



Futurology through the lens of Inquiry.

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This paper reports on the theme of Futurology through the lens of Inquiry. I begin with some thoughts about inquiry in TESOL before considering futurology and then finally bringing the two together in reflections on directions for the future.

TESOL involves a number of stakeholders: researchers, policymakers, administrators, and, of course, teachers and learners all immediately spring to mind. In our discussions, a number of other groups were also identified: trainers, publishers, materials writers, educational consultants, professional associations, NGOs, and technology experts.

In other words, there is a vast array of people who have a role and an interest in the profession. However, inquiry in TESOL is still seen very much as the domain of just one group - researchers. Moreover, research is often not made accessible, either in content or in dissemination, to those who can benefit from it the most, thus contributing to the theory/practice divide that has been much debated in our field. One consequence of these limitations on inquiry is that the various stakeholder groups often know very little about each other, about each other's experiences, about each other's knowledge; they have little opportunity to share and to understand each other's perspective.

So inquiry in TESOL currently tends to be equated with academic research, which is done by a very specific group of people. What about futurology? Without wishing to state the obvious, the world faces a number of well-recognized megatrends: political instability, economic uncertainty, massive social change, and rapid technological development. All of these impact on English and English language education. English is seen, rightly or wrongly, as the key to a better life across the globe. But is this really the case? Mass migration, whether caused by conflict or economic hardship, brings to the fore new questions that need investigating, for example around multilingualism and multiculturalism in language education, as societies shift and change in their make-up.

In our discussions, a number of further important changes were identified, especially around the rapid growth of technology. Social and technological developments that remove restrictions on both time and space in our ability to communicate are clearly an opportunity, but also a challenge – how do we prepare TESOL professionals for these developments? There are a myriad of on-line opportunities available for

practitioners: on-line and blended learning courses, MOOCs, and webinars, to name just a few. While on the one hand, technology may offer solutions, it is also likely to lead to greater challenges in the form of inequalities between those who can access it and those who cannot. How can we ensure that such developments are available for the many and not just for the privileged few?

I argue that, in order to address these challenges that the future holds for all those in TESOL, we need to turn to inquiry but we also need to rethink what we mean by inquiry. The traditional picture of researchers producing the knowledge that professionals are then expected to make relevant to practice no longer works for today's TESOL profession. Debates about both how to make research more accessible and how to overcome the theory/practice divide through, for example, practitioner research, are now well-established. More and more teachers are researching their own classroom and their own practice using Action Research as their guiding principle. But what if we take a more radical approach? What if we realign priorities, by shifting our attention and placing, not less emphasis on academic knowledge and research, but more emphasis on professional knowledge and inquiry? Let us take a step back to basics.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines inquiry as “the act of asking questions in order to gather or collect information” while the Oxford dictionary uses the word ‘investigation’. In the on-line discussions on the theme of Profession as Change Agent, the meaning of the term ‘research’ was discussed and defined by Misty Adoniou as ‘data collected and analysed to provide an answer to a question’, while Lucilla Lopriore noted it is a process that will inevitably lead to individual or collective change. Put together, we have inquiry as questioning, finding out and changing.

All those involved in TESOL, teachers, teacher educators, administrators, policy-makers, materials writers and so on, have a deep interest in asking relevant and pertinent questions, collecting information, investigating issues, and bringing about change. So what if we broaden our view of inquiry in TESOL to include not only the knowledge and expertise gained through academic endeavour but also the knowledge and expertise gained through the professional practice of all these groups of TESOL professionals?

Such a shift requires a broad coalition of all those involved in the field. We need closer collaboration across stakeholders. Through their own inquiries, through their particular skills, knowledge and experiences, all TESOL professionals have a role to play in identifying, influencing and mediating the impact of a whole variety of factors on their specific contexts and bringing about change. That is not to say that investigations remain local, however. Let us not underestimate the power of the local to resonate globally.

This leads us to how this shift can be achieved. A broad view of inquiry inevitably means a major rethink in what counts as valued knowledge. We need to find ways of listening to and respecting, not only those in academia who are traditionally

considered the 'experts', but also those with 'professional craft knowledge', acknowledging the ways in which this contributes to our overall understanding of the field. Genuine collaborations between teachers and researchers, such as the work by Supriya Baily mentioned in the on-line discussions are one way forward. Practitioner research is another extremely valuable way of doing this and the on-line discussions presented some excellent example of projects, such as the national action research project in Italy and the work by CAMELTA in Cameroon. But the number of professionals who can realistically get involved in this sort of activity is relatively small. Moreover, a number of contributors pointed to the fact that practitioner research is time-consuming and requires training.

So on the one hand, we need to encourage and promote practitioner research, seeking ways in which training can be 'light-touch', hands-on and integrated into routine professional development, ensuring that it does not become an extra requirement or an extra burden. At the same time, however, we also need to encourage and value less onerous forms of inquiry – for teachers this might be, for example, Exploratory Practice¹, where teachers and learners work together during their normal pedagogic practice to answer puzzles. It might be or reflective practice², where teachers self-observe, think about and analyse what they do in the classroom. It might mean more informal uses of 'traditional' research instruments such as surveys and focus groups. This is all already happening, but is usually confined to individual classrooms, single schools or at best regional professional organisations. We need to find alternative channels for wider dissemination with a focus on ways of professional sharing and a number of ideas were suggested in the discussions, particularly by Faiza Derbal, Lourdes Ortega and Christel Broady:

- Create online communities of practice and use social media to empower practitioners, creating and sharing professional knowledge.
- Organise events like monthly meetings, summer institutes, or retreats during which practitioners can be initiated to different forms of inquiry
- Encourage practitioners to use alternative and less onerous forms of reporting to the traditional article, such as oral reports and short summaries.
- Undertake joint writing between researchers and practitioners, rather than simply having practitioners as 'informants' or producing practitioner-friendly reports
- Model for students (future researchers) how to value different kinds of knowledge, and particularly professional craft knowledge, and how to work in mutual respect.
- Reverse the traditional model of researchers formulating research questions and then finding institutions where they can carry out their research. Instead have institutions/practitioners draw up a list of questions they would like answering and then invite researchers to collaborate with them.

¹ See, for example, <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/83621/3/LTRversion%5B1%5D.pdf>

² See, for example, <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/reflective-teaching-exploring-our-own-classroom-practice>

- Formulate bottom-up professional association research agendas and directions originating from wishes and ideas generated by practitioners, not researchers.
- Encourage funding agencies to require not only a statement of impact from researchers, but also a letter of support from a practitioner, commenting on the local and educational relevance of the proposed study and its quality as "inquiry" that is meaningful at some local and practical level beyond just "research",

These are just some of the excellent ideas that have been put forward in both face-to-face and on-line discussions, and there are many more.

In sum, to address the challenges that the TESOL profession faces, at both macro and micro level, I argue we need to consider inquiry in its broadest and most inclusive sense and in its most diverse forms. We need to find ways to value and to disseminate the contribution that all those in the profession can make through a variety of forms of knowledge leading to a rich and varied community of inquiry involving all stakeholders in TESOL.