Writing methodology texts:
Bridging the research-practice gap

Scott Thornbury
‘A lack of time is the predominant reason cited [for not reading research]… A perceived lack of practical relevance was also a common hindrance, as was the inaccessibility, both physical and conceptual, of published research.’

‘Studies of teachers’ consumption of and attitudes towards academic research articles show that such articles do not seem to function well as a mechanism for communicating information for teachers.’

‘Research in second language acquisition and pedagogy almost always yields findings that are subject to interpretation rather than giving conclusive evidence.’

To what do you attribute the persistence of the grammar syllabus?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students expect it.</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ELT publishers are unwilling to take risks with alternative ways of organizing courses</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Most examinations test grammar, so a grammar syllabus is the best preparation.</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teachers prefer it.</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The SLA researchers are wrong: grammar is the basis of fluency, like it or not.</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The alternatives (e.g. a task-based syllabus) are unworkable.</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
‘For the ELT practitioner the main source of professional learning is classroom experience, enriched by discussion with colleagues, feedback from students, and – for those teachers with the time and inclination – input through reading, conferences and courses, of which research is one important component. Research is not the primary basis of ELT knowledge for the practitioner, but it is a valuable supplement.’

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‘It should be the responsibility of theorists and researchers to establish the “particularizability” of their work for teachers. The important question to ask is “To what extent can this information be made usable for particular teachers?”’

‘It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal.’

‘How is the researcher going to communicate with the consumer of his research? Does he even know what his audience is and what his audience wants?’
‘I can pass on to you one suggestion to the solution of this problem. It is not original with me… The idea actually comes out of the history of American agriculture: the idea of the county agent, the person who by personal visitation communicates the findings of agricultural research… to the farmer right at his door.’

‘There could be an analogue of the county agent in education: the individual who makes a specialty of communicating the findings of research to the potential consumer, the teacher, teacher trainer, educational policymaker, or preparer of instructional material…. The major problem that would be encountered… is the shortage of persons qualified to do this kind of educational liaison.’

Carroll, op. cit.
‘As the various fields of theory develop and proliferate, the demands on those introducing theory to practitioners grow ever more complex. That is why intellectual guides to the whole area and its many perspectives are needed, as a resource for trainers and educators and as a way of demonstrating the richness of available perspectives to practitioners wishing to understand and develop their practice.’

McNamara, T. 2008. 'Mapping the scope of theory in TESOL.' TESOL Quarterly, 42/2, p.304.
1. How did you get into writing methodology texts?
2. How important is it, do you think, to link research and classroom practice?
3. How have you kept/do you keep abreast of new developments in research, e.g. SLA, corpus linguistics, neurobiology etc?
4. Given that most research is somewhat inconclusive, how do you select from – and prioritize – the research findings that inform your texts?
5. Do you feel you have an ‘agenda’, i.e. a bias towards a particular theoretical (or a-theoretical) position? If so, do you think this matters?
6. If not (or even if so) do you attempt to be balanced/impartial/non-prescriptive? How do you achieve this?
7. Does it concern you that you might be ‘dumbing down’ or otherwise misrepresenting research findings? How do you guard against this?
8. To what do you attribute your success? (Don’t be modest!)
1. How did you get into writing methodology texts?

PU: I got excited about things that worked for me in the classroom, and wanted to share...
2. How important is it, do you think, to link research and classroom practice?

JH: I simply fail to understand people who deny the role of research in helping us understand our practice and improve it. Research is, after all, what all good teachers would do if they had the chance.
PU: It’s sometimes a useful support and can provide interesting insights, but it’s certainly possible to write helpful and valid professional guidance for teachers with no research references whatsoever.
DB: Imperative! Teachers need to ground their teaching in research-based findings and assumptions. And, more importantly, teachers themselves should not shrink from engaging in their own classroom-based “action research.” It’s an all-important interaction.
JS: I’ve never found much formal “research” very helpful to my own classroom work. I am not “anti-research” but I do carry a suspicion of many statistical studies in teaching.

My teaching is not applying linguistics. Rather, it is about tuning in to people and attempting, moment by moment, to help create a space where learning can happen. I more often look at the literature to see if it can help me understand what I have already noticed myself.
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3. How have you kept/do you keep abreast of new developments in research, e.g. SLA, corpus linguistics, neurobiology etc?

DB: By teaching university courses myself and disciplining myself to set aside reading time. Purposeful reading of summaries of research in edited “state of the art” volumes helps to acquire information in subfields that are of interest but not in my central focus.
PU: Inevitably, I’m sure I’m missing some key publications, but on the other hand things that are really important get cited by those I am reading, so sooner or later I think I get most of the major stuff. But certainly not all.
JS: For some years I think Twitter has been a very important signpost to interesting articles and websites [...]
JH: Teachers journals, published books etc - though I fear that I do not have enough time to do as much of that as I should. [...] The large number of teachers’ conferences and seminars that I attend [...] News media, magazines and, increasingly, social media where news about new research often breaks.
4. Given that most research is somewhat inconclusive, how do you select from – and prioritize – the research findings that inform your texts?

JS: Mainly, I think I write what I do and what I see other teachers doing. Informed ideas that may or may not work for others. These need to fit in with my own internal schema for how I think people learn, study, behave etc.
JH: I go for what seems plausible to me. But I have to be careful (and suspicious) of my own unreliable instinct … There IS an element of fashion in this too, of course. Readers of a general methodology book need to know what is most ‘current’.
PU: One criterion is, obviously, that I feel the research is reliable – well-designed and carefully executed, with convincing evidence and logical conclusions. Another is that it’s not on a trivial or very limited subject.
DB: The selection of findings to inform my writing is based on degrees of (1) *validity* through triangulation of findings, (2) *relevance* of findings to pedagogy, and (3) *practicality* of those findings for classroom teachers.
5. Do you feel you have an ‘agenda’, i.e. a bias towards a particular theoretical (or a-theoretical) position? If so, do you think this matters?

PU: I really try hard in my own writing to be as objective as possible. The problem arises when a researcher’s data seems to contradict my own experience-based opinions: so then I have to read the research very carefully, re-examine my own experience, and try to decide who is right, or how they might both be.
JS: I have been very influenced throughout my career by the voices I came across in IH Hastings – especially the educational worldview of Carl Rogers. This is what I think of as “muscular hard-edged humanism” based on honest, uncompromising feedback cycles...
JH: I write ‘general’ methodology and I see it as my duty to try and present a balanced picture of what is going on - showing where alternative views of what is going on can be relevant.
DB: Everyone has biases, but I try to be as fair-minded as possible in weighing relevant alternatives.

Having said that, I firmly believe that language learning is a universal means for multicultural communication and reaching across national and linguistic borders, as well as appreciating and affirming diversity in points of view. I always remind my teachers that they have a social responsibility to appreciate that diversity among their students, to be nonjudgmental in responses to students, and to remind their students that language is a bridge to global peace. If that’s a bias, so be it!
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7. Does it concern you that you might be ‘dumbing down’ or otherwise misrepresenting research findings? How do you guard against this?

JS: No… I think there is a valid place for practical manuals for teaching that do not encumber the reader with all the background understanding the author has acquired.
JH: I worry about dumbing down all the time. If I see it as a useful service to make some complex ideas more accessible to practising teachers, then the corollary is that I may (and almost certainly do) fall into the trap of oversimplification.
DB: The best way to guard against it is to provide concrete examples and “show” (rather than “tell”) how research informs pedagogical decisions and actions.
PU: I don’t think this worries me. Research which is very complicated and difficult I can’t understand anyway, so I’m not about to dumb it down because I’m too dumb myself to deal with it in the first place. If I understand a research study then it can probably be understood by other teachers as well, except they don’t have the time or resources to read it.
8. To what do you attribute your success? (Don’t be modest!)

DB: I avoid language that’s pedantic and academically stuffy. I talk to my readers as I would in a classroom setting or sitting down with them in conversation.

PU: People tell me they like my books and talks because they are ‘practical’…. At the same time, I can explain the underlying rationale and quote supporting research where appropriate, have ‘done my homework’, as it were.
JS: It is not the content of my books that is most often mentioned, but the voice. I’ve been told that I sound like a real teacher – someone who quite obviously has taught a lot - talking to them…

JH: I seem to have found a writing ‘voice' that many teachers have found congenial. I think it’s as simple as that.
Conclusions:

1. Methodology writers have an interest in keeping abreast of developments in research, but largely as filtered through their own experience and ‘sense of plausibility’.

2. Methodology writers use research findings less to promote new practices than to validate existing ones.

3. Methodology writers are sensitive to, and respectful of, prevailing trends, while, at the same time recognizing their inherent weaknesses.

4. Methodology writing is not ‘applying linguistics’ so much as ‘particularizing theory’.

5. Methodology writers present options rather than prescriptions.

6. Methodology writers adopt a voice that is non-academic and practitioner-oriented.
‘I have arrived at this conclusion long time ago that there is no point for teachers to read books on teaching. … The power of authors such as Harmer or Thornbury lies primarily in their Personalities, not their knowledge. … the exact content of their books, whether they stick to findings and science or not, is irrelevant. … Each of them could write fiction for that matter, and the outcome would be the same. Or better.’