

What Type of Research Article should I write: Theory or Practice Based?

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Thought Seed¹

You receive a phone call that a guest is arriving in an hour for lunch. You quickly walk into the kitchen and find that you have a few varieties of rice such as basmati, jeeraga samba and sona masoori. You have very few vegetables in the fridge, but you do have the usual staples, sugar, salt, milk and curd. What would you feed the guest? The guest does not eat food from hotels, so you cannot order food and serve it. It is a busy day and you may not have too much time to order online, let alone go marketing for vegetables. A few possibilities are listed below.

- 1. You could just cook all the varieties separately with either sugar, salt or milk and in one case with a vegetable and offer it plain.*
- 2. You could alternatively add all the varieties of rice into a single pot, add salt and serve it up in a hotch-potch manner.*
- 3. You could use the vegetables available, cut them up in a neat manner, decide which variety of rice is best suited for which dish (main dish, mixed rice, sweet dish) and plan and present an interesting menu, with a good choice.*
- 4. A fourth possibility is to get a good idea of the varieties of rice, and select the type best suited for making the payasam or kheer, the one for dosas and another for biryani or pulao/fried rice. Such a selection would be a choice informed by an analysis of what is usually used by good cooks, be it your grandmother, spouse, or a known chef.*

What would you do and why? Do you have any other better way of using these 3 varieties of rice and vegetables to come up with award winning dishes? What determines our choices with what we do with what we have? What kinds of analyses do we do and why do we do them? What kinds of rationales do we use to justify our choices? Do our strengths and weaknesses play a role in these choices that we make?

As teachers we often think that it is easier to read up on a few perspectives and paraphrase them in our own way and add a few paragraphs telling the audience how good a field this is in the format of a 'research article' with a few suggested activities thrown in and send it up for publication and patiently wait for the acceptance letter/email while twiddling our thumbs. It seems to look like an easier thing to do rather than collect data, analyse it and then write up the paper, locating relevant articles for a literature review. But we need to pause a bit at this point before we get sucked into this trap. While it gives us great pleasure to share what we have read with others, it does not readily make a research article but only an empty paraphrase that would probably function as a good conversation starter in an academic conference and nothing more. This is not to say that we need to completely avoid making theoretical arguments but let us look at the actual process and modalities of doing it before we attempt to write up a full fledged research article. Other than paraphrasing, some

¹ A thought seed is one that is planted in the mind of the reader, left to grow, and fruit when it will. These seeds, unlike tasks, which are often pedagogic, are anthrogonic, (meant for adults) and open-ended; while they present a problem, there is no need to find a clear solution. This notion of thought seeds has been used in the field of language education by Dr. Shree Deepa, who was inspired by the idea of dropping seed balls in a forest for them to germinate at will. (Deepa, S. 2022. *Thought seeds in Anthrogonic Learning Contexts*. Journal of Indian Education. Vol.48, Issue No.2. (forthcoming).

potential authors also copy-paste chunks of their doctoral literature review section and somehow hope that it will magically get accepted for publication. This is another easy trap where the attempt is made to either just quote, cite or summarise a bunch of articles that we get through search engines such as ‘google scholar’.

The first decision we usually need to take is to select the area we would like to work on and then take an informed decision on the nature of research we wish to carry out. We can choose to write a paper, in the area chosen, that is purely theoretical, or write a practice-based one that has data collection and analysis as its base. We will look at the kind of research work that would work well for data collection, analysis and writing up in the field of ELE in another column while we understand a little more about the theoretical articles and the issues of writing them. Writing a theoretical research paper is not easy. To do so, one has to have read nearly all the material and perspectives available in that particular area and also be able to go meta on all that has been said, have an overarching perspective and be able to critique what has been said from that justified individual stance taken by the author.

Once upon a time, before the internet era, very few potential research paper authors, particularly from India or Asia, would dare to even think of writing a theoretical paper for very practical reasons: it was well nigh impossible to get access to all the necessary hard copy articles from a library. The institution may not have subscribed to that journal, or that particular back issue would not have been received, to mention a few problems. Today, the availability of search engines, and many open source internet options has caused a sea change in this scenario. With intelligent clicks of buttons, hundreds of articles are available on many topics. Unfortunately, this has encouraged many potential authors to assume that if they can download and summarise ten or fifteen articles in their chosen area, they can write a theoretical paper. This is not the case. Summaries or even paraphrases of relevant bits of articles, covering the various aspects in that area are not enough to provide a perspective. Budding authors have rarely read enough to get a

higher order ‘bird’s eye’ view, which is required. Even if an attempt is to be made to write a ‘state of the art’ article, that implies that a large number of relevant articles, and more importantly, all the seminal articles in the area must be touched upon, with a critique based on the stance taken by the author. Such forays into theoretical articles, written by young authors, remain at best, a poor summary of a few sporadic articles on research carried out in some part of the world; as long as the areas mentioned are covered, it is assumed that this is sufficient.

Let us take the well known domain of communicative language teaching (CLT) for example, and look at some examples of what is generally submitted as ‘theoretical’ research papers. Some mediocre ‘papers’ begin distinguishing between the arguments of the weak form of CLT, and they go on to justify that there is a need to teach grammar in some form. The argument sometimes made is that the weak form of CLT is meant for second or foreign language learners who may not get the necessary ‘native like’ exposure to ‘good’ English and therefore their mental faculty cannot perceive all the patterns of grammar in the language just through exposure.

Such an attempt of putting together a few paragraphs as a kind of an essay is perceived as a ‘research’ article. But in order for it to be a full fledged theoretical research article one has to review a larger body of research on the teaching of grammar, starting with the teaching of explicit rules and ending with consciousness raising. Further to write a theoretical critique on this aspect of grammar teaching, a potential author must be aware of the work done from these perspectives, and be able to critique that stance which says that unless there is good native like exposure no one can learn to speak or write the language well. Usually in a good theoretical research paper, newer perspectives or dimensions are added to the already existing theoretical arguments that are carefully and critically reviewed and steered toward the newer lens that form the research aspect of this theoretical paper. Very often even in such theoretical papers some examples are added to strengthen the case of this newer perspective.

Let us look at one more popular domain of research,

task based teaching. It is very easy to go to the net, locate already published articles in the area, do some intelligent paraphrasing and get all the relevant information on the different models in task based teaching. Along with this, a range of definitions are provided, which are usually merely reproduced, with no authorial stance indicated. In such papers, the focus will then shift to the different task types and although theoretical, will usually end with a few sample tasks in the chosen area of research, which could be enabling vocabulary, fine tuning grammar or one or more of the skills. Unless there is a critique of the various models and definitions, from the perspective chosen by the author, such a summary is a waste of time: if it can be found on the net, why should someone choose to read the article written? All authors who plan to write theoretical papers need to ask themselves: “what is my contribution to this field? Where am I (in terms of perspective) in this paper?

What is it that I am adding to what is already there?” If these questions cannot be answered, it is better to stay away from attempting a theoretical research paper. Many such hastily written articles that attempt at only theoretical stance rarely carry an authorial

perspective; they also have in text citations which are author oriented and not argument oriented. This also means that we state X or Y author said this, with the name of the author being given prominence. Sometimes we manage to write argument-prominent texts, where the citation of the author and the year is only in brackets, with of course the page number added, if a direct quote.

To go back to the thought seed we presented at the beginning of the column, a hotchpotch summary of 10 or so articles, is like the one pot hotchpotch meal. The banal reproduction of models of task based teaching, definitions etc. is like selecting one variety of rice and cooking it with a vegetable; it is likely to be palatable, but not interesting. A theoretical paper on the role of grammar teaching in CLT, with a criticism about the native speaker bias is what would be a good theoretical paper where the rice variety is used for the dish that will bring out its best quality.

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