The EDC Journal: Then and Now, Now and Next
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of research-oriented papers published in the journal *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion* over the first four editions. In surveying the core teaching principles covered and research methods used, the paper serves as an overview of what has been achieved so far over the 116 articles reviewed and considers the journal as it currently stands. Findings reveal that, notwithstanding qualitative unstructured observations, quantitative questionnaires and experiments were dominant methodologies. By comparing the results of this review with a summary of publishing trends in the JALT journal, the paper offers suggestions for future research projects in the department.

INTRODUCTION

As the English Discussion Class (EDC) journal, *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion* (*New Directions…*), reaches its fifth installment, it is a valuable moment to pause and reflect on what has been achieved, meditate on the current state of the journal, and consider the way forward for what follows. Since 2012, when the first volume was published, a total of 167 articles have been written and published by 85 contributors including both instructors and program managers. One of the main aims of this study is to review what has been achieved in the previous volumes of *New Directions…* by identifying the teaching principles that have been focused on and the research methods used. A secondary purpose is to position research contained in the EDC journal within the wider ELT research community in Japan to identify similar areas of interest and set a course for the future.

Teachers often develop through ongoing reflection on in-class experiences which prompts revision of activities and materials, and delivery of better quality lessons that enhance students' learning experience and accelerate their acquisition of language skills. This is part of what Nunan and Lamb (1996, p. 4) refer to as being a 'self-directed teacher' and contributes to the notion of self-management as an important role for professionals teaching in a leaner-centered curriculum such as EDC which subscribes to a Communicative Language Teaching approach. EDC instructors have many opportunities to steer their professional development through peer-observations and by leading or actively participating in faculty development sessions. Furthermore, many early and mid-career instructors in the programme have some research training and gain experience conducting their own research through the completion of postgraduate studies. However, for many, there are barriers to engaging in independent research in greater depth due to heavy teaching workloads, uncertainty about the relationship between ELT theory and practice, and unfamiliarity with research methods and data analysis. Wallace (1991, p. 56) claims that through assuming the role of a teacher-researcher, language teaching professionals can better understand the connections between theory and practice, particularly through types of research that are close to the classroom and tackle real classroom challenges. The semester project bridges the gap between practical classroom teaching experience and theoretical knowledge through promoting reflection and evaluation of classroom phenomena via formal observation and supporting empirical research. Completion of semester projects is compulsory for all instructors. Departmental research has shown them

to be highly valued by teachers, especially in the way that projects act as a core aspect of professional development and the extent to which they provide instructors with a better understanding of how their teaching affects students' learning (Livingston & Moroi, 2015, p. 343).

A variety of different types of articles are written during the career of an EDC instructor. This sequence of articles provides instructors with a structure to develop their research interests over time starting with a self-reflection paper which focuses on teaching beliefs and values that are salient to the instructor's initial experiences of teaching in the programme, through to the classroom activity that introduces observations and evaluations of classroom activities, and culminating in a research project in which a full research methodology is employed to investigate some aspect of ELT related to the department and similar contexts. Semester projects completed by instructors in their third year in the programme and beyond qualify as 'classroom research' which "refers to the location and the focus of the study" (Bailey, 2014, p. 603). In other words, research is conducted in the classroom environment and the object being investigated is the activity in the classroom. However, as we shall see later, some of the articles in the classroom research section of *New Directions…* are based on research where the classroom is neither the setting nor the object of the study, for instance studies where the instructor is the source of the data. Much of the classroom research done in EDC fits the research design of action research, defined as "a systematic, iterative process of: identifying an issue, thinking and planning an appropriate action to address that concern, carrying out the action, observing the apparent outcomes, reflecting on the outcomes, and then repeating the cycle." (Nunan & Bailey, 2008, p. 227). This approach lends itself well to projects in the classroom activity section of the journal which are based on unstructured observations that test and evaluate classroom activities or practices.

Another common approach is the case study, which is perhaps less distinctive. Yin defines case study research as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (1984, p. 23). In the instance of EDC research, the context is the discussion lesson in the classroom and the phenomenon may be a particular teaching principle such as motivation. Upon reviewing literature from the field of applied linguistics, Nunan (1992, pp. 76-78) points out that case study research in this field often has a longitudinal aspect to it due to its application towards following language development. As a result of case studies being difficult to define due their hybridity, in this study time scale will be a key factor when categorizing projects as case studies.

METHOD

One hundred and sixteen articles about classroom activities or classroom research were selected for this current study, justified on the grounds that they were more empirical in nature than articles on reflective practice. On top of that, due to having a research design decided upon by the author, they tend to demonstrate a wider variety of data collection methods.

To establish the basis of a meaningful review, it was decided to examine two general features of the 116 articles: topic area and research method. In order to characterize articles into topic area, a pre-determined approach was decided upon drawing on Brown's (2007, pp.

64-80) twelve fundamental teaching principles: Automaticity, Meaningful learning, Anticipation of Reward, Intrinsic Motivation, Strategic Investment, Autonomy, Language Ego, Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Language-culture connection, The Native Language Effect, Interlanguage, and Communicative Competence. Upon initially piloting this method of characterization, it became starkly apparent that these principles overlapped in many of the articles. For example, most of the articles feature some aspect of Communicative Competence due to the context being a discussion class, but they also cover one or more of the other principles. On studies which are very wide ranging thematically, every effort has been made to characterize them as accurately as possible by identifying the core principles they represent to avoid homogeneity in the results of the review.

A two-tier approach was employed in order to categorize projects by research method. Categories were developed inductively throughout the categorization process. Approaches and methods were identified mostly by scanning the abstracts and methods sections of articles for vital clues and keywords. Early on in the categorization process the research methods became apparent and more were added to accommodate each study. After a small initial sample of categorization was completed, the methods were doubled-checked and then grouped into approaches. Table 1 sets out the categories. This type of categorization was settled on in order to focus on four approaches to research and their associated methods that are commonplace in English language teaching in sufficient detail whilst trying to avoid preoccupation with the narrow and somewhat simplistic distinctions of quantitative and qualitative research.

Table 1. Four research approach categories and methods sub-categories

Survey	Questionnaire	Case Study	Mixed Methods
	Interviews		Qualitative other
Experiment	Classic		Theoretical
	Quasi		Observation
Action Research	Observation		Comparative
	Qualitative other		

This methodology is not without its limits however. One limitation to the study is that both types of categorization involved a tremendous amount of subjectivity on the part of the researcher. This kind of interference was perhaps accentuated when categorizing research approaches and methods as there was no pre-determined framework. Higher levels of reliability in the categorization process could have been achieved through having a co-researcher to also undertake the entire categorizing procedure to allow for cross-checking.

RESULTS

Starting with principles (Table 1), unsurprisingly due to the speaking skill-based orientation of the EDC programme, Communicative Competency was the most commonly focused on principle with 84% (n=98). In most cases Communicative Competency was not studied in isolation but was looked at in conjunction with one or more other principles. Strategic Investment 32% (n=37) featured heavily in the sample of articles and this overlapped extensively with the other cognitive principles such as Intrinsic Motivation 17% (n=20) and Autonomy 24% (n=28). These three principles link up due to the way in which instructors in

many studies were researching the effects of activities that aimed to internalize learners' responsibility for their own learning and encourage better discussion performance through making activities more rewarding. Two papers exhibiting this blended principle focus are Singh (2015) and Warchulski (2015), both of which investigate the effectiveness of self-assessment materials entailing a goal-setting orientation. Another much looked at principle is Automaticity 23% (n= 27). Studies on this principle span a variety of different activities in EDC covering pre-teaching topic-related vocabulary (Smith, 2015), a focus-on-form to encourage better use of target-language (Turner, 2015), and the benefits of fluency-building activities in comparison to interactive pairwork tasks (Bertorelli, 2012). A good number of studies concentrated on the principle of WTC 16% (n=18). Aldrich's (2014) paper provides a useful example of this in which students are allocated roles in group discussions to encourage risk-taking and reduce reticence to perform speaking or active listener turns. The category of 'Other' (n=8) contained studies that were impossible to categorize. Some interesting examples here are Hunter (2013), which sheds light on ways in which gender impacts on the composition of discussion groups, and Finn (2015) which evaluates the usefulness of activities to develop critical thinking skills in EDC lessons.

Table 2. Frequency of teaching principles studied

Automaticity	Meaningful Learning	Anticipation of Reward	Intrinsic Motivation	Strategic Investment	Autonomy	Language Ego
27	8	6	20	37	28	7
WTC	Language-culture Connection	Native Language Effect	Interlanguage	Communicative Competence	Other	
18	8	2	6	98	8	

Turning now to research methods (Table 2), the majority of studies in the sample come under the approach of Action Research 80% (n=93) and all but one of these were observations. This is to be expected when we take into consideration that 50 out of the 116 projects in the sample were classroom activity type articles in which studies centered around the evaluation of an activity implemented in class for which no data was collected. Many studies in the classroom research section also involved Action Research style observations, thus continuing the same methodology used in the previous classroom activity project. In some Action Research-based projects, a survey approach to collecting data through questionnaires was also implemented (n=11). This is evident in Yagi (2013) which blends classroom observation notes with questionnaire data to explore the feasibility of teaching critical thinking by introducing students to a range of logical patterns. Other Action Research ties in qualitative data collection by way of an Experimental approach (n=31) as with Warren's (2015) article which measures the improvement in lexical density of speaking turns delivered by students before and after the introduction of a language scaffolding schema. This study employed a quasi-experimental method but some research included a control group to follow a classic experiment method, such as Kellas (2013) in a study investigating the possibility of increasing student speech rates during fluency activities using a metronome.

Table 3. Frequency of research approaches and methods used

Survey	Questionnaire	18		Mixed Methods	13
	Interviews	1		Qualitative other	9
Experiment	Classic	13	Case Study	Theoretical	2
	Quasi	18		Observation	45
Action Research	Observation	93		Comparative	5
	Qualitative other	1			

A Case Study approach was widely employed and within this approach a diverse range of methods or types of case study were used. As a result of the hybrid nature of these case studies, there was also much overlap with the other approaches. Doran (2012) is one particular example in which peer assessment data was collected at three separate intervals during the semester to track fluency gains in conjunction with a focus on the critical evaluation of his method of measurement through observational diaries. Another example is Landicho's (2015) study which transcribed extended discussions from twelve classes and undertook a form of conversation analysis to look at interactions in which students assume novice or expert roles to collaboratively fix communication breakdowns. The study focuses on how leaners employ the techniques they have learnt over an entire academic year to negotiate meaning between themselves and combines qualitative data with observations to achieve this. A further rare example of a case study utilising a qualitative methodology, and even less common in that instructors were the research subjects, is a paper by Wilson (2015). This research analyses semi-structured interviews with instructors from a range of nationalities to explore how cultural backgrounds of native and non-native speaker teachers are synthesized with their pedagogical knowledge. It is a point of interest here that very few studies focused on the instructor as the source of data, and that qualitative methods other than observations (n=9) together with clear examples of mixed methods studies (n=13) are underrepresented in the sample overall.

DISCUSSION

Results reveal that some principles and methods have been covered more than others. The relevance of certain principles to EDC is reflected in the objectives and requirements of the programme. For instance, WTC is a popular research topic in the department seeing that students are expected to share ideas and communicate effectively in group discussions. Similarly, due to emphasis placed on inclusion of a fluency-building activity in EDC lessons, a great number of instructors have made Automaticity the main teaching principle in their semester projects. It would be unfair to undervalue the theme of Autonomy and abandon it to focus on lesser covered principles when developing greater independence in learners is crucial to building students' discussion skills. Furthermore, discouraging questionnaires in favour of qualitative interviews would be unwise seeing that the method is the most effective and efficient means of collecting large samples of data on attitudes when researching cognitive principles.

Overlapping of research approaches and methods is clearly visible in this review. In spite of the messiness and much complexity this causes, difficulties in distinction are treated as inevitable and tolerable, following the assumption that demarcations between research approaches and methods are an ever evolving and are much disputed spanning debates far

beyond the scope of this paper. Looking onwards, it is worthwhile to contemplate how we can combine or use different methods to research the most relevant principles to EDC whilst building confidence in the validity and reliability of our data. One way to gain perspective on the issue of future direction is to assume a more outward looking position by looking at how studies published in *New Directions…* size up in terms of topic focus and research approach and method with other Japan-based English language teaching journals.

In a review of 297 articles in the JALT journal between 1978 and 2008, Stapleton and Collett (2010) discovered a bias towards quantitative methods and an increase in qualitative and mixed methods research over the 30 years. The topic focus section of the review paper finds that although pedagogy and teaching methodology dominated earlier papers, more recent articles featured themes such as teacher/learner beliefs, motivation, and test reliability.

To bring this review up to date and draw closer comparisons with the EDC journal, a quick survey of JALT journal articles between 2010 and 2015 (n=43) was compiled using the same categorization method used with *New Directions…*. Results indicate that many of the key principles frequently covered in the EDC journal were also prominent in the JALT journal including: Communicative Competence (n=9), Intrinsic Motivation (n=5), Automaticity (n=3), and WTC (n=3). However, since 2010 JALT has included some noticeable topics that have been less covered or not covered at all in *New Directions…*, in particular the principle of Meaningful Learning. Themes outside of Brown's (2007) principles were also trending such as assessment and team-teaching. In terms of research approaches and methods employed by recent JALT authors, results mirror the first 30 years of the publication with qualitative methods including Experiments (n=9) and Survey questionnaires (n=14) still highly prevalent, but with a growing tendency towards qualitative studies with Case Studies featuring qualitative methods (n=12), and mixed methods (n=6). Survey interviews (n=6) also displayed an upward trend.

With these findings in mind, it is possible to suggest some possible future avenues for the next five volumes of *New Directions…*, Meaningful Learning is one principle on which more research could be done to try and harness the experiences and knowledge our students already possess through activities and materials used in EDC. Kasparek's (2015) article on humorous language play, which observed student responses to activities including a recontextualization of a sketch by famous Japanese comedians, has made steps in this direction. As for research approaches and methods, with the JALT journal indicating an upward turn in qualitative and mixed methods research and an ever growing interest more generally across academic disciplines in this direction, it would seem justified to try and explore a wider range of qualitative methods beyond unstructured observations. One qualitative method used to good effect in case studies by contributors, less so in EDC and much more frequently the JALT journal, is conversation analysis. Young (2015) uses a finely detailed version of the method to observe how students acquire and use turn-taking practices in EDC group discussions. This method, together with other qualitative methods including discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires all have a valuable role to play in providing a richer and more forensic analysis on a range of EDC related principles and associated issues. Similarly we could look towards a better-defined raft of mixed methods research that enables us to triangulate and cross-check our quantitative findings across the methodological divide. This has already been achieved in some EDC

studies such as Saito (2013) which analyses quantitative and qualitative data collected from students on a peer feedback activity.

CONCLUSION

This review reveals that some of Brown's twelve principles such as Intrinsic Motivation and WTC are of priority to the aims of the programme. Research approaches such as Action Research and associated observation methods have been widely used to provide instructors with a starting point to develop a deeper understanding of the linkages between practical classroom activities and the theoretical models and paradigms which underpin them. Combining principles with an activity evaluation or data-driven project provides the instructor-researcher with a space to develop their empirical curiosity. Looking ahead towards future volumes of *New Directions…*, an awareness of thematic trends and methodological progression is necessary. Recent trends in the JALT journal suggest that there are topics areas (assessment, meaningful learning and team-teaching) and research methods (qualitative interviews, conversation/discourse analysis, mixed methods) into which the EDC journal can venture more deeply.

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