

## Language Teaching Research Journals- Something Fishy Going On?

What happens when you receive your copies of the various academic language teaching journals? Do you read them thoroughly? Do you scan for pertinent articles only? Do you consign them to dusty journal bookshelves immediately?

I suppose the majority of us fall into habits closest to the second or third categories. If you are like me, you scan the index or cover for familiar names or catchy titles. And then, depending on how the article reads, you *may* read the whole article, but, more likely, a quick scan at the conclusion will suffice. If one remains in doubt or is intrigued one can always work one's way back from there.

To tell the truth, the situation in which I look most closely at these journals is when I am writing a piece of my own and I'm looking for any material that might support or supplement it. Searching for useful references, in short. More on this later.

Anyway, I doubt if anyone reads these things cover to cover, and if someone did he or she would definitely *not* be invited to my next Christmas Party. Rather, I hear a lot of criticism about academic language teaching journals, some of it hitting the mark, and some of it, IMHO, missing. Let's look at the misses first.

One complaint that one can hear quite regularly is that most of these articles do not have practical application for the classroom. But this is quite natural in academic circles. No one expects all published research in, say, chemistry to have immediate practical application as medicine. Which brings me to another oft-heard complaint. "*People write those things only because they are required to by the university or to see their name in print*", is not an uncommon criticism.

But I say, of course! Only the most pretentious among us would believe that his or her paper was going to be epochal, revolutionizing the very face of language education. At best, we publish on the hope that

we may contribute a little something that may help support something bigger, which in turn may eventually become part of something seminal. In short, article writers generally do not expect their papers to be earth-shattering. The scope *should* be modest and limited- so too, hopefully, will the writer's ego.

Having said that though I do have some beefs with a lot of the common features of language teaching journals. First are the pretensions of being a hard, objective science. The American-based journals in particular seem to have a fetish for producing almost gymnastic displays of statistical work. For me, understanding what a certain graph or diagram is supposed to be saying is much harder than if the writer had simply placed his numbers within normal sentential discourse. Fans of Dave Barry, the American humorist, may remember his tongue-in-cheek discussion as to how computer-generated graphs can make 'complex' statistical concepts such as '3 out of 4', seem more authoritative and complicated than they really are. On several occasions I've worked my way through a particularly dense display of stats only to find that the writer has told me something like "*25 of my 30 students enjoyed extensive reading*". Gee, thanks for telling me that! But now what I'm really wondering is why it is felt that such a conclusion must operate on the pretense of conforming to the dictates of hard science. After all, it is nothing but a case of "*my students said...*".

This leads me (you guessed it) to another criticism. Why do so many journals maintain this rigid adherence to the "suggested" form of the American Psychology Association (generally known as the 'APA Standard')? Yes, standards and guidelines for coherent organization are necessary but this seems to me to be a case where language teaching publications have become trapped in their own bad habits, like the

bureaucrat handcuffed by the very rules he created. In other words, the standard is determining the rhetoric!

After all, the 'recommended' organizational structure of a research piece according to the APA is Introduction-Survey of Literature-Methods-Results-Conclusion. But, oddly, this *recommendation* seems to have become something of an near-inviolable commandment for many journals. Why? To satisfy the need to appear *scientific*? It seems to me that the APA structure is far more suited to the hard sciences, and to force the rhetoric of a soft science such as applied linguistics into its architecture either serves to distort the research or simply chops the rhetoric into discordant, unnatural chunks.

Often I read such articles thinking, "*well, this all follows naturally but where is the rhetorical persuasion? Where is the appeal to the readers' instincts?*" The emphasis upon a hard science format leads potentially interesting and compelling language teaching insights behind in favour of a 'just the facts ma'am, just the facts' approach - also known as the 'Joe Friday School of Discourse'.

Finally there are the references, which can be nuisances for both reader and writer alike. Let's face it, not only is having more than two references on a given point largely redundant, it can also render the entire article unreadable, being punctuated by these ubiquitous notational gnats. On occasion, I've seen references take up to 40% of the text of a page. Then there is the question as to what should be referenced. It really grates on me when I see something like, "*This view of education has held sway since the days of DesCartes' Meditations (1649)*". Perhaps it won't be long until we read, "*This reflects a view of morality held in the Bible (God, 2000 B.C.-200 A.D.)*".

And what about the question as to what kind of claims should be

*Continued on page 26*

## IMHO-continued from page 24.

referenced. Of course, we can't expect to maintain any sense of academic credibility if writers are making all sorts of outlandish claims without support. But it seems that some journals are stringent to the extreme. For example, if I write, "...*the communicative method held sway in most teacher training institutions during the 80's*", should I really have to find a reference to 'support' such a statement? One assumes that such claims would be agreed on by almost all readers. Although claims such as, "*Students with dyed hair tend to avoid dangling participles in speech*", begs for support, doesn't it look ridiculous to read something like: "*Because China and Japan have different political systems (Greedler 1987, Schnord 1996)...*"? Yes, there will always be a gray area in this regard, but right now it seems to me that the call for referenced support is generally falling much too far on the side of excessive notation.

But, then again, what force does

providing a reference really have in terms of supporting an argument anyway? The notion that reference, not rhetoric, equals support lends credence to the ridiculous notion that anything published in the past has attained something of a canonical status. It's in print, ergo, it *must* be true. Often, when reading something I have a particular interest in, I find ludicrous arguments built upon support from tired old references which I know to be outdated nonsense, particularly in the area of culture and all its hallowed stereotypes. If you're quoting "Hall, 1976" as an authority, as so many do, I can be pretty sure that you are going to come to some pretty pedestrian conclusions about Japanese group-think, despite the vaunted reference above. That's when I say 'so much for *this article*' and chuck it aside.

The fact is that you can support pretty well *any* argument by references, including entirely contradictory ones. For example, research indicates that if teachers use the

learners' first language, it can aid in acquisition of the second. Here are the references. But look! Here is other research that indicates that using the language learners' first language in the classroom is *detrimental* to acquisition. Here are the references. What is going on here?

Well, as I said earlier, I tend to find articles that support my viewpoint only after I have formed my viewpoint. Scientifically unsound, yes. But who said I'm a scientist? I want to argue my point with rhetorical skills, not by arguing that some other guy agrees with me so therefore I *must* be right. And I suspect that I am not nearly alone in taking this tact. All those writers who 'discover' support for their positions, despite legions of contradictory research out there are likely doing the same thing. Why? Because the publisher wants these references? Why? Because this is the hallmark of scientific integrity? Maybe! But is it the hallmark of interesting reading or insightful writing?

Not IMHO.