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Enhancing the Reading of Peer-Reviewed Research Articles in the Teaching English as a Second Language Community

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Although reading research can enhance instruction, this is not a frequent activity among adult ESL instructors (Borg, 2010). To fill this gap, we explored instructors' engagement with research; applied linguists' and instructors' conceptions of teacher-friendly, peer-reviewed research articles; and academics' commitment to their dissemination. Twenty-three academics completed a survey; eight adult ESL instructors read three articles, completed a questionnaire, and participated in a focus group interview. Despite a strong commitment to sharing their research with practitioners, academics in this study reported a number of constraints in their efforts to do so. We discuss differences in participants' perspectives and provide suggestions for academics to enhance practitioners' engagement with the research literature.

Même si la lecture de travaux de recherche peut améliorer l'enseignement, peu d'enseignants d'ALS s'y mettent (Borg, 2010). Pour combler cette lacune, nous nous sommes penchés sur la question de l'implication des enseignants dans la recherche; les conceptions qu'ont les linguistes appliqués et les enseignants d'articles de recherche revus par les pairs et faciles à intégrer en salle de classe; et la mesure dans laquelle les chercheurs se préoccupaient de la diffusion de leur travail. Vingt-trois chercheurs ont complété un sondage, et huit enseignants d'ALS ont lu trois articles, complété un questionnaire et participé à une entrevue collective. Malgré un engagement ferme visant la diffusion de leur recherche parmi les praticiens, les chercheurs ont évoqué plusieurs obstacles qui limitaient leurs efforts. Nous discutons des différences dans les perspectives des participants et offrons des suggestions aux chercheurs voulant stimuler la lecture et l'intégration de leur recherche par les praticiens.

Introduction

In the general education research literature, there has been much discussion of the potential benefits of teachers' engagement with research (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cordingley, 2008; Hargreaves, 1999; Levin, 2004), and the ways in which research can be made more accessible (e.g., Davies, 2000; Wikeley, 1998; Zeuli & Tiezzi, 1993). Extensive research in primary and secondary school contexts has further focused on factors that hinder teachers' engagement with research (e.g., Hannan, Enright, & Ballard, 2000; Sá, Li, & Faubert, 2011; Shkedi, 1998; Zeuli, 1994). Although some strategies have been implemented to facilitate access and reduce barriers (e.g., open Internet access to journal articles and research summaries), these initiatives appear to have had little impact on instructor engagement with current research

(Borg, 2010). The gap between research and practice appears to be widening (Korthagen, 2007), and the utilization of research in both policy and practice remains inadequate (Cooper & Levin, 2010).

Several empirical studies exploring teachers' perceptions of second language acquisition (SLA) research have been conducted, but in limited contexts and in some cases with very small samples (e.g., Allison & Carey, 2007; Bartels, 2003; Borg, 2007; Borg & Liu, 2013; Mady, 2012, 2013; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; Nassaji, 2012; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). To our knowledge, only Allison and Carey (2007) and Tavakoli and Howard (2012) examined English as a *second* language (ESL) teachers' perceptions of language teaching research; all other studies on the research engagement of teachers in adult English language programs have been conducted in English as a *foreign* language (EFL) settings or in combined second/foreign language contexts (e.g., Borg, 2007, 2009; Borg & Liu, 2013; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; Nassaji, 2012; TESOL Research Standing Committee, 2008).

When speakers of other languages study English in an English-speaking country, the context is ESL, and classes typically include students from a wide range of countries who do not share a common language or culture. Conversely, when speakers of languages other than English study English in a country where English is not an official or dominant language, the teaching context is EFL, and these learners generally share many more commonalities. These differing contexts have significant implications for teaching and learning; in contrast to their EFL counterparts, ESL students have more exposure to English in the local environment, and a more immediate need for communication skills to facilitate their settlement and adaptation. Based on the recent results of a national evaluation of federally funded ESL programs, the Canadian government highlighted the need to "explore the introduction of professional development opportunities for [English as a Second Language] teachers to improve instructional practice" in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs across the country (CIC, 2010, p. xi). More contextually relevant studies of ESL instructors' engagement with research in Canada are needed to inform and support this initiative.

Findings from previous studies of ESL and EFL language teachers' research engagement have been limited by the use of surveys with a restricted focus and as few as six questions (e.g., Allison & Carey, 2007); the conflation of engagement *with* (i.e., reading) and *in* (i.e., doing) research (e.g., Allison & Carey, 2007; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012); and limited or unclear response options (e.g., How often do you read published research? *rarely / sometimes / often* [Borg, 2007]; "How much time do you spend studying research findings? *very much / to a good extent / somewhat / not very much / not at all*" [Tavakoli & Howard, 2012, p. 235]). Moreover, most dealt with perceptions of research in general and did not specifically explore engagement with peer-reviewed, applied linguistics research publications (but see Nassaji, 2012). Only one study (Bartels, 2003) investigated both language teachers' (n = 3) and academics' (n = 3) reactions to second language (L2) journal articles.

To our knowledge, no single study has extensively examined instructors' as well as academics' conceptions of and engagement with peer-reviewed publications of teaching English as a second language (TESL) research within an adult ESL context. Given the above considerations, the goal of this study was to explore the features of peer-reviewed teacher-friendly[1] research publications from the perspectives of both academics and adult ESL instructors within the Canadian context. We expanded the scope of previous research by exploring applied linguists' commitment to teacher-friendly research publications, the barriers and constraints that affect them, and ways to promote ESL practitioners' engagement with

teacher-friendly research publications.

Literature Review

ESL Instructors' Engagement *with* Research Publications

Factors affecting engagement. Engagement with research publications by second language instructors has been limited for a number of reasons. Twenty-five years ago, McDonough and McDonough (1990) reported that their 34 participants from an International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language conference found it physically difficult to locate research relevant to their interests, and noted that it was often difficult to understand, conducted in unfamiliar or irrelevant contexts, or presented with complex statistical analyses. Borg (2007) reported similar responses from 50 in-service EFL teachers in Turkey regarding their research engagement. Of the 31% of respondents who indicated that they did not read "published research", 73% attributed their lack of engagement to insufficient time, 60% to lack of practical classroom applications provided, 47% to lack of interest in research, and 7% to difficulty understanding published articles. Although 86% of all respondents to Borg's survey agreed that they had access to research books and journals; 69% agreed that they had opportunities to learn about current research; and 60% agreed that teachers were provided with support to attend English language teaching conferences, only 38% agreed that teachers engaged in discussions of research in their institutions. Borg's participants were not asked to what extent teachers read peer-reviewed research articles; questions instead pertained to unspecified "research books and journals" (p. 737).

In a similar study, the TESOL Research Standing Committee (2008) elicited survey responses on research engagement from 1,950 members (40% language teachers; 21% university lecturers /professors; 20% teacher educators; 2% researchers; 16% other) in 81 countries. When asked how often they "read published language teaching research" (p. 1), 39% responded *often*, 44% *sometimes*, 15% *rarely*, and 2% *never*. For those who reported reading research only *rarely* or *never*, the following deterrents were identified: lack of time (68%), lack of practical implications (45%), inability to access books and journals (21%), difficulty in understanding the research (15%), lack of interest in research (7%), and other (15%). Although the respondents, including university lecturers /professors and researchers, were asked how frequently they conducted research, the survey did not address the dissemination of their research, as we have done in our study.

Borg (2009) surveyed 505 English language teachers in 13 countries. Of the 495 instructors who reported engaging with language teaching research publications, 16% did so *often*, 52% *sometimes*, 29% *rarely*, and 4% *never*. Of those who reported doing so *rarely* or *never* (n = 161), 66% cited lack of time; 42% lack of access to journals and books; 35% lack of recommendations for classroom practice; 21% difficulty in comprehending research publications; and 17% lack of interest in research. Some respondents also questioned the quality of research publications, citing small sample sizes and lack of generalizability, and characterized them as dry, dense, excessively theoretical, and of limited practical application (p. 370). Borg's survey, however, covered a wide range of language teaching publications (books, journals, magazines, newsletters, and Internet-based sources).

Tavakoli and Howard (2012) examined the perspectives of English language teachers in England on the relationship between research and practice. They focused on research activities

(reading an article or chapter, studying research findings, attending research conferences, conducting classroom research) and did not clearly differentiate between engagement with (i.e., reading) and engagement in (i.e., conducting) research. Of the 60 teachers in their study, 50% had read a TESL research article or book chapter in the previous two months, 15% in the preceding six months, 13% in the previous year, 3% in the past two years, and 18% were unable to quantify their reading. Barriers to engaging with research were cited as insufficient time, and lack of familiarity and confidence with the application of research.

Of the 82 ESL teachers in Canada in Nassaji's (2012) study who were asked how often they read SLA research articles, 5% responded *often*, 33% *sometimes*, 60% *rarely*, and 2% *never*. Lack of time (93%), difficulty understanding research articles (43%), limited interest (33%) and access (28%), and lack of practical relevance in research (7%) were barriers noted by participants. Borg and Liu's (2013) survey of college English teachers in China found that 66% of participants read research *occasionally* or *periodically*, 20% *often* or *frequently*, and 14% *never* or *rarely*. Those who reported *rarely* or *never* reading research cited many familiar barriers, including lack of interest, time, and access; limited practical relevance of research; and difficulty reading and understanding it.

Influence and impact of research. Engagement with research by instructors is necessary if it is to impact their practice. When the 34 EFL teachers in McDonough and McDonough's (1990) survey were asked, "[h]ave you ever consciously made use of 'academic applied linguistic research'?", 61% reported that they had (p. 104). However, this question did not provide any specific timeframe or frequency, so this use could have occurred as infrequently as once in the respondents' careers, which ranged from 1 to 21 years. Of the 34 EFL teachers in Borg's (2007) study who reported reading research *sometimes* or *often*, 21% indicated that it had a *fairly strong* influence on their teaching, 50% a *moderate* influence, and 29% a *slight* influence on their classroom practice. The TESOL Research Standing Committee (2008) study indicated that the influence of reading research on participants' professional work was *strong* for 21%, *fairly strong* for 37%, *moderate* for 33%, and only *slight* for 9%. Although Borg (2009) asked respondents "to what extent does the research you read influence your teaching?" (p. 382), their responses were not reported. In Tavakoli and Howard's (2012) study, 50% of the ESL teachers reported that L2 research *often* or *always* supported their everyday practice. These findings suggest that the reading of research has perceived benefits for teachers. Although 84% of ESL teachers in Canada surveyed by Nassaji (2012) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that a knowledge of SLA research enhances classroom teaching and 27% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that it provides practical suggestions related to practice, more than half (55%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that classroom teaching experience was more relevant to their instruction than knowledge acquired from SLA research. Of the college English teachers in Borg and Liu's (2013) study who engaged with research at least *occasionally*, 44% indicated that it affected their work *moderately*, 33% *strongly* or *fairly strongly*, and 23% only *slightly* or *not at all*.

Relationship between Research and Practice

McIntyre (2005) identifies three essential criteria for relating research to practice in general education:

1. the research should generate valid new understandings of realities of classroom teaching and learning;
2. these new understandings should provide a basis for clear indications to classroom teachers

of how they might be able to improve their practice;

3. the new understandings, and the suggestions for improvement to which they lead, should make sufficient sense to teachers to persuade them to take the suggestions seriously and so to engage in dialogue about them. (p. 380)

Many English language teaching journals (e.g, *ELT Journal*, *TESL Canada Journal, TESOL Quarterly*) solicit manuscripts that have clear implications or applications for practice. A clear relationship between research and practice would be expected in TESL professional publications, such as those cited in the TESOL Research Standing Committee (2008) survey. Of respondents in that study who reported reading research *often* or *sometimes*, 84% read academic journals (e.g., *TESOL Quarterly*), 74% books, 69% web-based sources of research, 65% professional magazines (e.g., *Essential Teacher*), 61% professional journals (e.g., *ELT Journal*), 38% newsletters (e.g., *IATEFL SIG Newsletter*), and 7% other sources. These examples might be assumed to be "teacher-friendly".

Characteristics of Empirical, Peer-reviewed, Teacher-friendly Research Publications

Several studies have attempted to identify the characteristics of publications that encourage teachers' engagement with research. Below, we review the literature that contributes to what we term "teacher-friendly research publications", a term we define as being based on relevance, practicality, and accessibility in terms of both comprehensibility and availability. Relevance is one characteristic that provides incentive for reading. In addition, English language teachers value practical ideas to implement in the language classroom (Brumfit, 1983). Borg (2007, 2009) elicited responses from teachers about the importance of characteristics of "good quality research", not specifically teacher-friendly research publications. When asked whether particular features were more or less important, the majority of respondents in the 2007 study rated these among the more important: the results provide ideas for instructors (71%), and the research focuses on practical teaching problems (52%). In Borg's (2009) study, 79% of respondents indicated that research provides teachers with "ideas they can use" (p. 368). Similarly, in the TESOL Research Standing Committee (2008) survey, association members were asked for responses to statements on the characteristics of good quality research. Of the 1,662 respondents, 74% indicated that good-quality research has results that provide teachers with ideas they can use. In addition to relevance, these surveys point to the desire for TESL publications to provide practical ideas for teachers to implement in the language classroom.

The importance of these characteristics was reiterated by 60 adult ESL instructors in England who expressed their views on the value and use of research in their practice (Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). Results suggested that although the instructors valued research (70%), for many of them it lacked practicality and relevance to their needs and concerns. As Belcher (2007) stated earlier, "if the research they do find time to read makes little effort to speak [to teachers], then it should come as no surprise if they have little incentive to read more of it" (p. 397).

Accessibility was cited as a factor in McDonough and McDonough's (1990) survey of 34 adult EFL instructors. Limited availability of research publications and difficulty in understanding the academic content were reported as the main barriers to the participants' reading and use of research. Difficulty understanding research articles was cited as a barrier by participants in Nassaji (2012) and Borg and Liu (2013). Writing style was also highlighted in

Bartels' (2003) study of the extent to which three researchers and three teachers understood, evaluated, and used the information in two short articles (one research-oriented and one teacher-oriented). The teachers preferred the clearly written, succinct, personal style of the teacher-oriented text, while the researchers preferred the organization and qualities of the research-oriented text.

Academic Engagement with the Dissemination of Teacher-friendly Research Publications

Most academic contracts require faculty to engage in teaching, research, and service. Standards for demonstrating the fulfillment of these responsibilities can be very rigorous, leading to a "publish or perish" mentality (Lee, 2014). For many academics, "it is not only the fact of publication but also the journal in which [their] work appears that is of significance in the various accounting schemes used to evaluate and reward [their] work and that of… [their] universities" (Cargill, 2007, p. 394). Despite these constraints, many researchers are committed to communicating knowledge to practitioners in the field, often as an obligation to funding agencies, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's knowledge mobilization initiatives. Paradoxically, the publications that are most accessible to practitioners may not be highly valued for the purposes of academic faculty evaluation and promotion.

Depending on their discipline, academics may engage in two types of scholarly research: traditional research (e.g., peer-reviewed journal publications) and non-traditional research (e.g., applied, interdisciplinary research; collaboration with non-academics; knowledge transfer) (Phaneuf, Lomas, McCutcheon, Church, & Wilson, 2007). Phaneuf and colleagues surveyed representatives of Canadian faculties of medicine, nursing, business, health sciences, and public administration to determine the relative value of these two forms of research for purposes of tenure and promotion. Responses were received from 47 deans and 32 faculty evaluation committee members. Both groups reported that (a) research was valued more highly than either teaching or service in their faculties and (b) traditional research production was significantly more important than non-traditional (applied) research output. On a Likert-type scale (1 = *not important*; 5 = *extremely important*), "first author of an article in a high-impact journal" was rated as 4.28 by deans and 4.33 by committee members, and "frequently-cited article in a peer-review journal" was rated as 4.20 by deans and 4.06 by committee members (p. 508). Of 27 research activities, non-traditional research publication was ranked lowest: "a report specifically designed to influence public policy" received ratings of 2.72 from deans and 2.25 from committee members; and "a plain language document for the public or for decision makers outside the university" was rated as 2.43 by deans and 2.28 by committee members (p. 508).

In our own university department, faculty members are encouraged to include in their annual reports the following information for published articles (in descending order of importance): category ranking, impact factor, or acceptance rates for refereed articles, if available; or the name of the academic/professional organization that published the journal, and its status as a 'flagship' journal, if applicable. Not all of these data, however, are available for the non-traditional research publications that are most accessible to practitioners, and few SLA high-impact journals publish teacher-friendly research articles.

The above research renders understandable the "growing divide between research and pedagogy in our field" (Belcher, 2007, p. 397). Numerous barriers limit instructor engagement with research; implications of research are often poorly or never communicated to practitioners

(Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007); empirical research may lack relevance to practice and/or not be accessible; and, although they may be committed to teacher-friendly research publications, academics face the numerous aforementioned constraints with regard to dissemination. To our knowledge, no studies to date have formally investigated both researchers' and practitioners' conceptualizations of teacher-friendly research publications; TESL academics' commitment to disseminating teacher-friendly research publications; and researchers' and adult ESL instructors' recommendations for promoting instructor engagement with TESL research.

The Present Study

Although empirical, peer-reviewed research can inform teaching practices, it is of no benefit to instruction if ESL teachers are not engaging with it. Little is known about the extent to which academics in TESL/applied linguistics aim to facilitate practitioners' engagement with research. The objectives of this exploratory study were as follows:

1. To identify characteristics of empirical, peer-reviewed, teacher-friendly research publications from the perspectives of academics and ESL practitioners;
2. To determine academics' practical commitment to and dissemination of empirical, peer-reviewed, teacher-friendly research articles;
3. To explore means of enhancing ESL instructors' engagement with research publications.

Method

Participants

Academics. A total of 23 members of the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics (CAAL/ACLA) participated in an online survey designed to address the above objectives. The majority of the TESL, linguistics, and applied linguistics faculty resided in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec. They held positions as assistant professors (24%), associate professors (52%), or professors (24%); 91% had a doctoral degree and 9% a Master's degree. The participants reported a diverse range of research interests: from language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to second language teacher education.

Instructors. Eight adult ESL instructors were purposively selected for a focus group interview. They had excelled academically in a two-year TESL Master's of Education program and were chosen from 42 who had graduated between 2006 and 2010. Their adult ESL teaching experience varied (range = 2-20 years). They were all teaching full-time in adult ESL programs, and represented three large established ESL programs. The participants had all completed courses on research methods and univariate statistics, conducted empirical studies, and either presented or published their findings in peer-review contexts. The rationale for selecting these participants was that they were fairly recent graduates, not enrolled in university courses, yet still considered likely to be engaging with empirical research, given their background and experience. We purposely excluded 13 graduates who were working in institutions in which they were currently engaged in intensive research projects that required them to read the literature.

Procedures

TESL/applied linguistics academics on the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics listserv were invited to read a consent form and, if in agreement, to respond to the academics' survey hosted by *SurveyMonkey*®. Eight former TESL MEd students were invited by email to read three research articles, complete a short questionnaire regarding aspects of the articles, and participate in the follow-up instructors' focus group interview. The instructors' focus group interview, which lasted approximately two hours, was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Academics' survey. The academics' survey consisted of 15 questions, including yes/no, Likert-type, and open-ended responses. The participants were asked to specify their highest level of qualification, current position, and research interests. The remainder of the survey questions were designed to determine if the academics had published any empirical, peer-reviewed research articles in the previous 5 years and, if yes, how many of these articles they considered to be teacher-friendly; the journals in which the teacher-friendly articles were published; the academics' primary goals in disseminating empirical, teacher-friendly research publications; the characteristics of the articles that they considered to be teacher-friendly; and the characteristics of the articles that were not considered teacher-friendly. The respondents were also asked to provide one reference to an empirical, peer-reviewed article that best exemplified teacher-friendly qualities, and one to an empirical, peer-reviewed article that best exemplified non-teacher-friendly qualities. The final questions in the survey explored TESL/applied linguistics researchers' perceptions regarding the extent to which they should be committed to publishing teacher-friendly research articles; constraints that limited the publication of such research, and ways in which academics could enhance adult ESL instructors' engagement with research.

Instructors' focus group interview. The focus group interview was based on the instructors' discussions of three assigned articles, all of approximately the same length but with varying characteristics (e.g., degree of linguistic or statistical complexity). To control for familiarity of topic, we chose studies with implications for vocabulary instruction. Nation (2006) reported on the vocabulary size needed for learners' unassisted comprehension of a variety of spoken and written genres in English; Durrant and Schmitt (2010) investigated the effects of three different types of repetition on the acquisition of collocations; and Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011) studied the effects of task type and repetition on long-term vocabulary retention. We considered these to be good empirical research articles that would be of interest to the instructors. Prior to the focus group interview, the participants completed a short questionnaire in which they rated the following aspects of each article (using a scale from 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*): relevance to context, concerns, interests, and priorities; practical value; usability; accessibility and clarity of language; and rigour. They also indicated: for whom (academics/ESL instructors) they perceived each article was intended; if they would recommend each article to a colleague; which aspects of the articles encouraged or discouraged their engagement with research; and to what extent the articles might impact their teaching. In addition, two open-ended questions were discussed during the focus group interview: (a) What is currently being done to enhance instructors' engagement with research in your ESL program? and (b) What further steps could be taken to enhance instructors' engagement with research in your ESL program?

Data Analysis

Responses to the survey were entered into Microsoft Excel and verified for accuracy. Frequencies and descriptive statistics for the quantitative (Likert-type scalar and yes/no) responses were calculated and provided by *SurveyMonkey*®. Qualitative responses to open-ended survey and focus group questions were categorized and thematically classified using an iterative process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). For each question, all participants' responses were read carefully several times; salient themes were identified in each reading, confirmed in the other participants' responses, and quantified. This method of multiple readings and constant comparison throughout the analyses ensured the consistency of the coding and accurate representations of the participants' responses. Two of the authors independently coded and thematically analyzed the data. Coding decisions were then compared; for the few differences that were noted, consensus was reached.

Results and Discussion

Academic Survey

To facilitate interpretation, and because not all participants completed every question, we report survey responses below as percentages.

Characteristics. When asked to identify the characteristics of teacher-friendly research publications, academics who responded to this question (n = 21) described them as clearly written, with minimal jargon (62%); practical (57%); relevant to classroom/teaching context (43%); conceptually accessible (24%); containing no, few, or clearly explained statistics (19%); interesting, engaging, and thought-provoking (19%); short (19%); focused on findings (14%); authentic and classroom-based (14%); theoretically rigorous (5%); and co-written with language teachers (5%).

Commitment to teacher-friendly research publications. All 23 academic respondents had published empirical, peer-reviewed research articles in the previous five years. The average number of reported publications in this category over this period of time was 8 (median = 8; range = 2-19); the average number of published articles that academics categorized as teacher-friendly was 3 (*Mdn* = 3; *Range* = 0-11). When asked to what degree applied linguists should be committed to publishing teacher-friendly research articles, 44% responded *extremely*, 44% *very much*, 9% *somewhat*, and 4% *minimally*. Twenty-one participants reported that they had published teacher-friendly articles; at least two had published in each of the following: *Canadian Modern Language Review* (43%); *TESOL Quarterly* (35%); *Language Awareness* (30%); *TESL Canada Journal* (26%); *CALICO Journal* (10%); TESL Ontario's *Contact Research Symposium* (10%); and *Language Teaching* (10%). One academic explained:

> Although my work has appeared in journals with a distinct pedagogical dimension (*TESOL Quarterly; Language Awareness*), they are not necessarily accessible or of interest to teachers with little training in how to read such journals; my teacher-friendly publications have lately been in non-peer-reviewed journals.

Dissemination. When asked about their primary goals for disseminating teacher-friendly research articles, many of the academics' responses focused on enhancing links between

research and practice, as outlined by McIntyre (2005). Of the 22 responses to this question, 50% indicated that their purpose was to inform teaching practice: for example, "to help teachers develop suitable strategies for multilingual learners"; to explain "what has been shown to work and not to work"; "to help teachers to be more productive and effective", and "to provide useful information about efficient teaching". Another 45% stated that they wished to make research accessible by explaining it to practitioners and other relevant stakeholders, while 23% cited engaging teachers' interest in research, by publishing research that teachers can relate to, stimulating reflection on their teaching practice, encouraging enquiry on the part of teachers, and "encourag[ing] readers to think or offer a different perspective as opposed to simply giving [them] research-based advice". A further 14% wanted to establish direct links between academics and practitioners, which Belcher (2007) recommends as a means of bridging the gap between research and practice. In addition, 14% wished to provide theoretical insights, 9% wanted to improve language learning, and 9% wanted to obtain reactions and feedback from teachers and other researchers "to better understand [their] own work and the issues under investigation". Single responses included the following goals: "to have something to put on [an] annual report", "to get approved for tenure", to model dissemination for graduate students, and to raise one's profile within the discipline.

Constraints. Despite a strong commitment to sharing their research with ESL practitioners, the academics in this study noted that they faced a number of limitations in their efforts to do so. Of the 23 academics who identified constraints, 43% stated that teacher-friendly research publications were accorded lower status for tenure and promotion; respondents commented that these were considered "soft" publications and that theoretical articles were more valued by their faculties than applied research. These comments echo findings from a range of disciplines in Canadian universities (Phaneuf et al., 2007). Of the participants in our study, 30% noted that teacher-friendly journals tended to be less academic, narrower in readership, and fewer in number. Several (13%) stated that peer-reviewed journals required empirical researchers to include statistical analyses, which might be a barrier for some instructors; 4% noted that classroom implications were often not required for publication, and another 4% stated that not all researchers possessed writing skills appropriate for teacher-friendly research publications. Academics in our study also acknowledged the challenges in conducting classroom-based research: 9% noted barriers related to ethics, university policies, and collaboration with administrators and instructors; 4% identified funding challenges, and another 4% the time required to conduct classroom-based studies. Despite constraints, however, 91% of the academics reported that they were committed to publishing teacher-friendly research articles and that approximately 50% of their peer-reviewed articles published in the past five years were teacher-friendly.

Instructor Focus Group

Characteristics of teacher-friendly research publications. The ESL instructor focus group began with a discussion of the three assigned articles and the participants' responses to the accompanying questionnaire regarding various aspects of the research publications. Although we had selected the three articles as representative of varying degrees of teacher-friendliness (in terms of relevance, practicality, and accessibility), not all of the participants shared our perceptions. For example, we had rated Nation (2006) the most teacher-friendly (i.e., extremely relevant to classroom context, concerns, interests, and priorities; practical, with

usable findings; descriptive statistics, and clear, accessible language). The article reported lexical analyses of a variety of texts: novels, newspapers, graded readers, children's movies, and a corpus of spoken English. Interestingly, because the analyzed texts (e.g., *Lady Chatterley's Lover, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Toy Story, Shrek*) were not being read or viewed in their own ESL classes, some instructors did not perceive the author's findings to be relevant or usable.

Several participants criticized all three articles for not providing explicit directions for application of the knowledge to the ESL classroom: one participant (P2) characterized two of the articles as "practical, in a way, in that it increases your awareness, but not in actually what to do with it"; another (P5) stated, "I'd want the [actual vocabulary] lists… a ready-to-go product." Based on these reactions, researchers writing for practitioners need to ensure that the application of findings to teaching is made explicit, reminiscent of Brumfit's (1983) assertion that pre-service teachers often seek "clear statements of practice". The participants agreed that they needed help in seeing the benefits of research, which goes beyond the simple provision of classroom implications.

Some of the terms in the articles (e.g., *lemma, type, token* [Nation, 2006]) were unfamiliar to several readers, and this was a reported barrier to comprehension. Abbreviations (e.g., *FFI* for form-focused instruction [Laufer & Rozovski-Roitblat, 2011]) likewise were reported as reducing reading fluency. Researchers who are hoping to engage instructors cannot therefore assume knowledge of basic terminology, even among TESL Master's graduates; they must include definitions and examples of all important terms, and limit the use of acronyms and abbreviations. Findings from the literature support the need for clearly written, understandable publications (Bartels, 2003; Borg, 2007, 2009; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; TESOL Research Standing Committee, 2008).

Surprisingly, the article by Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat (2011), which we perceived to be the most challenging because of its use of inferential statistics, was not reported to pose significant problems for the participants. During the focus group interview, however, it was revealed that several instructors had simply skipped over the analyses and gone straight to the findings. As one participant (P4) stated frankly, "The stat[istic]s turned me off", a comment reminiscent of responses in McDonough and McDonough's (1990) study. Another interviewee in our focus group described her approach to reading research in this way:

> I read the abstract first, the introduction/lit review, and then the conclusion (like reading the end of a murder mystery first to find out who dunnit). I'm looking for something that can inform my work in the classroom. If the article is in a peer-reviewed journal, I take it on faith that the research methodology is sound [rigorous]. I skim the data analysis section and the reference list. (P8)

Peer-reviewed journals generally require authors to provide sufficient detail in their articles to enable replication of the research, but the need for this degree of detail was clearly not appreciated by the teachers. One instructor (P4) regarded all three articles as "too dry", a criticism of research articles expressed by one of Borg's (2009) participants. In Bartels' (2003) study, the teachers also reported a preference for a more personal style over a formal academic style. Generally, respondents considered the three 18-22-page articles (excluding references), in the words of P4, "just too long". One focus group participant (P2) commented on how Durrant and Schmitt (2010)'s complex methodology (three training conditions) wasn't reflective of her own classroom. Others criticized the article for being "too wordy to arrive at tentative

conclusions" (P1), and referred disparagingly to the authors' statement expressing the need for further research (P3).

Interviewees indicated that they would prefer a summary of the findings: "a more teacher-friendly digest" (P5); "…just a little paragraph that gave me the results-just the results" (P6). As evidenced by the candid comments above, the focus group participants felt comfortable criticizing the articles, sharing their opinions, and expressing their (dis)engagement with research.

Impact. Six of the eight participants reported that the findings from the three articles would impact their teaching *somewhat*, while two responded that the impact on their teaching would be *extensive*. They indicated that the information in all three articles could influence their selection of materials and classroom activities, as well as provide information on effective acquisition for learners, "like telling them what kinds of things they should be looking at" (P4).

ESL program level engagement with teacher-friendly research publications. Instructors were asked what was currently being done to enhance engagement with research in their workplace ESL programs. In two of the three programs represented, instructors were encouraged to read research articles. One participant described the sharing of research publications in her ESL program:

> Our coordinator will read the article, then she gives it to me and then I read it and then I get it bound, and then I put the instructor list [of names] on the front, and then I pass it around… We're trying to encourage more reading of research articles, but I'm not sure if [instructors] are actually reading it, or they're skimming it, or they're just looking at the abstract. (P6)

In the second institution, initial steps had been taken to encourage the reading of research:

> [The administrator] sent out at first, two or three times, links to interesting articles, academic articles, and then it just stopped. So I don't know if she got a lot of negative feedback, like saying "we don't have time to read this stuff." I don't know, it just stopped. (P3)

No formal arrangements were in place, however, to engage instructors in discussions of research in any of the three programs. This situation may be partly attributed to time constraints. All focus group participants confirmed that "the biggest thing that every teacher… struggles with is time" (P7). As one explained,

> there are so many pressures on classroom teachers to do so many things and on our [administrators]-program managers, coordinators, department heads…. [We have] so so much to do in the class that research sadly takes second place, or maybe third or fourth place. (P3)

Time constraints were found to be common in both ESL and EFL contexts (Borg, 2007, 2009; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012; TESOL Research Standing Committee, 2008). If our carefully selected focus group participants, whom we had assumed would be reading research, were not actually doing so, then it is likely that engagement would be even lower among ESL instructors with less formal education and less exposure to empirical research.

Participants' Strategies for Enhancing Instructors' Engagement with Research

Academic recommendations. We received suggestions from 22 of the 23 academics on how

to enhance instructors' engagement with research in ESL programs. Of these, 45% proposed that academics present their research at teachers' conferences and workshops, 27% suggested collaborating with practitioners to conduct research, and 14% recommended that professional development (PD) to increase instructors' familiarity with research would be beneficial. In addition, 14% stated the need to include pedagogical implications in articles and, similar to Phaneuf et al. (2007), 9% expressed the desire to have teacher-friendly research publications valued by universities for the purposes of tenure and promotion. A few academics (9%) recommended providing instructors with time and compensation for engaging with research; 5% cited the need to provide affordable access to journals, 5% suggested publishing in professional magazines, and 5% recommended the creation of research summaries or annual journal digests to enhance engagement. The importance of establishing relationships between academics and ESL program staff was also suggested by 5%.

Instructor recommendations. Instructors in the focus group also contributed constructive recommendations for enhancing engagement with research in their workplace ESL programs. These included the creation of professional reading groups, the identification of interesting and relevant articles, financial incentives, and professional requirements to keep abreast of current research.

Reading groups. Three of the participants discussed the formation of reading groups to facilitate engagement. One suggested, "if we have our PD days… to have like an expert reading [group] where… four people get this reading, four people get this… you could certainly summarize it and talk about it" (P2). Another participant indicated that "[her professional TESL organization] could be a much more vital force in disseminating research or forming reading groups" (P3), while a third member of the focus group recommended using staff meetings to discuss research publications, "depending on the different departments [courses taught, interests]" (P8). This option, however, was not universally endorsed. One respondent described the reaction of two of her colleagues to this idea:

> There was absolute horror… at the thought of having required reading for a staff meeting… horror, horror. So please do not suggest that; you know, I like the idea much more of a focus or a special interest group… I think people are much more likely to read things that they have interest in…. What interests someone in literacy is going to be really different than someone who's teaching [intermediate proficiency learners]. (P7)

The efficacy of engaging all instructors was perceived as problematic. One participant, however, felt that, despite expected resistance, this barrier could be overcome on two conditions: "if it is a requirement, and if the instructors see the benefit" (P8).

Article selection. Focus group participants unanimously agreed that they would appreciate suggestions of relevant, accessible, and interesting articles to read. As one instructor in our study noted, "Out of hundreds that are published every year, how do we know what to read?" (P3). The participants, who had all conducted empirical research, stated that they did not want to read articles with statistical jargon because, as one explained, "I'm not actively involved in using statistics every day. I've lost what little knowledge I had of understanding statistical data" (P8). Nor did they wish to read articles with extensive detail, technical jargon, or erudite tone. Instructors in previous studies provided similar responses (e.g., Bartels, 2003; Borg, 2007, 2009; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; TESOL Research Standing Committee, 2008).

Of the three articles that they had read in preparation for the focus group, some interviewees

in our study agreed that they would recommend that colleagues read only the abstract and the conclusions of the studies; one stated, "I would give them my copy with what's underlined and say, 'Just read the underlined parts'" (P1). Another explained, "Honestly, we never talk about research articles, and so if I was to recommend [one], I think I would get strange looks" (P6). This finding is similar to Borg's (2007) results; few teachers reported engaging in discussions of research in the workplace. Some of our participants felt that interest among instructors was likely to vary, as indicated in this comment:

> It depends on how long the person has been teaching. If they're recent grads, maybe they'd be more interested in reading an article, or if they're going to start into academics, then maybe they'd be more interested, but if they've been teaching for 30 years and they're happy teaching, they're not going to be interested in reading a research article, I think. (P6)

One common barrier to reading research reminiscent of previous findings (e.g., Borg, 2009; McDonough & McDonough, 1990; TESOL Research Standing Committee, 2008) was the lack of availability of relevant journals in the workplace:

> I think subscriptions… are very expensive. I think a cheaper alternative might be accessing the university library in some way, a closer connection between the university and the institutions. 'Cause we come here, we get our Master's degrees, and then we go back, and it's like you cut that umbilical cord for us, right? (P3)

Incentives. Focus group interviewees generally agreed that ESL instructors would require incentives to engage with research, and that the benefits would need to be made clear and explicit.

> Teachers think… especially if it's a contract teacher… paid for only the 4.5 hours when they're in the classroom… "I'm not paid to sit here for another 2 hours and… read this article"… So I think that's where the disconnect is, that you're not paid for it… The sad part of professional development is that you're supposed to be wanting professional development for yourself, but now we always think, "Okay, I have other things to do. Am I getting paid for these 2 hours to sit here and read this? Of what benefit is it for me?" (P6)

The issue of incentives for reading research did not appear to have been raised by participants in previous studies. In our study, financial compensation for time was the only suggestion common to both focus group instructors and academics for enhancing instructor engagement with research.

Professional requirements. One participant articulated the advantages of creating annual professional development requirements for accreditation/certification to enhance professionalism:

> …once you get your accreditation from [your professional TESL organization], you never have to do anything again and I feel that's wrong and I know that would not be a popular thing for me to say among staff at our institution. But I think there should be some requirement that you keep up your skills, that you are not necessarily conversant with all of the current research, but that you have an idea of what is being done… We know that there are things happening in the classroom that are not supported by research. (P3)

One respondent confirmed: "You may teach for 30 years, but… you need to update" (P8). According to another, however, this suggestion would only apply "… assuming that your institution cares… that you're accredited" (P2). In those ESL programs that employ instructors without TESL accreditation, alternate requirements would have to be found, such as the reporting of engagement with research on annual reports.

Conclusions and Limitations

We recognize that every methodology has potential shortcomings. The two main limitations of our study may be attributable to convenience sampling and the reliability of self-reported data. The sample sizes for both participant groups were rather small; however, the academic survey respondents (n = 23) were likely quite representative of the small population of academics in Canada who were specifically interested in adult ESL education. The active membership of the organization (ACLA) through which we recruited academic respondents is itself quite small: for example, in a 2014 vote to amend the ACLA constitution, only 51 members voted (personal communication, C. Mady, March 20, 2014). Despite the fact that the instructors who participated in the focus group were all MEd TESL graduates, and perhaps not typical of most L2 teachers, these participants were purposively selected for our study. We posited that if they were not reading peer-reviewed English language teaching articles, it was unlikely that teachers without Master's degrees would be either. The second limitation of the study is related to the self-reported survey and focus group data, which may not correspond to actual behaviours. However, it is likely that the highly educated participants who provided anonymous responses were able and willing to provide accurate responses to the questions posed.

Although previous studies have examined the characteristics of scientific research, this is the first study to our knowledge that has extensively investigated the characteristics of TESL-related teacher-friendly research publications from the perspectives of both academics and instructors. In addition, we explored applied linguists' commitment, barriers and constraints, and ways to promote practitioner engagement with research. Prior studies lacked a clear focus on engagement with (i.e., reading) research, as opposed to engagement in (i.e., conducting) research. In our study, we focused specifically on engagement *with* research in the adult ESL context, and the research was designed to avoid some of the limitations noted in previous studies.

Strategies for applied linguists to enhance practitioner engagement with research, based on the responses of both the academics and instructors, are presented below.

- Presenting at professional conferences (e.g., TESL Canada, TESOL), at staff meetings, and at PD workshops in the community. Because peer-reviewed articles often take a considerable length of time to be published, presentations also allow practitioners earlier access to knowledge.
- Providing institution and program staff with clearly articulated oral or written reports of research conducted in their (or similar) ESL programs. Because many journals are not available to ESL program staff, academics should also consider the complementary publication of research summaries in a professional magazine or newsletter. These would generally be less formal in tone, with evidence-based guidelines for the explicit application of results to the particular settings in which the research was conducted (in accordance with the strength of the evidence) and a reference to more in-depth reports available elsewhere.

- Establishing professional relationships with ESL program staff, by which researchers develop greater familiarity with the specific contexts of the field; this, in turn, may assist them in developing meaningful research questions in key areas of interest and relevance to practitioners. Practitioners can also contribute valuable perspectives on the interpretation of findings, resulting in the co-construction of knowledge.
- Collaborating with instructors in ESL programs to develop follow-up materials for classroom use based on recommendations in research articles. This provides instructors with a deeper understanding of the research findings and researchers with a clearer understanding of the target context.
- Including activities that originated in or were adapted from the research literature (e.g., tasks, scales, survey and research questions) in textbooks and teacher resources and appropriately attributing such materials to researchers. This may increase practitioners' awareness of the relationship between research and practice.
- Clearly articulating conceptual and instrumental classroom implications in research articles where applicable. Implications need to explicitly outline the benefits for instructional practice. Advocating for acceptance of teacher-friendly research publications for tenure and promotion is essential to encourage academics to invest time and energy in implementing the strategies outlined above.
- Providing suggestions for accessing research articles online. This would likely be welcomed by both professional TESL organizations and the members they serve. Options might include links to researchers' websites, Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals, and other sources of affordable, accessible research articles.
- Providing ongoing support and expectations for instructor engagement with research. Administrators play a key leadership role in this regard. Academics can take an active role in encouraging program funders, professional organizations, and administrators to meet this need by offering time, financial compensation, leadership, or professional recognition, and by setting minimum PD requirements.
- Establishing both formal and informal reading groups. Guidelines and options for initiating and maintaining effective reading groups should be determined before initiating groups. Two key ingredients are leadership and the provision of relevant and accessible articles of interest to group members. TESL academics would serve as useful sources of recommendations for teacher-friendly research publications for consideration by reading groups.

The TESL profession would benefit from future research to determine the effectiveness of some of the strategies above; for example, further studies might be conducted on the use of reading groups in particular contexts or of incentives for stimulating and maintaining instructor engagement with research. The reading of applied linguistics research appears to be one of the most flexible and cost-effective approaches for increasing the impact and use of research in the ESL classroom. Academics, administrators, and instructors must make a concerted effort to link applied linguistics research to ESL program policy and practice. As one participant in this study asked, "What's the point of doing language research if it's not going to have an impact on learning?"

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Note

1. The term 'teacher-friendly research publication' is not meant to be disparaging. As not all ESL instructors have graduate degrees in second language acquisition or TESL, plain language and other features can make research more accessible to all practitioners and therefore more influential in second language teaching and learning.

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