

This essay will consider the meaning of the phrase “evidence-based practice” before going on to discuss the current lack of evidence-based research within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) industry. Conclusions are reached to suggest it could become more evidence-based in the future under certain conditions.

In order to understand the phrase evidence-based practice it is important to consider what is meant by the word "profession". According to the Study Guide (page 16), in order for an occupation to be considered a profession it should exhibit a number of characteristics including having a code of ethics, an extensive training period and effective entry requirements and disciplinary procedures for members. In addition, one of the more important characteristics is that the occupation has a large central body of knowledge which informs current practice. Consequently, an evidence-based profession would use research evidence to influence and inform practice in order to ascertain which methods are sound.

Ravitch (1998) compares and contrasts both the medical and education professions and is critical of the education profession for not having strong links between research and practice which, if in existence, would help practitioners to determine and employ best practice in their classrooms.

Ravitch (1998) suggests that, "*unlike educators, physicians have canons of*

scientific validity to protect innocent patients from unproven remedies and specious theories". In other words, the medical profession has reached a point whereby decisions are made based on tried, tested and valid evidence. However, Hammersley (2007) does not see the medical profession as necessarily being better than education in terms of research produced. In fact, Altman (cited in Hammersley, 2007, p29) comments on the often poor quality of evidence-based medical research stating, "*Doctors are often inadequately prepared for or committed to it*". Nevertheless, Hargreaves's (2007) agrees with Ravitch when he states, "*Teaching is not at present a research-based profession*" (2007, p3). Furthermore, he suggests that if teachers are to become experts they need to be supported by evidence-based research since it can provide justification for teaching in a particular way.

In terms of a profession, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) industry would appear not to exhibit certain characteristics of the Trait Model (Study Guide, p16). Specifically, there is no central body of research material nor is there an extensive training period for practitioners. Nevertheless, EFL is a massive industry worldwide, which in terms of educational practice uses Communicative Language Teaching as its primary teaching methodology (Knight, 2001). As an educational practice, CLT aims to provide students with the language, vocabulary and grammar to be able to deal with a wide variety of real life, everyday conversational interactions.

However, it is relatively unchallenged. Although there are teacher-researchers in the industry, the work they produce does not always inform practice, or if it does, only at the local level. Previous experience in research into the advantages and disadvantages of CLT in comparison with other teaching methodologies provided enough evidence to inform me of best practice within my own classroom. However, these research reports were not subsequently taken up and examined by senior management, despite the opportunity. Possibly because EFL is not considered a profession, EFL teaching policy is dictated by senior management interested in financial results and targets, rather than by practitioners within the classroom. EFL could, consequently, be considered “*managerialist*” (Study Guide, p32) in nature, with CLT being seen as a priority and any deviation from it being considered a failure requiring correction. Consequently, EFL and the CLT methodology are not currently evidence-based.

Within many EFL schools and institutions there are clear divisions between the academic directors and managers and the general teaching staff, reminiscent of the “*old professionalism*” outlined by Hargreaves (cited in Study Guide, p36) which can result in barriers to innovation. However, with practitioners working cooperatively and collaboratively an environment suitable for Action Research could be created. According to Kemmis (2007,

p168) action research requires reflection on the part of the teacher on current practice and how these practices are conducted. This could involve, for example, EFL teachers conducting and reporting on evidence-based research carried out within their classrooms which, according to Kemmis (2007, p168), could influence senior management's decision making as to best practice. With regard to the use of CLT throughout the EFL industry, action research may have to become emancipatory (Kemmis, 2007, p177) in order to encourage more widespread innovation. Nevertheless, action research could allow greater links to be made between research and practice in EFL.

However, there are potential problems with this approach. Research conducted at the present time is likely to have only a local level impact unless a network can be established to distribute the research findings to EFL practitioners. McEwan (2008) agrees with this assessment when she states, "*It seems that there is not enough that is documented and shared with other professionals. It is probably going on but there is no place for people to share it*". Hargreaves (2007, page 10) believes that the establishment of a National Educational Research Forum involving practitioners and policy makers may result in an increased demand for evidence-based research conducted in the classroom. However, for this to be successful in EFL, the industry would need to move towards professional status, adopting more of the characteristics outlined in the Trait Model. In other words, fundamental changes would need

to be made in order to encourage more practitioner led evidence-based research which could then influence educational best practice.

This essay has argued that, in theory, evidence-based research, such as action research, can help bridge the gap between educational research and practice. It can allow practitioners to investigate best practice and inform the decision making process. Using EFL as an example, it was determined that whilst it is not an evidence-based industry at present, perhaps as a result of it not being considered a profession, it could become so, at least at the local level. In order for this to become industry wide, the EFL industry and practitioners have to work towards it being recognised as a profession, with dedicated teachers, a central body of research evidence available to all and increased professional standards. Without this, evidence-based research within EFL will remain at the local level only.

Word count: 1029

References

Hammersley, M. (2007) “Educational research and teaching: a response to David Hargreaves’ TTA” in Hammersley, M. (ed) *Educational Research and Evidence-based Practice*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd. in association with The Open University (the Course Reader), pp18-42.

Hargreaves, D. (2007) “Teaching as a research-based profession: possibilities and prospects” in Hammersley, M. (ed) *Educational Research and Evidence-based Practice*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd. in association with The Open University (the Course Reader), pp3-17.

Kemmis, S. (2007) “Action Research” in Hammersley, M. (ed) *Educational Research and Evidence-based Practice*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd. in association with The Open University (the Course Reader), pp167-180.

Knight, P. (2001) “The development of EFL methodology” in Candlin, C.N. and Mercer, N. (eds) *English Language Teaching in its Social Context*, London, Routledge, pp147-166.

McEwan, M. (16 October 2008) Moodle conference: Evidence-based practice, E891-08J (accessed 16 October 2008).

Ravitch, D. (1998) 'What if research really mattered?', *Education Week*, 16 December, 18, (16), p33.