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The influence of academic articles on an ESL teacher’s stated beliefs

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The current study investigated the relationship between one English as a second language (ESL) teacher’s encounters with three academic articles on the topic of oral corrective feedback (CF) and the impact that they had on his stated beliefs regarding CF. The teacher had 14 years of English teaching experience and an MA TESOL degree. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, one before and one after reading the articles. Results suggest that the teacher’s stated beliefs about CF prior to reading influenced how he responded to the articles, in that he focused most on the findings and claims that coincided with his stated beliefs prior to reading. Namely, he agreed with statements and evidence that supported his belief in the effectiveness of CF, and he discounted negative claims about the use of CF. Reading the articles did not seem to facilitate a change in his beliefs regarding CF; nevertheless, the articles succeeded in raising his awareness of CF and caused him to reflect on a classroom practice that he had not considered for some time. The present study proposes the possibility of using academic articles for professional development even for experienced teachers.

Keywords: teacher development; ESL teachers; stated beliefs; oral corrective feedback; relationship between research and practice

Introduction

From a teacher’s perspective, there are several factors that limit the influence of research on pedagogy. First, teachers may presume that research does not apply directly or easily to the classroom because it may not appear to address teachers’ concerns (Clarke 1994; Freeman and Johnson 1998; Lightbown 2000; McDonough and McDonough 1990). Furthermore, teachers may not trust researchers’ abilities to understand classroom realities (Shkedi 1998). Also, a lack of accessibility is a hindrance (Bartels 2003; Ellis 1997); research studies are often ‘conceptually, stylistically, and sometimes even physically’ inaccessible to teachers (Borg 1998, 274). Teachers are frequently unfamiliar with technical terminology and research methodology, particularly related to quantitative research (Bolitto 1991; McDonough and McDonough 1990; Shkedi 1998; Zeuli 1994). As a result of these difficulties, second and foreign language (L2) teachers often avoid reading research studies (Borg 2007; Pennington and Urmston 1998; Shkedi 1998). Such avoidance creates ‘a world in which teachers talk to teachers about techniques, and researchers and theoreticians talk to each other about research and theory’ (McDonough and McDonough 1990, 103). Clarke (1994, 13) states that this creates ‘a situation in

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which one group tends to do the teaching, while another group does the speculation about how the teaching should be done.’ Allwright (2005, 27) calls it ‘the damaging split between researchers and teachers.’

Efforts to bridge the gap between teachers and research are important, even if research does not always directly apply to pedagogy. As Ellis (1997, 82) claimed, second language acquisition (SLA) research has the potential to indirectly influence teachers’ cognitions and personal theories ‘either by helping them to make explicit their existing principles and assumptions, thereby opening these up to reflection, or by helping them to construct new principles.’ In an expansive literature review for L2 teachers, Ellis (2005, 44) concludes:

[A] literature review such as this is not to prescribe or proscribe what teachers should do to ensure effective learning in their classrooms but to stimulate reflection on the complex phenomenon of instructed language learning and a willingness to experiment with new approaches in accordance with their local conditions.

The present study investigated the effects of reading academic articles about oral corrective feedback (CF) on an English as a second language (ESL) teacher’s stated beliefs about the topic. CF was chosen for the following reasons: (1) the topic is easy to apply to pedagogy (Ellis 1997; Vásquez and Harvey 2010); (2) L2 teachers are familiar with CF and many use it in their classrooms (Sheen 2004); (3) there has been an accumulation of both descriptive and experimental research studies on the topic; and (4) despite these facts, it remains a controversial topic (Leeman 2007). The considerable amount of research and the controversy surrounding the topic may leave teachers unsure about the role of CF in the classroom, and thus research on CF may have the opportunity to influence teachers’ stated beliefs.

**Corrective feedback**

CF is a topic that has been extensively investigated in SLA partly because it is important both theoretically and pedagogically (Long 1991, 1996; inter alia). CF is seen as one way in which teachers can briefly draw learners’ attention to linguistic items during communicative interaction. Such a focus on form is viewed as potentially beneficial to learners because it creates optimal conditions for learning by combining attention to both form and meaning. CF may occur in several different ways. Recasts reformulate the error. Prompts encourage students to correct the error themselves, and metalinguistic feedback provides explicit information about the nature of the error. Several meta-analyses of CF have concluded that CF is generally more effective than no CF (Li 2010; Lyster and Saito 2010; Mackey and Goo 2007; Russell and Spada 2006); however, the effectiveness of specific types of CF is unclear. For example, Mackey and Goo (2007) showed that recasts were more effective than metalinguistic feedback, but Li’s (2010) results showed that explicit CF, such as metalinguistic feedback, was more effective than implicit CF, such as recasts, on immediate posttests; however, the results were reversed on long-term delayed posttests.

While several of the abovementioned meta-analyses included research studies conducted in both laboratory and classroom contexts, Lyster and Saito (2010) limited their focus to 15 published quasi-experimental classroom studies. Their results showed that when comparing across groups, explicit correction and prompts
were more effective than recasts. However, when comparing within groups, prompts were the most effective followed by recasts and explicit correction. Lyster and Saito concluded that although these three kinds of CF were all effective to some extent, the effectiveness of explicit correction was weaker than that of recasts. Furthermore, prompts were viewed as the most effective type of CF.

As can be seen above, research has not reached a clear consensus regarding which type of CF is most effective. In addition, a minority of researchers questions the effectiveness of CF at all, suggesting that the practice is best abandoned (Krashen 1981; Schwartz 1993; Sheen 2005; Truscott 1999). In particular, Truscott, in his 1999 review article, listed a number of arguments in favor of abolishing CF in the classroom. From a teacher’s perspective, there are difficulties in (1) understanding the error, (2) presenting the correction, (3) correcting consistently, (4) tailoring the correction to the student, and (5) maintaining a communicative focus. From a student’s perspective, there is difficulty in (1) noticing and recognizing the correction, (2) taking the correction seriously, (3) understanding and accepting the correction, and (4) incorporating the correction. Together with the previously mentioned uncertainty regarding the best type of CF, the call to abandon CF altogether leaves teachers with conflicting opinions regarding the role of CF in the classroom.

Nevertheless, there is growing consensus among researchers, based on the results of multiple meta-analyses, that CF does have a place in the classroom.

L2 teachers’ stated beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs have been a focus of many studies in education; however, despite this long history, there does not seem to exist a consensus regarding how beliefs can be defined (Borg 2001, 2003; Pajares 1992; Woods 1996). One reason may be that beliefs are not easily amenable to empirical investigation; therefore, educational researchers often resort to investigating teachers’ stated beliefs expressed in interviews and questionnaires. For this reason, the present study revolves around stated beliefs, which are defined as ‘statements [L2] teachers made about their ideas, thoughts, and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of what “should be done”, “should be the case”, and “is preferable”’ (Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis 2004, 244).

There has been considerable investigation into how teachers’ stated beliefs are formed and what might influence currently held beliefs. Researchers suggest that three general areas have a large influence on teacher cognition (Borg 1999a, 1999b; Woods 1996). First, teachers’ own experiences of learning are an important consideration. Many L2 teachers have themselves studied an L2, and these years of classroom experiences have an effect on teachers’ views of how an L2 should or should not be taught. Second, teacher training and education programs have an influence as preservice teachers engage in coursework, practicums, and workshop throughout their university education. Furthermore, many in-service teachers engage in teacher development opportunities throughout their careers. Finally, the experiences that in-service teachers have, especially during their first few years of teaching, can influence their beliefs. It is the second component, namely teacher education and training, that most directly relates to the current study.

The influence of teacher education and teaching experience is important when it comes to stated beliefs. Crandall (2000) suggests that there is the possibility of changing L2 teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices through teacher education if
the program consistently offers opportunities for practical experiences and reflection upon those experiences. However, previous studies show contradictory results as to whether or not preservice teachers change through teacher education (Kettle and Sellars 1996). Some studies have found that teacher education had little or no influence on teachers’ stated beliefs (Mattheoudakis 2007; Peacock 2001; Pennington and Urmston 1998; Okazaki 1996; Urmston 2003). In contrast, other studies have shown that teacher education had a large impact (Angelova 2005; Busch 2010; Kettle and Sellars 1996; MacDonald, Badger, and White 2001; Murray 2003). Such variation results, in part, because knowledge of teaching is not simply transmitted to, followed, or realized by prospective teachers; rather such knowledge is informed by prior experiences and beliefs (Freeman 1993, 1996; Johnson and Golombek 2002; Rankin and Becker 2006). In addition, Borg (2011) suggests that although a change in stated beliefs may not occur as a result of teacher training, a better ability to articulate one’s beliefs is also a possible and important outcome.

Although many studies have examined preservice teachers as shown above, it is also important to investigate the stated beliefs of experienced teachers (Cheung and Pennington 1994; Pennington 1996). In-service training programs have been found to have considerable influence on teachers’ beliefs (Akbari and Dadvand 2011; Borg 1999b; Cheung and Pennington 1994; Lamie 2004; Numrich 1996; Pennington 1996; Scott and Rodgers 1995). One relevant study that investigated the relationships among teacher training, teacher experience, and classroom practices was conducted by Mackey, Polio, and McDonough (2004), who compared the provision of CF by nine experienced and nine inexperienced teachers. Results showed that both groups engaged in approximately equal amounts of negotiation; however, the experienced teachers used more feedback techniques than did the inexperienced ones. In order to encourage inexperienced teachers to provide similar amounts of CF as did experienced teachers, the researchers provided inexperienced teachers with a professional development workshop, consisting of (1) discussions of CF, (2) video examples of CF, (3) role plays in which the teachers practiced CF techniques, and (4) reflections on transcripts of their own teaching. Quantitative analysis did not reveal a statistical increase in teachers’ provision of CF, but qualitative results showed that the workshop raised the teachers’ awareness of the opportunities to use CF. However, the teachers commented on the difficulty of incorporating CF into their teaching, partly owing to their insufficient skills in implementing the techniques that they learned in the workshop.

Although not all teacher training programs include the reading of academic articles, such activity is a common practice in many MA TESOL degrees. The impact of such reading on teachers’ stated beliefs varies (Borg 1999b; Kagan 1992; Zeuli 1994). Borg (2007) found that only one-fifth of teachers in his study reported that research studies had a fairly strong influence on them, with the remaining teachers claiming that it had moderate or slight influence. Rankin and Becker (2006) described an action research study, conducted as part of a graduate-level pedagogy seminar, in which an inexperienced native-speaking teacher of German read three academic articles about CF. The articles impacted the consistency of the teacher’s stated beliefs and classroom practices of CF; however, he was not always able to implement his beliefs in the classroom due to the diversity of student needs. He commented that the research articles did not seem to provide guidance in this regard. Nevertheless, the seminar provided the opportunity for deep reflection on his provision of CF.
Finally, while the previous studies suggest that research articles may influence inexperienced teachers’ stated beliefs, the impact may be less on experienced teachers whose stated beliefs may be more deep-seated. For example, Shkedi (1998) found that only one teacher among 47 stated that she would prioritize research findings over her own beliefs. Three-fifths of the teachers said that they would reject the entire findings of a research study if it did not correspond to their own classroom experiences.

Views on L2 pedagogy are not static; rather, they shift and develop over time, in no small part due to the prevailing SLA theories which are supported by empirical research. Consequently, it is important to consider how experienced teachers can be influenced by current trends in classroom pedagogy. Teachers who have been teaching for many years may have received their initial training from theoretical perspectives that are no longer supported. How can these teachers be exposed to current theoretical perspectives? One way is for them to engage with current academic articles; however, most of the previous studies on this issue focused on preservice and inexperienced teachers, and relatively little is known about the influence that reading research has on experienced teachers who have stated beliefs that may be deeply held and influenced by their many years of teaching in the classroom. The current study investigates an innovative approach to teacher training in which the impact that reading three academic articles with differing perspectives on CF has on one ESL teacher who has been in the classroom for numerous years.

**Method**

The present study was conducted at an intensive English program (IEP) at a large American university. The IEP offers various programs, but its major function is to prepare ESL students for university study, the majority of whom come from China, Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

This case study focuses on one teacher at the IEP. John, a native speaker of English, had been teaching English for 14 years in total, including three years outside the USA. Early in his career, John had taken a two-week long ESL training course right before he went overseas, but he later completed a master’s degree in TESOL. The masters’ program included a practicum, and John was also exposed to many academic articles during this time. He was also a colleague of the first author of this paper, who had been teaching at the IEP for four years.

In order to elicit John’s stated beliefs and to investigate the impact of reading three academic articles, two semi-structured interviews were conducted. The first interview occurred during the fourth week of classes and focused primarily on more general questions about his L2 learning and teaching experiences, his L2 teacher training, and his current teaching context. In addition, he was asked about his stated beliefs regarding L2 teaching in general and CF in particular; however, at the first interview John was not made aware that the researchers were specifically interested in his stated beliefs about CF. After the first interview, John was provided with three academic articles, along with a PowerPoint file, on the topic of CF (Lyster and Saito 2010; Truscott 1999; Mackey, Gass, and McDonough 2000). These instruments are detailed below. John was asked to read the articles within three weeks of the first interview, after which a second interview was conducted. During this interview, John was asked questions more specifically related to CF.

The articles provided to John were chosen because they offered differing perspectives on CF. Lyster and Saito (2010) presents a meta-analysis that
synthesizes 15 classroom studies on CF and their findings suggest that CF is effective in the classroom; however, it is less clear which types of CF might be most beneficial. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough’s (2000) article is a single empirical study that investigates teachers’ and students’ perceptions of CF provided in the classroom. Finally, Truscott (1999) presents a position paper in which he argues against the provision of CF due to its ineffectiveness and potentially harmful effects. In addition to the articles, John was given a PowerPoint file containing 31 slides which summarized the three articles, as well as provided examples of CF from Sheen (2004). The rationale for providing the PowerPoint file was to ameliorate any accessibility difficulties, John might have had with the technical, methodological components of the research articles (particularly Lyster and Saito’s meta-analysis which by necessity describe complex statistical procedures). In addition, the PowerPoint had the potential to save John’s time in understanding the main ideas from the articles, an important consideration given teachers’ busy schedules.

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and were analyzed using a content analysis to derive concepts and themes from the interview data (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005; Richards 2003; Thomas 2006).

Results and discussion
The next sections discuss John’s stated beliefs and his reaction to each of the academic articles.

John’s stated beliefs on CF
John’s stated beliefs on CF were investigated during two interviews, a more general interview before he read the articles and a more focused one after reading. In the first interview, John emphasized two points that he regarded as the most important in his teaching: (1) teaching critical thinking skills and (2) creating a comfortable environment for his students. He also stated that he used to think about CF a lot, but that was not the case anymore because it was not currently his main focus in the classroom.

Nevertheless, during the first interview John stated that he believed that CF was generally effective, and thus should be provided. Supporting this notion, John made comments such as, ‘I really thought that even if I am providing feedback that isn’t perfectly matched to a learner’s acquisition ability or timing or whatever, it’s better than not doing it,’ and ‘when students make...a grammatical mistake but not about the thing that we’re focused on...giving some correction to that, because their mind is already there, I think could be useful.’

When further asked why he thought CF could be effective, John said that it is ‘logical,’ and then added:

When mistakes happen, that is a good learning moment...in the classroom where there’s a natural flow...it makes sense that if I interject and say ok...here is what you said wrong, and here’s what is correct. That to me seems a lot more natural than like, the one off assessment measure that I create for them. So, I guess just logically to me, it seems like it makes sense to me intellectually...that it would be helpful.
In the first interview, John commented that his use of CF was ‘natural’ and ‘automatic and unconscious.’ He stated, ‘it’s not in the forefront of my mind...I’m hopeful that this is something that happens naturally during the class at this point,’ and ‘my hope is that some of [CF] is natural now.’

Before detailing John’s reactions to the academic articles, it is important to note the dissatisfaction he expressed in the first interview regarding research studies:

In education, there should be a right answer...what works best in the classroom. There’s a right answer. Right?...My problem with research [studies] is that they tend to be contradictory...You should be able to come to a conclusion that says this will make you a better teacher. This style will be optimal in the classroom.

After the first general interview, John read the PowerPoint file, Lyster and Saito (2010) and Truscott (1999), but did not read Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) in part because he read the PowerPoint summary of it and also because he thought that it would not ‘[add] anything new’ or ‘draw any new conclusion’ to what he gained from the other readings.

John’s responses to Lyster and Saito

Overall, John found Lyster and Saito’s (2010) meta-analysis is a more convincing article, in large part because it was not based on a single experimental study. He repeatedly made comments such as, ‘the meta-analysis had a lot more data behind it, and the numbers made...that argument stronger for me,’ and ‘it’s hard to deny when you look at...the meta-analysis of all those different studies, the evidence seems to me pretty clearly in favor of the usefulness at some level of feedback.’ He also stated:

I’m skeptical by nature...if there is one article, that was...based on one study...then I could find holes in it...and say well, what about this factor, but [Lyster and Saito] analyzed objectively those fifteen [studies], and...it’s fairly strong intellectual proof.

At the same time, John showed his dissatisfaction with the lack of detailed information about the 15 studies in the meta-analysis. Although this problem may be unavoidable in a meta-analysis due to length limitations in academic journals, it seems to have frustrated John. He stated, ‘I couldn’t find that information on these studies.’ This lack of methodological information about the 15 studies made him wonder to what extent they were conducted in a natural classroom setting, which may have been a crucial issue when evaluating their applicability to the real classrooms. Pointing at a sentence that he highlighted in Lyster and Saito (2010, 290) that states, ‘corrective feedback in classroom settings may be more effective when its delivery is more pedagogically orientated (i.e., prompts) than conversationally orientated (i.e., recasts),’ John indicated his agreement with this sentence and added an explanation:

They say here most of the studies that they reference...set up certain situations that would lend themselves to feedback. And I think when you do that, you separate the element of the natural classroom flow....a lot of these studies were set up to elicit this feedback.

Furthermore, John wondered about the focus of the instruction in each of the 15 studies, a factor which he thought would influence the use and effectiveness of
feedback. Asked what questions he had while reading Lyster and Saito, he wondered whether, ‘there have been studies just focusing on grammar and then maybe only focusing on vocabulary correction…that would be interesting to see if there’s a difference in effectiveness [between the] two different categories.’ John speculated that CF on grammar in a grammar lesson would be more effective than feedback on vocabulary in a vocabulary lesson:

If I correct a vocabulary word and we kinda continue on… I think the student isn’t focused directly on vocabulary at that moment, so I wonder how much they pick it up versus if we’re studying a grammar point, and then there is an opportunity and there is a mistake, I just say, oh, you mean, blah… we’re already studying grammar, so, boom, I think that naturally to me seems like it would be more effective than the first situation.

Thus, while John appreciated the ‘strong intellectual proof’ that Lyster and Saito’s meta-analysis of multiple studies provided, he was skeptical due to the lack of detailed information about the studies, which made it more difficult for John to feel that the results could be applied to the classroom. These reactions reveal that although John was concerned with the pedagogical implications of research, he also appreciated the rigorous and somewhat complex methodology employed in the study.

John’s responses to Truscott

In response to Truscott (1999) position paper, John expressed several reasons for his interest in it, although he did not necessarily agree with Truscott’s conclusions:

The Truscott article was the most entertaining. Because it brought up a lot of good points and it wasn’t as based in research, so it’s easier just to read through and I found myself thinking yeah, yeah… I understand what you’re saying… I enjoyed the Truscott article the most as far as just reading.

John also stated that Truscott addressed relevant concerns regarding CF. He stated, ‘he makes valid points that are worth thinking about,’ and ‘he brings up a lot of natural questions that I think, come up from… the research on feedback and how it helps the students or not.’

In the meantime, he called Truscott ‘the outlier,’ and claimed that many of his arguments did not necessarily mean that CF should be abandoned. John stated:

Most of [Truscott’s concerns]… were a natural part of what a teacher does, and not necessarily indicative of an inability to provide feedback.

Furthermore, John was troubled by Truscott’s lack of evidence to corroborate his arguments. He stated, ‘I don’t think that he really proves anything in this article.’ Asked why, he added:

He brings up a lot of data, but the data is very scattered and not real, he references a whole bunch of different articles, but never anything that really proved to me that what he’s saying would suggest that providing feedback is useless. I guess that’s what I mean by he didn’t prove anything as far as I’m concerned.
John also mentioned the difficulty in experimentally verifying some of the Truscott’s conclusions:

I think that the questions that Truscott brought up . . . when I read that . . . I don’t know how we could prove [them]. Some of his concerns . . . I don’t even know how you would study that and separate it from other issues that were going on [in the classroom].

In addition to his overall concerns about Truscott’s views, John also commented specifically on several points. For example, in response to Truscott’s opinion that error correction for one student may not be appropriate for other students, John commented, ‘I think that’s a pretty large jump.’ In stark contrast, John stated, ‘I think sometimes that feedback is also for the rest of the class.’ He further added:

If you have a level, you have some general . . . weaknesses and strengths of those students, and of course there’s variability, but I would be shocked if one student made an error . . . that the majority of the students in that class wouldn’t often have that same error at some point. That’s why I think that argument doesn’t hold a lot of water.

Several claims that Truscott made were derived from the practical difficulties of providing CF. While admitting that such difficulties existed in his classroom, John still believed that they would not negate the effectiveness of feedback. For example, he admitted that he may not be able to notice some of the errors in the classroom, but he further added, ‘but still I don’t think . . . that impacts whether [CF] is effective or not.’ While he agreed with Truscott that ‘it is difficult for teachers to make error correction consistent,’ he added, ‘my question was . . . does it have to be consistent?’ Finally, regarding another of Truscott’s points – ‘error correction facilitates explicit knowledge, but does not facilitate implicit knowledge’ – John broadened the issue to language teaching in general. He stated:

I think that could be said with a lot of language teaching . . . and how do we make the explicit into the implicit . . . that’s the struggle with any kind of instruction. In my opinion, that’s just one of the challenges of teaching, and it’s practice, it’s repetition, it is correction, and I think you have to have that step in that process or . . . you don’t have a shot at the implicit part.

Thus, although he appreciated the accessibility of Truscott’s article and his concern with pedagogical issues, John was concerned with the lack of empirical support for the arguments against the provision of CF.

**Influence on stated beliefs**

John reacted differently to the two articles he read, which may not be surprising given their different styles and purposes. However, neither article seemed to sway his stated beliefs about the provision of CF; rather, John’s opinions appeared to inform his interaction with the articles. That is to say, John found information that supported his views and used that in elaborating his stated beliefs. (The authors would like to thank D.F. [intentionally anonymized for reviewing; personal communication] for this insight.) For example, John indicated his agreement with a sentence that he had highlighted in Lyster and Saito (2010, 294) that said, ‘it is
effective to employ corrective feedback in response to students’ nontargetlike production because it contributes to target language development over time.’ Nevertheless, the articles succeeded in raising John’s awareness of his CF practices. For example, John said, ‘as I read through this, I was thinking about [my use of CF].’ Also, he stated, ‘I’ve been thinking about what my natural way is [of providing CF]. And I’m not sure if I know the answer to that, like it’s hard for me to pull myself out objectively and think about what I just did an hour ago.’ Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulty, the articles appeared to do just that they ‘pulled John out of himself’ as he considered his classroom practices of CF.

John mentioned two possible effects that the readings had on him. First, he would be more conscious of CF, stating:

I would like to think that [reading these studies] will make me more aware of those opportunities [for CF], especially like I said going to class today…[a] grammatical lesson, really there’s opportunity here, for that…a lot of it…when you speak about grammar, it becomes explicit correction, ah, but certainly there are opportunities for…more implicit [CF].

Second, John said that he would ‘like to give and be able to use a variety of ways just to make sure that their exposure isn’t only one style of feedback, it’s not always explicit, for example.’ This sentiment may be derived from Lyster and Saito’s meta-analysis which described the varied effects that different types of CF might have. John’s expression of this belief corresponds with his earlier stated belief regarding the benefits of providing CF, although it may reflect a more nuanced and deliberate approach to the provision of CF.

Discussion

In considering the implications of the current study, it is important to explore several issues. First and foremost, John did read two of the three academic articles that he was provided. Since several studies have shown that L2 teachers are reluctant to engage with research studies (e.g., Bartels 2003; Shkedi 1998), this fact is not insignificant, but it is also important to consider John’s motivations for doing so. John did not seek out these articles; rather, he was asked by a colleague to read them as part of participating in a research study. Thus, John had agency in making his decision, yet he may also have been influenced more by collegiality than by a desire to discover recent theoretical and empirical perspectives on CF. These motives may be reflected in John’s decision not to read Mackey, Gass, and McDonough’s (2000) single empirical study and instead concentrate on the two review articles.

Second, the impact that the two articles had on John differed. John found Lyster and Saito’s meta-analysis particularly convincing, which is somewhat surprising given the overall skepticism he expressed about research during the first interview. In addition, meta-analyses rely heavily on technical statistical procedures, which have been shown to limit teachers’ understanding of research (Bolitho 1991; McDonough and McDonough 1990; Shkedi 1998; Zeuli 1994). In contrast, John found Truscott’s article engaging and readable, and while John agreed with some of Truscott’s arguments, he disagreed with others. Previous studies (e.g., Bartels 2003) have shown that teachers are generally concerned with the more pedagogical aspects of research,
and it is clear that John had a lot to say about Truscott’s pedagogical claims, and many of his comments were framed in terms of his own classroom experiences.

Although the articles did not appear to influence the nature of John’s stated beliefs, they did succeed in raising John’s awareness of his CF practices; such awareness raising has been argued to be a significant benefit of reading research studies for L2 teachers (Ellis 1997; Mackey, Polio, and McDonough 2004; Rankin and Becker 2006). As an experienced teacher, John admitted that he had not thought much about CF recently and that any CF in the classroom occurred ‘naturally’ and ‘automatically.’ Thus, reading these articles gave John the opportunity to consider an aspect of classroom pedagogy that he had not thought much about.

In terms of teacher development, it is important to consider how experienced teachers are exposed to new pedagogical ideas. This study suggests that one way might be to include research articles in a teacher development program. If teachers read an article and discuss it, it can raise their awareness of the topic. However, few teachers may be willing and/or able to take the time that John did in this study. In this regard, it is interesting to note that John focused much of his attention on the meta-analysis which synthesized the results of 15 previous studies rather than on one individual study. Perhaps, it is a better use of teachers’ time to provide them with such research-based, synthetic articles. In this way, the findings from multiple studies can be distilled into a more compact format. As the field of SLA matures and synthetic research and meta-analyses increase, such an option will be more of a possibility.

Of course, it is important to consider the limitations of the current study. Because it is a case study of one individual, it does not provide generalizable conclusions about the role of research articles on teachers’ stated beliefs; nevertheless, case studies can provide detailed information that can be transportable to other contexts. In addition to being limited to one individual, the study was also limited, in essence, to two academic articles. Again, different articles could have evoked different responses, but it is possible to consider how the specific characteristics of the articles may be applicable more generally. Finally, this study was not part of an existing teacher development program and was necessarily created for research purposes. Teachers do not often take the initiative or time to read several articles on a single pedagogical topic and engage in in-depth discussions about them; however, the study provides some insight into how academic articles could be incorporated into teacher development programs, which can still facilitate self-reflection on their classroom practices, even for experienced teachers, whose stated beliefs do not seem to be amenable to change. An innovative aspect of this study is that it shows one way, albeit limited and very specific, in which research can be made accessible to experienced teachers. Much research suggests that teachers avoid research, but if research is going to have an impact on teachers, it must be made accessible in some way.

In conclusion, it is not our position that teachers are the only ones who need to work on bridging the gap between research and pedagogy. Clearly, researchers should also consider ways in which they can make their work more accessible to teachers. Indeed, there have been numerous calls for teachers and researchers to work as partners in exploring the effectiveness of L2 pedagogy. Nonetheless, we hope that the current study sheds light on one way in which teachers and teacher trainers can utilize research to encourage reflection on their classroom practices.
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