reading-responses is clearly beyond the scope of this essay, I briefly highlight the importance of their prior learning and experience in how they read and interpreted research. Generally, the participants drew upon their past experiences related to the subject matter of the research article in question. These experiences—which could come from pre-service teacher education courses, practicum, or classroom interactions with students—had a great influence on how they interpreted the messages contained in the research article (see Anwaruddin, 2016 for details).

Project II: How do teachers utilize research?

My second project investigated how teachers utilize academic research for pedagogical innovation or improvement. Language educators who participated in this project chose a research article from a peer-reviewed journal, read the article carefully, and integrated its findings or recommendations into their own curriculum. After teaching their research-informed curriculum, they wrote an essay reflecting on their experiences. I collected their essays and published them as an edited book (Anwaruddin, 2019). The educators’ firsthand accounts of research utilization were illuminating. They showed that the uptake and use of research evidence by practitioners is more complex than a linear transfer of research evidence from one place to another. The use of research is complex because research-based knowledge has to compete with other forms of knowledge in the context of professional practice. What educators could and could not do with research-evidence was greatly influenced by their contexts. They used their professional wisdom to adapt research-based proposals to suit the needs of their students within the cultural and material environment of their teaching. Thus, one important lesson from my project was the importance of contextualization as a strategy to make research meaningful for practice.

Understanding Knowledge Mobilization in TESL

The utilization of academic research in diverse professional contexts is a very complex and difficult endeavour. A major part of this difficulty is that the meaning of research results needs to be actively constructed, approved by other social actors, and then put into practice. The meaning that the researcher tries to transmit through research articles is almost always transformed by practitioners. These practitioners, e.g., teachers, make provisional decisions about evidence use and adjust their practice to provide the best possible service to their clientele. Therefore, I use the following illustration to underscore the multiple actors who interact and influence one another in the work of research utilization.

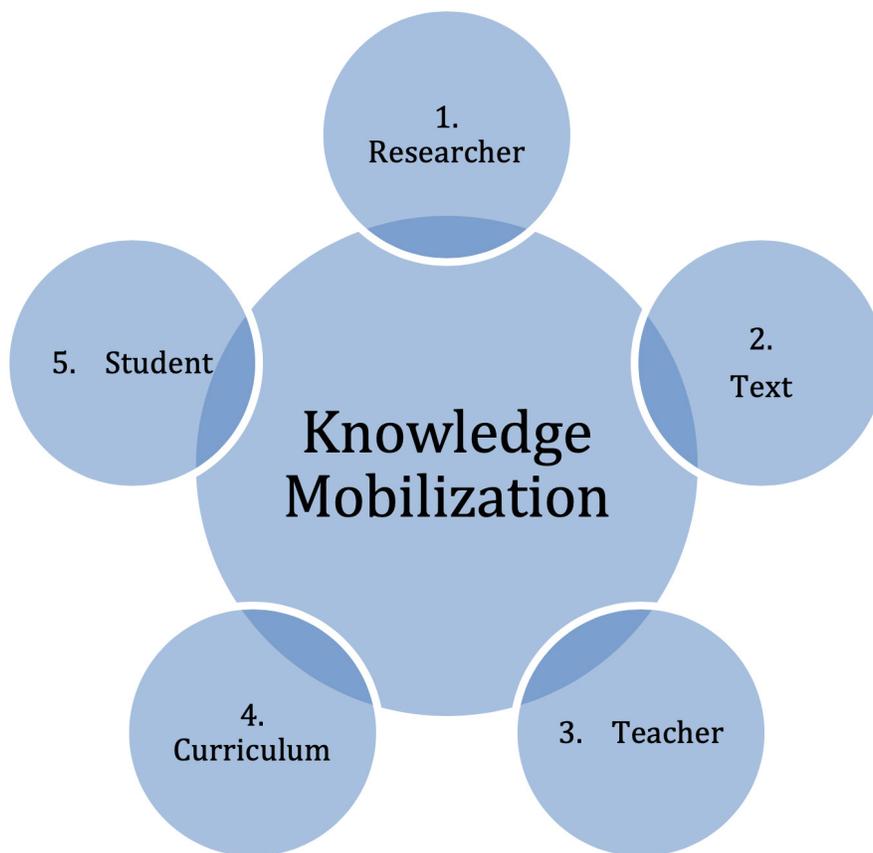


Figure 1: Five actors in knowledge mobilization

Below I briefly describe these actors whose importance and role in knowledge mobilization are variable. The list, therefore, is sequential, not hierarchical.

Researcher: Researchers are the first actor because the process of knowledge mobilization begins with them. The researcher conducts studies following systematic and discipline-specific methods of data collection and analysis. The primary goal of such studies is to construct new knowledge that will be helpful for the community at large. The kind of

knowledge generated through systematic research is commonly described as propositional knowledge. While the knowledge is generated in a *local context*, the researcher presents it in a way that will appeal to a broad readership, using a *global tone* and including implications for use in diverse contexts.

Text: The second actor is the research text, e.g., articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, or chapters in edited books. These kinds of text are important conduits to transfer knowledge from one context to another. However, they are also a potential obstacle to knowing the truth. I am saying this because text has no meaning until it is read by readers who bring their own worldviews and prior experiences to the text and thus actively construct its meanings. For such complexities of the reading process, the meaning a particular reader makes may be significantly different from the meaning intended by the researcher.

Teacher: Due to the problem of text interpretation mentioned above, perhaps the most important actor in the mobilization of educational research is the teacher. This actor decides whether or not a particular piece of research will be relevant to pedagogy, and if so, how the research should be integrated into the curriculum. However, this kind of decision is hardly made by the teacher alone. The teacher's previous education (i.e., influence of teacher educators), teaching experience, conversations with colleagues, and availability of relevant resources are among the factors that influence the decision. Therefore, the teacher's interpretation of research and the decision to act (or not) on such interpretation are collective.

Curriculum: Curriculum affects the teacher's ability to utilize research for pedagogical innovation. I use the term curriculum broadly to refer to both written guidelines and unwritten expectations that dictate what to teach and how to organize the educational experiences of students. It is not just an official document prescribed by authorities such as a ministry of education or a school board. Curriculum also involves material and cultural contexts of a teacher's workplace. In one context, a teacher may have professional autonomy to revise instructional contents and assessment procedures, while in another context, the teacher may be required to teach to the test. Therefore, curriculum is a critical factor in research utilization.

Student: The last but not the least important actor is the student. In a service-oriented profession such as teaching, professionals are concerned primarily with the education and well-being of students. Teachers generate important knowledge through their everyday interactions with students, and such knowledge can make important contributions to the disciplinary foundation of the teaching profession. However, it is not a primary goal for most teachers because they often lack the time and resources to report their practical knowledge back to the larger community. Thus, at a practical level, the teacher is likely to utilize academic research if and only if it is deemed beneficial for their students' learning.

Teachers' Research Literacy

The five actors briefly described above point to the complexities of putting research into practice. Perhaps for this reason, a one-way transfer of research from university to school has proven ineffective. As the contemporary approaches to knowledge mobilization suggest (Fenwick & Farrell, 2012), it is reasonable to support collaboration between researchers and educators so that both parties can learn and benefit from each other. To make such collaboration effective, teachers need to possess necessary knowledge and skills to critically analyze research results. Only then will they be able to have meaningful dialogues with researchers—either in a face-to-face setting or through reading research texts such as journal articles. Therefore, I suggest that programs of pre-service teacher education and in-service training take necessary initiatives to support language teachers' research literacy. By “research literacy” I mean the ability to critically evaluate research evidence and judiciously utilize its recommendations. It also involves “willingness to engage with research in order to assess its utility and ripeness for adaptation to context” (Waring & Evans, 2015, p. 18). This kind of literacy should be an integral part of teaching as a complex set of activities.

Conclusion

Based on the insights drawn from my work with educators, I believe that there is no “ideal” reader of educational research. All readings are partial and contingent upon the reader's background, prior knowledge, and contextual realities. Therefore, the aim of my argument in this essay is not to romanticize teachers' ways of reading research. What I have attempted to do is to highlight some complexities in connecting academic research and pedagogical practice. To make such connections stronger, I recommend that teachers develop and possess what I have described as research literacy. This is not the ability to conduct classroom-based action research, which deserves a different discussion. Instead, research literacy is an ability and willingness to assess academic research and wisely utilize it for pedagogical innovation. Pre-service teacher preparation programs and professional organizations such as TESL Ontario can play an important role in fostering such research literacy. This kind of literacy is necessary for language teachers to become informed interpreters of research results and to mobilize knowledge in pedagogically transformative ways.

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