

How Teachers and Researchers Read Academic Articles

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Educators often cite an apparent void in communication between those who serve as teachers and those who act as researchers in the academic community. Noting that “teachers and researchers hold strong, and often different, views on school subjects and academic disciplines,” this study examines the ways that teachers and researchers think and respond when they read allegedly common journal articles.

The designer of this study randomly selected three second language teachers and three second language researchers from larger groups participating in a survey of attitudes towards reading about research. All of the researchers were female, tenured full professors with numerous publications and years of experience in teacher education programs to their credit. The teacher participants had limited second language experience, no experience with publishing in academic journals, but averaged twenty years of teaching experience.

Two different articles were used in this study, one that could be considered research-oriented and the other teacher-oriented. Each study participant was asked to read both articles overnight, decide if the primary audience was researchers, teachers, or both, and to explain the reasons for their conclusions. Their responses were recorded and transcribed in individual interviews with the primary researcher for this study. Data analysis focused on whether or not the participants designated the articles for one target group or the other as well as the degree to which teachers and academics represent two different groups with differing ways of evaluating and using information in the articles. Additionally, analysis of the transcripts focused on

evidence that one group understands and accepts the communicative practices of the other group.

Results initially showed that all six participants clearly categorized the research-oriented article and the teacher-oriented article as such. One researcher stated, “I hate to call this a ‘teacher-paper’...It’s a ‘How To’ paper.” More important than the initial findings were statements regarding validity and what each group expected from an academic article. Research participants requested objective, empirical evidence for any claims made. “...give me some data. Show me that you’ve got 20 examples...You can’t make generalizations without supporting data.” In contrast, teachers expected and judged information based on the degree and quality of the connections the article makes to classroom realities and daily practice. For teachers, validity was primarily judged by the ease with which they could integrate the knowledge into their personal schemas.

Extensive discussion focused on the apparent differences in professional approaches to academic articles. First, study designers address the comparison of a public knowledge base primarily supported by the research community to a private knowledge base endorsed by individual teachers. The distinction is made between research community members who spend considerable time working towards making contributions to a public knowledge base versus teachers who “found that it wasn’t research that provided a frame to analyze teaching...it was these teachers’ own personal knowledge or intuition...” Concluding discussion focused significantly on the lack of acceptance between the teacher and researcher discourses.

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Abstracted by Benjamin Dotger