

Péter Medgyes “İddia ve Karşı İddia: Akademik Araştırmaların Dil Öğretmenlerinin Amacına Uygun(suz)luğu” Adlı Makalesi Üzerine Bir Eleştirel Düşünce Yazısı

A Critical Reflection on the Article by Péter Medgyes “Point and Counterpoint: The (ir)relevance of Academic Research for the Language Teacher”

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ÖZET

Akademisyenler, dillerin nasıl öğrenileceği ve öğretilceği konusunda sayısız çalışma yürütür. Araştırmalar esas olarak dil eğitiminin hem teorik hem de pratik yönlerine odaklanmaktadır. Bunların çoğunluğu, nicel, nitel veya karma yöntemlerden yararlanan çalışmalardan çıkarılan teorik sonuçları içermektedir. Öğretimin pratik tarafı görünüşte bu çalışmalarda kapsamaktadır. Ancak, öğretimin gerçek uygulayıcıları olan öğretmenler, araştırmaya dayalı olarak yayınlanan makalelere veya kitaplara başvurmuyor gibi görünmektedir. Bu makalenin temel amacı, eleştirilerimin temelini oluşturan Medgyes'in makalesini temel alarak, akademik araştırmaların dil öğretmenleri için ne kadar amacına uygun olduklarına ilişkin kişisel görüşlerimi iletmeştir. Fook'un (2011) Eleştirel Düşünceyi bir yöntem olarak kullanma önerisi, makale üzerine yorum yapmak amacıyla benimsenmiştir.

Keywords:

research and practice,
relevance of research,
critical reflection

ABSTRACT

Scholars conduct innumerable academic studies on how to learn and teach languages. Research mainly focus both on the theoretical and practical sides of language education. The majority of the studies include the theoretical conclusions drawn out of studies benefiting from quantitative, qualitative or mixed method. The practical side of teaching is seemingly covered in those studies. However, teachers who are the actual executors and practitioners of teaching do not seem to refer to the articles or books published based on the research. The main aim of this article is to convey my personal views on the relevance of academic research for the language teacher based on Medgyes' article which establishes the foundation for my criticisms. Fook's (2011) proposition to utilize Critical Reflection as a method was adopted to reflect on the article.

1. INTRODUCTION

Medgyes' article is based on IATEFL held in Hungary in 2015. Medgyes (2017) conveys that IATEFL conferences have become increasingly teacher centered as they not only have been attended by teachers but also the majority of the presentations were made by them. In his article, he questions the relevance of ELT related research to the practices of English teachers. The link which is thought to be existing between theory and practice is investigated where he supports that only a small number of teachers read ELT related research papers. He also explains that teachers see teaching and research as distinctive forms. He asks "Who needs whom?" and answers that "Researchers need teachers as it is important to reach out to teachers." He advocates that teachers are able to broaden their own knowledge and experience by sharing their experience with their colleagues.

Critical Reflection may be defined in various ways. The definition adopted are meant in this reflective article is as follows:

"A Critical Reflection is a process of identifying, questioning, and assessing our deeply-held assumptions – about our knowledge, the way we perceive events and issues, our beliefs, feelings, and actions." ("Critical Reflection," n.d.)

The aim of a reflective activity might be to change your or others' way of thinking and behaving. According to Fook (2011) critical reflection is a concept generally used in professional settings to improve practice. Fook observed that a deeper understanding of experiences was possible thanks to critical reflection and practitioners benefitted from the opportunity to express themselves better. Fook believes that the gap between research and practice may be bridged if critical reflection can be promoted as a research method. He supports that the method might be great leap between the practical and theoretical area by involving 'rationales, theoretical frameworks and specific practices' which will pave the way for better 'formulations of practice experience'. His understanding or definition of critical reflection serves learning from experience that he believes crucial to learning about one's professional practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

According to Fook (2011) the reflection procedure may involve small groups consisting of colleagues or friends. It is a way of discovering implicit assumptions held by these members who are bound by power relations. However, my reflection does not include a group of colleagues but it is a way of communicating my perspective using the text and sharing it publicly. Therefore, the participants are the writer of the article I am reflecting on, me and my prospective readers. I am totally aware that my reflections are susceptible to further reflections and criticisms which I am happily ready to receive and accept. I will try to recognise the values and beliefs of the writer (first stage) and then try to add my understanding of my experience which forms the second stage of Fook's approach. However, I am not struggling to devise a new value system. Parallel to Fook's (2011) statements, I try to 'incorporate ... [my] experiences and rework ... [my] understanding of them in order to arrive at a perspective that allows integration of ... other experiences with ... [my] world view.'

Therefore, this reflection article tries to address three main foci:

1. Medgyes' thoughts on the relevance of the research and practice,
2. My personal professional reflections on the points he covered in his article.
3. Other points that I can add to the points covered referring to my own professional experiences.

3. RESULTS OF THE CRITICAL REFLECTION

Medgyes (2015) studied on the IATEFL conference booklets and created a repertory of more than 2000 talks and workshops. He witnessed that these presentations were mostly related to the practical side of teaching such as teaching grammar, vocabulary, the 4 skills; tests, course books, culture and the new technology. He also observed that only a limited number of the presentations were related to research or research findings. I personally would support this conclusion as a teacher with more than 15 years of experience, I am more interested in practical side of my profession rather than being re-loaded with a lot of research involving daunting details such as methodology, participants, or findings of academic studies. Borg's survey with 505 teachers from 13 countries also support that not many teachers read research regularly and an important proportion of the teachers which is one-third of the participants rarely or never do so. Nor do they do research on their own.

According to Medgyes (2017), teachers are reluctant to read for several reasons. First, they complain about time constraints. I support his view because as practitioners, we, English teachers, have our own responsibilities of teaching, testing or advising at school while parenting at home. Allocating time to do meticulous research is too demanding for us. The second reason why teachers keep a distance from academic research is that there is ‘limited access to books and journals’ (Medgyes, 2017) rendering it almost impossible for state school teachers to use the articles without infringing the copyrights. That is true because only after I have transferred to my university that I had an unrestricted access to many journals thanks to my university library subscriptions. It is still not easy to reach high rank articles or journals as a member of an academic institution. One is expected to fill in forms, accept terms and conditions and sometimes pay for fully granted access. Third, teachers feel that published articles either do not give practical ideas or are difficult to understand. I agree with this point. As I mentioned before, articles are full of details out of which you need to extract the relevant points to your needs. Reading strategies such as skimming or scanning would work; however, there is the question of time constraint still at hand. It is understandable that scholars have their own concerns such as addressing reliability and validity issues, justifying their methodology or sticking to the frame imposed by journals or senior academicians. Still, these issues tend to overload the content with repetitions of already uttered sentences in their area of research. I especially feel that the literature review parts in papers are the main reason for the litany. If you squeeze an article and try to get the quintessential message the part you will get would be minimal. It is doubtful whether what you obtain will have any functional value in your profession. I benefit more from my colleagues when we negotiate a problem together and get their ideas. It does not take much time as we can sort it out even at break time. Medgyes supports my view while writing “rather than listening to the theoretician with the sweetest tongue, they [teachers] are better off if they heed their own (and their fellow professionals’) experience and intuitions, and disregard ‘expert opinion’ by and large. Consciously or instinctively, most teachers seem to agree with this statement.”

Medgyes conclude that “more experienced teachers proved less willing to read research than their inexperienced colleagues” (2017). This might be true as the years pass I feel that I have been accumulating strategies, techniques, or activities and tend to use them within my classes. I only resort to the research arena when I face some extraordinary difficulty within my profession.

I believe I would never read any articles if were not doing my masters or doctorate. This point is also mentioned in the article. It is suggested in the article that about 50% of the teachers started their academic career to be eligible for further studies and the participants implied that they would not be motivated to undertake research after they have completed their degrees. I cannot say I will not be motivated to do further research, but I am looking forward to focus on subjects I am interested in such as pronunciation and word roots. As a candidate Phd. title owner, I have already been disappointed by the programs put before me. First, we are obliged to opt for classes that were not interested in due to schedule constraints. We have to complete certain courses in order to be eligible for further studies. Second, although it is acceptable that we need to update ourselves in our area by reading articles, books and attending classes, it is excruciating to hand in assignment within deadlines. As stated in the article teachers “are too busy doing their daily work”. We have got our responsibilities in our lives. The situation is aggravated when the topics are too repetitive and tedious to read. Third, even if you have achieved your masters degree and managed to start your doctorate after all exams and interviews, you are still made to take a proficiency exam. Only after succeeding in these types of exam that candidates are allowed to start to their thesis. In conclusion, there is a gap not only between theory and practice but also between your dreams about academic studies and the reality that creates burnout.

Medgyes (2017) reads from the same page and emphasizes that “Hungary research strikes the same chord: practising teachers of English demonstrate only a slight interest in what researchers have to offer.” He implies that research papers are difficult to understand. I think the reason behind this is not the difficulty level of texts or any lack of knowledge of the language by teachers but that “advice researchers give is considered irrelevant for classroom work, contributing little to professional development.” I think the same is true for in-service trainings, continuing professional units and any similar type of compulsory programs. A very to-the-point analogy is presented in the article: There is an old man standing by the road not willing to cross it and a young person approaches and tries to help him cross the road without really understanding what he intends to do.

Under the title “teaching versus researching”, Medgyes further discusses the differences between theory and practice. He proposes that teachers are ‘people of action’ who do not need elaborate words to do their job decently while research involves a lengthy process involving ‘collecting, analysing and then evaluating a set of data’. I think research procedures and methodology or other conventions in research have cut in front of practical solutions to the problems experienced in classrooms. Having to do our research, or write our articles or

references as academically as other scholars do spoils the contentment received from contributing to the improvement of ourselves and other stakeholders. As a result, I believe that too much focus on the form broadens the gap between teaching and researching.

Larsen-Freeman (2015: 271) states that ‘research has been less consequential in affecting practice widely’ (cited in Medgyes, 2017). The reason might be the controversial issues within the academic world. “According to some researchers, there is ample evidence ... that learning a second language had better start in infancy, others put the ideal age at adolescence. Similarly, contradictory beliefs are professed with regard to the input hypothesis, task-based language learning, the English as a Lingua Franca movement, and many other issues” (Medgyes, 2017). I think it is not practical for English teachers to dwell on controversial issues while so many issues are awaiting them in real life. Other types of controversies in academic studies can be experienced by researchers. When you start your research, you have ideals and pursue your research meticulously. You have your advisors guiding you through the process and then you feel that you have done a great job and present your study before a jury who drag you through the mud resulting in loss of self confidence. You are at a loss about what exactly you need to do satisfy the expectations of your seniors. You notice that the more eyes see your study, the more criticisms you receive and that it is impossible to please each one. In other words, each scholar has their own approaches to research strategies, tools and methodologies resulting in the confusion of the candidate researcher. Therefore, it is almost impossible to foresee what type of deficits will be put before you or where you did wrong.

The article suggests that a majority of researchers are aware of the complexity of their discipline and discourse for teachers as practitioners and supports that there is a need to mediate between teachers and scholars. However, who will be the mediator is a question put forward. Some candidates proposed are agents in university departments for language teacher education such as TESOL. These departments are not seen a solution to the problem as they “engage in research activities of their choice” and the courses they prepare is “theory packed”. The situation is the same in ELT programs in universities where students cram for exams or assignments and forget all once they have cleared the hurdles. I could not agree more. This is possibly one of the reasons of practising teachers showing little interest in theory. One of our professors used to comment that what we did through our universities was to ‘hold, swallow and puke!’. This expression highlights the need to bridge the gap between theory and practices. That was true. We had to cover some topics and hold it in our head for exams and then reset ourselves for the real world. As a result, I can say that not only candidate scholars but also candidate teachers need practical experience that they can really digest and use it in the body of their own teaching context.

Another mediator might be the coursebooks. I think coursebooks are among the most important resources to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Coursebooks are prepared by publishing companies which employ many scholars. Inevitably, these scholars reflect their approach to teaching languages. However, according to Medgyes (2017), it cannot be said that ‘mainstream coursebooks have been significantly affected by recent developments in language-related research, apart from the use of trendy labels such as ‘communicative’ and ‘intercultural competence’.’ Richards (2006) does not observe any interdependence between course materials and research. He believes that companies have their ‘inherent educational values’ and they consider teachers’ need for ‘aggressive sales promotion’.

Under the title who needs whom Medgyes (2017) contends that that teachers do not need scholars to survive in their job. He also contends the researcher needs the teacher. He questions the position of academicians and supports that rather than contributing to practice they have other concerns such as meeting certain expectations. They have to survive in the academic world while pursuing job security, seeking promotion and prestige as well as salary. This is true as academicians we are now expected to renew our contracts every year which was expected from us biennially. While renewing our contracts we are asked to list the articles and books we wrote or the conferences we presented in. The situation is even worse for senior academicians who are under pressure to produce more. I can say I am both a teacher and a researcher and have the opportunity to observe the situation from both sides. While as a teacher I do not see any relevance between my academic studies and practice within the classroom, I am expected to contribute to the academic arena with more irrelevant products. It is like a sword of Democles hanging over my head. To conclude, I can say that I do not need myself as a researcher producing impractical articles but I need myself as a researcher to secure my job. Then, why should a teacher working in a state school depend on my research? I agree with Medgyes (2017) when he asserts that “the pedagogical relevance of language-related academic research is of dubious value and the role researchers play may be considered parasitical.”

The necessity to fulfill the requirements imposed by universities result in puffed up numbers of articles or books. Medgyes supports the same view while saying ‘tons of academic papers and book’ have been ‘churned out’. I feel that it is a waste of time and effort. I personally believe that, writing a book, in accordance with my interests, that satisfies the need for some practical issue is more beneficial as a practitioner. The exaggerated number of studies released has another negative effect. I used to work as an English teacher in state schools and I was eager to join all conferences to improve myself academically and professionally. Later on, I noticed that I was only losing time with all the superfluous amount of information flying about. Most probably, as a result of this, I observe that conference halls are empty. The same is true for academic journals. There are so many of them that I am tired of receiving invitation mails to submit papers. There are many second class journals whose aim is to take your money or fill their pages without really seeking quality. Many of them manage to publish copies with articles written by scholars who try to meet requirements for academic incentives.

Under the title ‘Two contemporary lables, plus one’, Medgyes discusses teachers’ position as a teacher-researcher. According to him, eachers have been regarded as researchers since the 1990s in the academic world. Teachers started to engage themselves more with research and in collaboration with academics. However, such teachers were rare and they were ‘hijacked’ by the world of academia (Maley, 2016). I think teachers are eager to improve themselves as they aim to do their best in education; therefore, some tend to join conferences, follow researchers, search for coursebooks. He cites Freeman (1998: 14) who suggests that teachers are expected to teach as best as they can but struggle within myriad of search documents. However, whenever teachers have the even the slightest opportunity, they naturally tend to escape from the swamp of educational problems and secure themselves by transferring to the ivory towers of the academic world which promises them mature students with a certain level of knowledge and ready to listen to them, a good salary, fewer working hours, prestige and facilities both within and around universities.

Under the title ‘The teacher’s voice’ Medgyes refers to Freeman’s (1996) sentences where Freeman highlights that teachers know what is going on the classroom but do not know how to convey the events happening there in academic terms. The reason behind this, according to Freeman, is that they are not obliged or they do not have the chance to do so. Academic researchers are experiencing the opposite. I personally do not agree that teachers do not know the necessary language to convey themselves in educational terms. If what Freeman refers to terms coined in the academic world, it might be true to some extent; however, as I mentioned in previous parts, teachers always talk about the classroom related issues whether at school, in canteens, while having lunch or even at home. The point is that do they really have to use the terms created by some scholars. Terms coined for an educational phenomenon overlap with eachother creating confusion. Even scholars are not clear about these terms which renders their studies uninteresting and unintelligible for teachers. Medgyes gives the methods as an example, saying that methods such as Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, and a more recent term ‘communicative competence’ have become buzzword at certain stages but ‘have been no more than trademarks’ in spite of which ‘most teachers kept doing whatever they thought worked best for their students.’ The writer of the article further supports that teachers learn how to express and share their educational experience in various opportunities. I do not agree completely with this statement as I believe teachers are already aware of how to convey messages to even to young learners. Teachers are the ones who can adapt the terminology, concepts or the content in accordance with the level of addressees. Moreover, I agree with the writer when he suggests “it is a welcome development that there is an increasing number of teachers who have both the skill and the will to tell their story.” The main relevant contribution might be to provide them with opportunities to express themselves.

4.CONCLUSION

In this article, Medgyes (2017) opens a pathway to question the situation in the academic world and its relation with the real world where we see teachers practising. I feel that his observation in IATEFL conferences which have become more practitioner centered is a ray of hope in struggles to solve the practice-theory issue. He advocates that scholars need teachers who are able to express themselves about their profession. I feel that they can also widen their horizon themselves without receiving much assistance from scholars. It might be alleged that teachers received their foundations in their university years. This is true to some extent. We became more aware of what is going on in the academic world, what has been said up to now, what has worked and what has not. However, I can assert that what I have learned most comes from my experiences within classrooms or schools. I can say I have reset myself and learned from my mistakes and improved my strong sides. Especially, the first three or four years of my profession has set the foundations for my present way of teaching. I read a lot of research to improve my english, to see what is going on in the academic world but I benefit little from what I read. As Medgyes (2017) put forward, researchers focus too much on their work and

nothing else or as Maley (2016) implies the paths of teaching and researching will never meet. I agree with them to some extent in that the gap should be accepted and teachers' voice should be heard more.

As a teacher, I want to see what my colleagues do or experience in their classes, or how they solve classroom management problems in practice, share materials they have created and which worked. Still, I do not support that academic research must be left astray. Researchers must get out of their little cage 'with no periscope available to scan the whole landscape'. One cause of this shortsightedness is the 'ramifying nature' of the area of language study (Medgyes, 2017). Even the researchers themselves are lost in their area as a result of this. Teachers will not be able to keep up with developments, either. Therefore, teachers should work hand in glove with researchers. What is more, teachers must not be denied the right to do the research in cooperation with other experts such as lexicographers and linguists. In Medgyes's words "academic discourse is conducted among a handful of fellow researchers working in the same specialist field" (2017). A comprehensive approach including all stakeholders might be a solution to this issue.

By collaborating, the research will be more relevant to the classroom context. Otherwise, we will be provided with hundreds of technical terms some of which overlap with each other and make it impossible to see the wood for trees. Or else, studies will be full of verbosity conveying little, as Medgyes (2017) suggests the studies will bombard us day in and day out like the dietary advice that contradict each other: 'Is eating red meat healthy or a health hazard?'

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