

Roundtable Discussion Report

This is the first part of a two-part report on a roundtable discussion titled 'The state of ELT research in the UK' at the September 2011 British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) annual conference University of West of England, Bristol. Panel participants were: Olwyn Alexander, Adrian Holliday, Richard Kiely, John Knagg, James Simpson, Richard Smith, Catherine Walter and Cyril Weir. The discussion was organized by Richard Smith and chaired by Phillida Schellekens.

The State of ELT Research in the UK (Part I)

Richard Smith (University of Warwick) with John Knagg (The British Council)

Introduction

The panel discussion reported on here was organized to complement a recent British Council initiative to survey 'ELT research' in the UK from 2005 onwards. This initiative has resulted in two 'Directories' to date (Rixon and Smith 2010, and Smith with Choi, Reid, Sky and Hunter 2011), plus a searchable database. All of these are freely available online at:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/elt-research>.

This survey project was initiated for reasons which were explained in detail to the audience by John Knagg, and his contribution is reproduced verbatim and in full below. As Richard Smith – the academic coordinator for the project since it began late in 2008 – and his co-investigator Shelagh Rixon have previously written,

one concern we had before embarking on this venture was whether present-day university-based research would turn out to have relevance to ELT at all. There also seemed to be some scepticism amongst British Council ELT specialists about the value to ELT of much academic research, reflecting concerns within the profession more generally. This pointed to a need, expressed by the British Council to us, specifically to seek out 'ELT research', not simply 'applied linguistic research'

(Rixon and Smith 2010: 11)

It is this issue of *relevance* (of research to practice) that will be focused on in the present report. In this first, shorter, part, a definition is provided of the newly introduced term 'ELT research' and an overview is provided of the *Directory of UK ELT Research* project methodology and findings (these constituted Richard Smith's introductory contributions to the BAAL round table discussion). John Knagg's transcribed contribution to the panel discussion then follows, in which he reflects on the origins of the project and both describes and evaluates some additional findings. Further remarks on the 'state of UK ELT research' by the other panellists – Olwyn Alexander, Adrian Holliday, Richard Kiely, Catherine Walter and Cyril Weir – will be recorded in Part 2 of the report, in issue 28 of this newsletter.

Project outputs and basic methodology

There were two phases of data collection, resulting in two separate books, one for 2005-08 (Rixon and Smith 2010) and another for 2009-10 (Smith with Choi, Reid, Sky and Hunter 2011). Data for the entire period 2005-10 has also been made available via a searchable online database at <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/elt-research>.

The main working principles for collecting data were as follows: Key contacts were identified in UK institutions – they had responsibility for selecting, judging the relevance of and inputting entries (via an online form); and all entries had to be publicly accessible in some form. There were 20 optional descriptors which could be used, ranging from 'Assessment' to 'Writing'. Details were also requested of country of research, learners' background, and institutional level. Fuller details of the data collection procedures are provided in the Introductions to the two downloadable books cited above. Thus, rather than describing in further detail the procedures for data collection, the next section of this report highlights the definitions and parameters set up at an early stage for deciding what constituted 'ELT research', in other words for bringing to life this term.

How did we define 'ELT research'?

Some major decisions needed to be made in the initial planning phase of the project regarding what was to be meant by 'research', 'ELT research', and 'UK ELT research'. For the purposes of the project, we decided to define 'research' as 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding'. The term was also taken to include 'scholarship', that is, the 'creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of an activity or area of study' – in this case, ELT. Accordingly, 'ELT research' was defined as 'any research whose data and/or findings relate directly to the teaching, learning or assessment of English as a Foreign, Second or Additional Language'. 'UK research' was itself defined as research undertaken by anyone who was currently (that is, at the census point

for the survey) a member of staff or associate of a bona fide educational institution with a base in the UK: the actual research may have taken place anywhere in the world, not necessarily in the UK.

Types of entry we decided to solicit for the Directory included journal articles, chapters in edited books, authored books, and papers in conference proceedings. However, contributors were also encouraged to submit details of any unpublished but electronically accessible items, and doctoral theses supervised. Details were also requested of any externally funded research projects during the period in question.

Some extra findings

The following overall statistics were presented at the outset of the BAAL roundtable discussion. For the period 2005-10 there were 1,756 entries from 66 different departments or institutions in the UK. Nine departments/institutions accounted for over half of the total number of entries. There was an increase in average number of entries for each year, with 1,039 entries for 2005-08 and 717 for 2009-10. There was also an increase in rate of entries for externally funded projects, with 61 being recorded for 2005-08 and 54 for 2009-10. The top funders (according to number of projects funded, not amount of funding) were The British Council (16 projects funded out of 107 in total, 2005-10) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), with 10 projects funded, 2005-10. The British Council showed noticeably increased activity in funding ELT research projects over the most recent two years (2009-10) (for the reasons, see John Knagg's contribution below).

For the period 2005-10, descriptors with more than 100+ entries were English language (199), Assessment (175), Methodology (130), Teacher education (119), Cultural issues (113) and Writing (103). Where location of research was concerned, the top four countries were the UK (338), 'various' (130), China (33) and Hungary (28), while the top four countries for learner origin were 'various' (337), China (64), Germany (17) and Hungary (17). Regarding institutional level concerned in the research, tertiary came out top (352 entries), followed by adult (139), secondary (85), primary (71) and pre-primary (2). Doctoral theses were more likely to focus on overseas secondary / primary contexts. The top doctoral descriptors for 2009-10 were curriculum/syllabus (21), followed by cultural issues (20) and English language (19).

Panel Discussion Contribution by John Knagg (British Council)

"Interestingly, I think I'm the only speaker who is not an ELT researcher, at least I don't see myself as one, and I'm the only speaker who doesn't have an entry in the book. However, I do claim to be the inventor of the

concept of the book within the British Council, thinking that this would be a useful thing for the Council to do. And it fits in within the Council's aims of contributing to a wider knowledge of English, of promoting things that are going on here in the UK and promoting educational collaboration internationally. And it comes at a time where we felt we wanted to reinforce the message that the British Council is an important global player in the world of English language teaching and learning around the world. It's a role that the Council has played and been seen in for decades in fact, and one which we felt had been lost in some areas over the past couple of decades. And the idea for this, in a way, came to me partly from a BAAL Conference session by Emma Marsden and Susan Graham, which was looking at UK PhDs and analysing UK PhDs about language teaching and in the area of language teaching. I was amazed by the difficulty that they had in finding these PhDs. They had to go in to the British Library database of PhDs and it wasn't at all easy to find them. And then I thought there must be an easier way to put this together for ELT and it kind of grew out of that and then I started talking to academics about it, and then handed it over to Richard and his team at Warwick to plan it.

Step 2 was to do it. And now it's been done, twice. We've got 6 years of data. And now, the next thing to do is to think how it can be used and what it tells us. That's the background. I think it's left us with a very useful database.

And now I have a few critical thoughts about what it does tell us about the state of UK ELT research. One thing... I just would like you to think for a minute about this: Our numbers suggest that there are over a billion learners of English in the world, and maybe something in the region of 11 million teachers of English around the world. Now, just think, in that universe of English language learning, what proportion of it is at primary and secondary level? In other words, at school level, up to the age of, let's say, 18? Is it 10%? Is it 99%? What proportion of the whole English language activity is at that level? [An audience participant suggests 80%.] My best guess is 85%. But it could be 80, could be 90, it's something around that number. The other 10, 15, 20 % is in the area of 'post-18', including Higher Education.

Now, the interesting thing when we analyse the 1,700+ pieces of research done over the last 6 years is that whereas we see that overall about 85% of activity is at school level, only 25% of those outputs and research projects are to do with school level; with 75% to do with post-18 contexts – higher education, especially, and adults.

I then thought, well, that's very strange that ELT research doesn't seem to reflect the universe that it's dealing with, in a way. Well, I thought, maybe it's different when we look at PhDs because PhD students

will want to improve their systems from around the world and they will be looking at primary and secondary levels, which is where most of the teaching and learning takes place. But no, I'm afraid not. This time, we've got more, but still only up to 36% of the research that is to do with school level learning.

So then I thought, well, OK, there were other reasons. Obviously, PhD candidates... maybe their first aim isn't to do something that reflects the needs of society so much as yet, for their PhD; maybe, it's easier to research in a university context to get a PhD.

So, let's look at the externally funded projects, that is, research that is paid for by another organization. So, I looked at that. But I still found that even out of research projects that were paid for by outside organisations only 28% focused on school level, with 57% focusing on university level and 72% on university and adults together. Very strange.

My second innovation was the British Council's ELT Research Awards Scheme, which goes beyond our having a role in pulling together research to actually facilitating certain types of research. Of nearly 60 different universities in the Directory database and in the 3 years of the running of our research award scheme, 42 universities have expressed interest in putting in a submission, so a good proportion of them in other words. We've so far funded about 19 projects, of which 10 are related to primary and secondary, and only 5 to higher education, so at least we are in the 65-70% mark in aiming towards research reflecting the universal reality of English language learning.

So, the last thing I'd say is this ... I've only been here [at the BAAL conference] half a day but already I hear a lot of talk about the REF [the UK 'Research Excellence Framework' – a research assessment exercise due to take place at the end of 2013] It's a very strange idea for me, not being an academic researcher, that suddenly impact has become something that is measured – and I think this perception is shared by my colleagues from the British Council overseas. Because, for us, impact is what it is all about and should be a given. The good thing is that we've got a great resource here in the *Directory*, which allows us to talk about research with much more information to hand, but I do wonder whether ELT researchers in the UK are researching the right thing.

Further opinions on the state of UK ELT Research will be shared in Part 2, in a future issue. In the meantime, if you wish to contribute your own opinions about anything you've read here, don't hesitate to get in touch (resig.iatefl.org) or participate in the Directory project discussion forum:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/directory-uk-elt-research/blog>

References

Rixon, S. and Smith, R. (2010). *Directory of UK ELT Research 2005-08*. London: The British Council. Also available online via:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/elt-research>

Smith, R. with Choi, S., Reid, S., Sky, G. and Hunter, D. (2011). *Directory of UK ELT research 2009-10*. London: The British Council. Also available online via:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/elt-research>

British Council Research Papers are freely available to download from:

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/research-papers>

From the website:

“The British Council works closely with universities and other research institutions to fund and publish ELT research. The Research Papers series gathers together the outputs of these partnerships and collaborations. The series includes reports written by partners working with the British Council as part of the ELT Research Partnerships scheme. Research commissioned by the British Council can also be found in this series. The British Council is committed to making the results of innovative and inspiring research available to ELT practitioners worldwide.

Produced in partnership with UK and overseas specialists, the series presents the latest findings in key areas of ELT – teaching Young Learners, learning technologies, teacher education and more – and provides practical recommendations to teachers and teacher educators working in a range of contexts and conditions.”