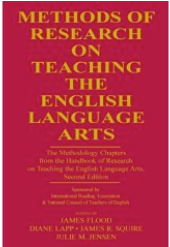


Methods of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts:

The methodology chapters from the Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts, Second Edition

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Research on the teaching and learning of the language arts is constant and constantly evolving, as it should be, since our knowledge of learning has evolved, the populations that are learning are changing, and the economic and political circumstances that they are learning in are also changing. One unusual but interesting way of looking at a body of research, in this case, related to literacy in the k-12 classroom, is to divide it by the way it was done; this book separates out the methodology chapters from a larger Handbook (2003) and takes a closer look at eleven methodological approaches to research in the field. These include empirical research (Calfée and Chambliss), longitudinal studies (Tierney and Sheehy), case studies (Birnbaum, Emig, and Fisher), ethnography (Green, Dixon, and Zaharlick), teacher research (Burton and Seidl), teacher inquiry into literacy, social justice, and power (Fecho and Allen) and synthesis research (Smith and Klein); there is also an introduction (Stotsky and Mall), an opening chapter on teacher professionalism and multiple literacies (DiPardo), and a concluding overview (Wittrock). One chapter on Fictive Representation (Alvermann and Hruby) I could hardly take seriously, as it seemed to me that mixing fiction and research could undermine the dry seriousness that may be the only remaining element that the other forms have in common.

As a practicing ESL teacher (albeit with adults in a university), I occasionally look at the classroom with a researcher's eye, wishing that I could back up from it, perhaps carry out a study, and find empirical answers to questions that have come up from teaching. I

have faith in research and the ability of serious inquiry to answer some of my questions, given that someone hears them, and has the time and the resources to carry out the research. Of course, these are two assumptions that may be mistaken in our field, where the "conversation" between research and teachers is often more like muttering under one's breath. Anyone who became serious about such a project, however, would want to know more about kinds of research: what each does best, how each has evolved, and why one would choose any particular way over the others. "Serious educational research in the language arts is only about 100 years old," according to Stotsky and Mall (p. 19), yet at the century mark it is clear that its branches are now so diverse as to require some study just to understand them better, to choose the appropriate tool for the appropriate job, or even to get a more accurate view of the body of research that is out there.

One might ask how relevant k-12 literacy research would be to my particular situation, but I was frequently reminded how much the fields have in common. In the first place, many of the skills involved in childhood literacy are the same as those involved in second language acquisition, though this similarity is far overshadowed by the fact that while nothing is more important to a nation than the literacy development of its young, perhaps nothing is more readily forgotten than the literacy struggles of its temporary visitors. The literature of k-12 literacy is so thorough and vast that, in fact, one can see an ongoing conversation between researchers and teachers, one which I have so often sorely missed in our field. Of course, there is, as in many fields, a split between researchers and practitioners: "(t)he perceived split--between knowing a field of study and knowing how to teach--is as enduring as it is unfortunate . . ." (DiPardo, p. 26). Yet we comment on and struggled with it; the political nature of k-12 education and the stakes of the issues alone ensure that.

This book brings to light many of the struggles that language teachers have in common, among them the development of the understanding of multiple intelligences (DiPardo), and even of multiple literacies (Tierney and Sheehan, p. 81); increased awareness of, and adjustment to, the diversity of backgrounds of our students (Green, Dixon & Zaharlick); and the need to see teaching language as a politically empowering act, placing our students in the center of a participatory system (Fecho and Allen). At its core, though, the book helped me reflect on teachers' central relationship with research. Though there may be some who manage to teach from day to day paying very little attention to the world of research (" . . . observers have noted an internal divide between teachers who see English as something one does, and those who see it as a body of information one can come to know--great books, literary criticism, rhetorical form, and so on" [DiPardo, p. 31]), I believe that the majority of teachers would like to bring these strains together, to participate in the conversation between teachers and researchers, and to define teaching partly as keeping an ear to the results of carefully done studies, and inspiring them. Our classrooms are living research laboratories, requiring not only constant and vigilant analysis of the results of each activity, but also inquiry into the appropriateness of the methods of measurement, and inquiry into the approach most

suiting to the task. Teachers should be reminded that research can play a central role in this; that they in turn have a central role in research; that research has evolved and will keep evolving; and that it may benefit us to keep an open mind with respect to its possibilities, as science has a number of ways of getting to the core of the issues it deals with.

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