

Yes we can! Bridging the gap between research and practice at the ReSIG Showcase at IATEFL 2023: a report

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1. Introduction

The ReSIG Showcase was a pleasant discovery; it was my first time presenting at IATEFL and I was grateful to ReSIG for hosting my presentation on teachers' emotions based on my MA TESOL dissertation at Lancaster University and on my personal history, which led me to move from teaching to researching. I came with this gratitude, curiosity and what is probably a common intent: bridging the gap between research and practice. What this means varies widely, depending on cultural backgrounds and educational contexts, so it would probably be unrealistic and not particularly helpful to try and predetermine how to bridge that gap, but presentations from the Showcase have certainly offered stimulating options. In this report, I am going to reflect on my experience, hoping to convey some of the inspiration I went home with on the day and increase teachers' willingness to engage in research in their daily teaching practices. I will also try to highlight the relevance of research for educators through my perspective on some of the presenters' contributions.

2. Highlights and reflections

2.1. Practitioner research: an encouraging scenario

While setting up the equipment for the presentations at the start of the day, enthusiasm in the room was tangible. This helped me overcome any anxiety about presenting. Nervousness soon dissipated during the first talk where Mark Wyatt from Khalifa University and Cemile Buğra from Cukurova University reported on how five teachers from a higher education context in Turkey engaged in collaborative research. The steps of the project were clearly laid out and the presenters keenly showed how participants collaborated actively, felt empowered and developed agency thanks to the experience. Their project gradually took shape following a conference organised by ReSIG in İzmir in Turkey, where practitioner research was actively promoted (Buğra & Wyatt, 2021). I did have my reservations as to whether that kind of enthusiasm could only be achieved when research organisations invest in collaboration among education institutions. In fact, the presenters helped me

identify how vital it is to support teachers in developing research projects individually and collaboratively within individual institutions. Connecting across community members over time and with clear objectives is another starting point for successful collaboration, a perspective shared by other presenters outside the ReSIG Showcase during the conference.

2.2. Emotions as professional tools for language teachers: strongly felt needs in daily practice

I was surprised that so many people chose to attend my presentation on how the emotions teachers feel can help them teach better; the room was full. This is flattering for a presenter, but what attendance was telling me, as did participants who asked questions and approached me afterwards, was how relevant and urgent it is to continue researching teachers' emotions in a way that can support them in their teaching practice and provide opportunities for practitioners to share their daily experiences, beliefs and concerns. This was possible during the few minutes left for questions, following what emerged in the poll that was conducted at the start of the presentation where participants' responses showed that unpleasant and pleasant emotions in teaching coexisted. One participant wondered how unpleasant emotions such as anxiety and frustration can be transformed into more pleasant ones such as enthusiasm and care in a way that is emotionally fulfilling for both learners and teachers. The fact that some of the participants were able to link research findings from the presentation to their own contexts was an encouragement to pursue this line of research further and increase connections.

2.3. Teachers engaging in research: what holds them back and what is needed to encourage engagement

Research engagement of Chinese veteran teachers was then explored by Meifang Zhuo from the University of Warwick. What she cared to emphasise was how context, cultural background and familiarity with research affect veteran teachers' perceptions and participation. Workload and administration tasks appeared to be two key hindrances to pursuing research. This is interestingly in line with research findings among language teachers across the career span (Sulis et al., 2023), where workload has been reported by teachers at different career stages as one of the main challenges. In addition, OECD data (2022) do not identify workload as a constraint specifically, but do show how working hours include a range of tasks which are not necessarily linked to teaching and contribute to the total number of working hours.

International collaboration and support were advocated at the end of the talk as possible ways of facilitating research engagement from outside China. Once more, it was really helpful to see how relevant and necessary collaboration is to facilitate the transition between research and practice in different cultural contexts which face similar constraints and challenges.

2.4. Hands-on research methods with voices from the field: short story analysis

In the next talk I attended, Gary Barkhuizen from the University of Auckland explained how to carry out short story analysis in research. As a beginner researcher with no upcoming projects, I was concerned that information about research methods would only be applicable to dissertations or research projects in higher education. While this is certainly the case, this talk urged me to reflect on how short stories are in fact both a way for research participants to gain voice as people, and valuable resources to strengthen interconnections between educational and social contexts.

The talk showed clearly how to approach short story analysis by addressing the space and time domains, alongside the person-oriented dimension (the where, when and who). I think there are considerations here: how research – in particular qualitative research – is often concerned with the 'what' and 'how', and how this may shape narratives and beliefs about the relevance of research for pedagogical practice. The importance of narrative approaches becomes evident when engaging actively in research, both because people's narratives describe people's meanings, and because people's meanings are co-constructed within the time and space domains they take place in.

Methods such as narrative enquiry allow for a richer account of contextualised information and situate individuals in their context, as advocated by the sociocultural perspective (Golombek, 2019). The talk reiterated the necessity of giving teachers a voice and recognising their perspectives and identities. Research can do exactly that: short stories are likely to provide more authentic, less biased examples of teachers' contextualised experiences as opposed to interviews, where beliefs and opinions may partly be affected by questions.

2.5. Work-life balance with research in the picture: a goal worth pursuing

In the last talk I attended, Gareth Scyner from BINE (Benemérito Instituto Normal del Estado Gral. Juan Crisóstomo Bonilla) in Puebla, Mexico, shared his experience of transitioning from teacher to researcher and reported how this choice impacted on his career and how it was received by his employers. I think this contribution was particularly helpful in showing how the distance between research and practice can be reduced. The speaker highlighted the interconnection between professional and personal lives, a common situation among ELT and education professionals, and explained how he managed to convince his employers to negotiate his working hours so that he could devote time to research by explaining that the institution would benefit from the expertise he would gain from researching. Once again, the value of establishing a dialogue outside of research environments to promote research-oriented professional approaches emerged and – for me – this was one of the key takeaways from the day.

3. Conclusion

In this report, I have attempted to capture what are but subjective reflections on some of the talks from the Showcase Day, and to express the richness of the contributions. I also aimed at emphasising their applicability in daily practice, either in the form of joint projects or personal initiatives. One of the main insights has also been the reminder of how collaborating across networks is the main driver of practice-oriented research, and – from my position as a novice researcher – I hope to have provided a stimulating, enriching and fresh perspective.

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Laura Ferroglio has taught English in Italy and in the UK since 2000. Her MA TESOL (Lancaster University) research in 2022 addressed EFL teachers' emotions, the topic of her presentation at the ReSIG Showcase. She is currently doing a PhD at the University of Turin researching the role of chatbots in supporting language teachers.

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