



## JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • Jim McKinley

# Supporting the Teaching-Research Nexus: From Practice to Research and Back

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This paper explores the concept of a teaching-research nexus, which addresses the important relationship between teaching and research. It describes the benefits of grassroots teaching-informed or teaching-led research as a way to disrupt assumed unidirectional flows of knowledge within this nexus, which have historically been established from the perspective of research-informed teaching. I further focus on the implications for language educators who are working in policy-driven teaching-focused higher education in Japan.



The concept of a teaching-research nexus addresses the important relationship between teaching and research, one that challenges the presumed unidirectional flow of knowledge from research to teaching. In my *TESOL Quarterly* paper “Evolving the TESOL Teaching-Research Nexus” (McKinley, 2019), I raised the issue of how a growing divide has been noted between language teaching researchers and language teaching practitioners around the world. I argued that the division was due to many teachers’ lack of engagement with research on language teaching. This has led to a situation in which “irrelevant” research is seen by some as “out-of-touch with real-world teaching issues” (Sato & Loewen, in press, p. 3). Based on this year’s JALT conference theme of *Learning from Students, Educating Teachers: Research and Practice*, I will suggest that by learning from students through teaching, we can leverage the learning experiences of students to provide opportunities for researcher-practitioners to engage in research that tackles real-world teaching issues. The organisation of this paper is based on my own chronology, reflecting first on the origins of language teaching research. I follow this with an

overview of current relevant discussions in higher education studies and recent discoveries regarding language researcher-practitioner identities. Finally, I reflect on some Japan-based language-teaching research to highlight examples of researcher-practitioner work that is reaching beyond Japan.

### Grassroots Teaching-Informed Research

Language education is a social science, and as such, research grew out of the efforts made to address questions that arose in language education practices. The questions were based on real-world language teaching problems, and the ensuing research often came out of language researcher-practitioners’ efforts to answer questions by trial and error in their own language classrooms (McKinley, 2019). Language educators recognise a problem, they conduct research in their own teaching to try to solve it, and they apply the findings of their research to their teaching to see if the problem is solved. As these problems are always in flux, the process is open ended—an ongoing, forward-moving, and circular activity that will grow and take new shape as new problems arise or older solutions are no longer relevant or viable.

This understanding seems to have been lost somewhat over time, as those in positions to inform and educate about language teaching practices are those who are no longer in language teaching classrooms but who now identify primarily as researchers located in “research bubbles” or “research silos,” also known as “ivory towers” (Rose, 2019). Language educators—an umbrella term I use to include language teachers, language-teaching researchers, language researcher-practitioners, language teacher-researchers, or any other relevant term—are under increasing institutional pressure to produce research output. Educational policies and structures can force a bifurcation of teaching and research, resulting in the loss of the circular process of teaching informing research and back again. Instead, institutional constraints may leave language teachers without the capacity to engage in research and reliant on language-teaching researchers to provide them with the answers to their questions.

Later in this paper, I will return to the problems of limiting ourselves to research-informed teaching as the only outcome from a teaching-research nexus when considering work in higher education studies, but now, a more personal perspective will help me

to illustrate the problem as I see it, particularly concerning language educators in Japan.

### A Personal Perspective

The relationship between teaching and research as a language educator was something I struggled with for more than a decade working full-time at Sophia University in Tokyo. I had moved to Sophia while working on my PhD and, based on my developing studies, I found myself wanting to dig deeper into the *whys* and *hows* of English language teaching from an empirical perspective. The problem was, the job did not have a research element. To interpret it in UK academic contract terms, I was expected to fulfil essentially a “teaching-only” contract, even as I progressed from contract lecturer to permanent lecturer and then associate professor. While problems with Japanese higher education internationalisation policy as it affects contract types have been covered in recent literature (e.g., Morley et al., 2021), the case I raise here is the undervaluing by universities of language educators compared to those working in other academic disciplines, regardless of the contract.

As a Lecturer in English in a multi-disciplinary department, I was not expected to conduct any research. Some of my content area colleagues commented to me that of course the English teachers should teach more hours as they have no need to update materials—they can just teach the same content every term. Another colleague mentioned in a meeting that he felt burnt out and wanted to “take a break” by switching over to teaching the department’s English classes for a while. To be fair to them, until I arrived, those in the English section of the department were not research-active, and so these content area colleagues were basing their misunderstanding on what they had perceived as the norm. My colleagues—those in and outside the English department—were surprised to learn of all the research work I did, as it was neither required nor expected. They gradually learned to appreciate my research, as I used it to develop the curriculum for the department’s core program and the writing centre.

I was in two minds about my efforts. While the payoff was positive in terms of improvements to the program, I ended up creating more work for those coming into the English education group, as everyone was now expected to be research active while still teaching a heavier load than everyone else in the department. Eventually, after I left, the department did establish the same teaching workload for all, based upon an understanding of a teaching-research nexus, which became a central focus of my research after leaving Japan.

### Higher Education Studies and the Teaching-Research Nexus

I place teaching first when referring to the teaching-research nexus to emphasize its importance. I have endeavoured to highlight the benefits of grassroots teaching-informed or teaching-led research to disrupt unidirectional flows of knowledge within this nexus, which have historically been established from the perspective of research-informed teaching (McKinley et al., 2021). Higher education policies and organizational structures encapsulate the bifurcation of teaching and research—whether from a grassroots organic development or from a top-down implementation.

Higher education sectors globally are constantly revising their approaches in response to political and economic pressures, and for some time now in many parts of the world, we have experienced the reimagining of universities in the so-called “enterprise era.” The enterprise educational ideology is the most recent of the four raised by Trowler and Wareham (2007) that represent changes in attitude towards teaching and research. These ideologies were outlined in a broadly chronological order by McKinley et al. (2021) as follows: We started with *traditionalism*, where the teaching-research relationship was especially strong between researchers and research students. This moved loosely to *progressivism*, where the nexus was strengthened by the inclusion of teaching in research activities. The third ideology of *social reconstructionism*, with its shift toward a social justice agenda, strengthened the nexus even further. However, the most recent *enterprise* ideology is best understood as a drifting between teaching and research, where research agendas see a focus on innovation taking the place of teaching.

This is particularly concerning for the humanities and the social sciences, where the shift from social reconstructionism to an enterprise ideology may be aligning innovation with entrepreneurship. Such alignment compromises the earlier agendas of criticality and social justice, which in turn compromises the relationship between teaching and research.

Certainly, these ideologies affecting a teaching-research nexus vary widely in different national and institutional contexts. There are policy and organizational structures to consider at the institutional level that push teaching and research apart. For example, evaluating teaching and research separately at a systemic level strains the relationship in the daily practices of the two activities, leading to individuals making compromises (McIntosh et al., 2022). In some higher education sectors, such as those in the UK, we also see management roles sep-

arated, with different heads of research and heads of teaching, as well as research-led or teaching-led promotion pathways (McKinley et al., 2021).

In Japanese higher education, policy-driven teaching-focused higher education seems to suggest that *enterprise* ideology-inspired organizational structures may not have had the same impact. The most recent higher education policy initiatives have targeted internationalization, maintaining a focus on students and the development of competitive graduates (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020; Rose & McKinley, in press). This has meant increasing support for students by increasing resources for English language educators and advisors, as well as support for content instructors to deliver effective teaching in English (Bradford & Brown, 2017). These initiatives have big implications for language educators in Japan. With the realization that to meet policy objectives, students need to develop both English language skills and content knowledge. There is a growing body of research highlighting the importance of learning from students to inform curriculum and policy formation for the purposes of better supporting students (e.g., Rose et al., 2020).

Taking such research further, we can see it has the potential to conceptualize a nexus in which teaching and research are mutually beneficial. An inherent problem with many higher education policies and structures is the conceptualization of the teaching-research nexus being a point at which the two meet, as if on an axis. This conceptualization itself is a bifurcation of the two activities. If we can understand the nexus to be more holistic (more along the lines of the *traditionalism* ideology), the nexus can be seen as more of an ongoing process, such as the one described at the start of this paper—one in which teaching can inform research, which can in turn inform teaching (McKinley, 2019). The idea of teaching and research as a holistic activity is one that has been mentioned in the literature as the activity representative of the “holistic academic.” However, is this just a bygone ideology—an unrealistic endeavour? Is it necessary to place our focus on teaching *or* research? How we identify ourselves as researcher-practitioners may not necessarily align with institutional or systemic pressures. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate such identities, and to consider whether they also contribute to supporting or eroding a teaching-research nexus.

### Language Teacher Identities

Are language teaching and language-teaching research inescapably divided? Is such a divide due to language teachers not, or no longer, engaging

with language-teaching research as purported in the literature? I approached these questions in a recent study (Rose & McKinley, in press), which explored the teacher identities of more than 400 researchers of language teaching, to highlight that the teaching-research community may not be as divided as some people suggest. This exploration was done in two stages, first via text analysis of authors' biographies, and second via a questionnaire completed by 233 of those authors. We found through the biographical text analysis that teaching was rarely mentioned, in favour of highlighting areas of research expertise, academic qualifications, and other publications. From the questionnaire data, we discovered that these authors did, in fact, have a lot of teaching experience as well as teaching qualifications, but the teaching aspects were frequently underreported in the author bios. There are certainly many possible reasons for this underreporting, from authors' understanding of the genre of author bios, to limited word counts in author bios and a belief that teaching aspects may be seen as less impressive to readers who they want to instil with confidence that their work is worth reading. Ultimately, we argue that authors with relevant teacher identities should highlight their professional expertise, especially in journals most accessed by language educators and that claim to support a teaching-research nexus.

### Disrupting the Flow: Nurturing Teaching-Informed Research

Japanese higher education and its conceptualizations of a teaching-research nexus are changing. As universities continue to change their recruitment criteria for language educators, such as requirements to hold a doctorate or to have a track record of research publications (McCrostie, 2010), more people in language education are embodying a researcher identity. These researcher-practitioners are functioning within integrated ideologies affecting a teaching-research nexus, solving real issues in their classrooms which are then feeding into important theories and notions in research communities. Examples include the body of work in the 2010s in Japan on Global Englishes (Galloway, 2013; Galloway & Rose, 2014, 2018; Rosenhan & Galloway, 2019), which has spurred a new research field and attracted new researcher-practitioner communities in other areas such as Thailand (e.g., Boonsuk et al., 2021). There has also been valuable work produced by scholars in Japan on the topic of native speakerism and the impact on English language teaching (Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018; Lowe & Pinner, 2016). Earlier examples of impactful Japan-based

research include a wealth of motivational research on topics like Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Watanabe, 2013; Yashima, 2002) and silence in the classroom (King, 2013), which were born from the work of researcher-practitioners in Japan who were seeking more interactive and communicative classrooms. This practice-oriented research has helped to develop a strong empirical basis for these fields, ensuring research is practically grounded and relevant to solving real classroom issues.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I reflect on the impact of teaching on research, particularly concerning the current situation for language educators in Japan. The bifurcation of teaching and research, spurned by shifting ideologies and enterprise-era educational contexts, threatens to strengthen the unidirectional flow or knowledge within the nexus by adding further emphasis to research and its presumed influence (by researchers) on teaching and to weaken the potential for teaching to inform research. Language educators are continuing to make compromises as they develop their research profiles within such structures. In my own experience in Japan, I feel somewhat complicit, having pressed my department to recognize and value research at a time when the academic culture did not demand it. However, I also feel a strong sense of accomplishment in raising the recognition of language teaching research in that department. While Japan might be changing, there are more opportunities, and more value is placed on research activities at the nexus—research that has grown out of addressing real issues in language education. The important point about recognizing these opportunities going forward is to prioritize support for research that is not removed from teaching, to place more value on teaching-informed research, and to remember that the reason for the language teaching research is to address real-world problems in language education.

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## JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • John Creswell

# Introducing Mixed Methods Research in Language Learning and Teaching

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Few mixed methods research studies have been published in language learning and teaching. To encourage this methodology among English language teachers and researchers, I will introduce a simple logic model of interconnected steps in this research approach. The model starts with a mixed methods problem and continues with the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the combination or integration of the two databases, the framing of integration within a specific type of mixed methods design, analysis of integration within a table of data, and finally, the interpretation or meta-inferences drawn from the quantitative and qualitative data combination. Through this process, participants will learn the language of mixed methods research, will be introduced to state-of-the-art thinking, and will see the practical value of using this methodology. I will end with a proposed mixed methods study in Japanese language learning based on my own experiences illustrating the steps in the logic model.



Mixed methods research studies are found in many fields in the social and health sciences. For language teaching and learning, authors of the overviews of using this methodology have lamented the lack of research studies. However, the conversation about using mixed methods has begun in language learning. In 2017, an entire book addressed its application in language learning and teaching (Riazi, 2017). A year earlier, my colleagues at Cambridge English and I authored a book titled *Second Language Assessment and Mixed Methods Research* (Moeller et al., 2016). Our efforts focused on bringing mixed methods in the second language field and encouraging their use. I remember studying carefully and citing a well-written language learning article by Wesely (2010) that addressed the motivation to learn languages in an immersion program. More recent publications in language studies provide a systematic research synthesis in language writing (Park et al., 2021) and explore web-based classroom instruction in language learning (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2018). Still, few articles link mixed methods to language teaching and learning.

My experiences in presenting workshops and lectures in Asian countries have encouraged me to clarify the meaning of mixed methods research for non-English speaking researchers. Consequently, in this paper, I present a simplified logic model that describes the major components of this approach. I will begin with an overview of the model, detail each component, and end by proposing a mixed methods study based on my experiences during the last three years as a language learner of Japanese.