Introduction

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The need for evidence-based practice and data-driven decisions in language education has never been as urgent as it is in the 21st Century. Yet language education, like education in general, continues to be impacted by a clear gap between research and practice.

The consensus that has emerged over several decades of debate is that we need more teacher researchers and researcher teachers working together to bridge this gap. This edited volume, therefore, brings together contributions presented at the international conference "Teacher Researchers and Researcher Teachers: Bridging the Research–Practice Gap at University Language Centres" held at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano on 25 October 2024. The conference, and this publication, were created in response to a long-standing challenge in foreign language teaching and language education: the persistent gap between research and teaching practice. Although empirical research in second and additional language teaching and learning has considerably grown over recent decades, research outcomes are yet to be systematically applied to the foreign language classroom. University Language Centers, which are at the crossroads of teaching, assessment, curriculum development, and institutional policy, are uniquely placed to address this challenge, as stated by Carmen Argondizzo, one of the two invited keynote speakers at the conference.

The teacher research movement is a relatively recent phenomenon in that it originated during the late 1980s in the United States (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 15). Interestingly, there are several different types of teacher research available to the language teacher. For example, Roulston et al. (2005) list sev-

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eral kinds of teacher research, which include practitioner research, collaborative inquiry, critical inquiry, as well as self-study (p. 170).

Burns (2019) explains that one teacher research movement, which has become more popular over the last two decades, is action research (AR). In AR, "teachers are seen as agentive actors within their own social contexts" (p. 991). More specifically, the action part of AR comprises some type of planned intervention with the aim of applying specific "strategies, processes, or activities in the research context". The author goes on to highlight that the planned interventions are a response to a challenge, puzzle or question which people who are experiencing them would like to influence with the aim of creating a positive educational outcome (p. 992).

Since the movement towards teacher research first began, there have been some strong arguments within the language teaching profession that teachers should continuously reflect on their own teaching practices. More specifically, educational institutions would benefit their teaching practitioners in terms of professional development by allowing and supporting them to undertake classroom-based research within their own language classrooms. To support these points, it has been shown that those practitioners who engage in reflective practice can develop their teaching skills in various ways.

More specifically, "teachers who engage in reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop more informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching" (Farrell, 2025, p. 2). In addition, practitioners who carry out research are likely to grow their own professional identity. More specifically, "teachers' engagement in research is key to development of professional identity since it allows the freedom to investigate issues related to classroom practices" (Dikilitaş & Yaylı, 2018, p. 416).

It has also been shown that those teachers who carry out classroom-based research are potentially able to see learning from a different viewpoint compared to more conventional means. In particular, "practitioner research can offer fresh perspectives on language education phenomena, which traditional research, conducted by third-party researchers, may not be able to yield" (Consoli, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, teachers who engage in reflective practice

might benefit in terms of developing their own teaching skills, which, in turn, will benefit their learners.

Despite the arguments for engaging in reflective practice, it appears that few practitioners participate in reflective practice (Wyatt, 2011, p. 417). Borg (2013) adds weight in that "teacher research remains a minority activity in the field of language teaching" (p. 6). It has also been argued that teachers are interested in research which can be directly transferred to and applied in the classroom in the form of teaching methodology. When asked about their conceptions of research, teachers "rated highly the need for research to provide results they could use" (Borg, 2009, p. 327). Hence, it appears that teachers seem to particularly value research outcomes which can be directly used during language classes. For these reasons, it was decided to organize an international conference which would bring together practitioners who would showcase their own classroom-based research.

In her contribution Carmen Argondizzo offers a reflective, institutionally grounded account of university language centres as evolving academic actors whose missions increasingly encompass teaching, assessment, project work, and research. She situates language centres historically and argues for their recognition as legitimate sites of knowledge production rather than mere service units.

Complementing this perspective, Thomas S. C. Farrell's article "Reflective Practice as Teacher Research" provides a theoretically grounded yet practice-oriented framework for conceptualizing reflection as a form of systematic inquiry. Farrell challenges traditional distinctions between "big R" research and classroom practice, proposing reflective practice as an accessible and sustainable form of teacher research that enables practitioners to investigate and improve their teaching while remaining firmly anchored in their primary professional role.

Among the other papers which were presented at the conference, there were three main strands. These were classroom-based research, multilingualism and plurilingual approaches, as well as technology and digital approaches.

The first paper by Daniele Polizio focuses on a university seminar designed to facilitate reflective teaching practices among German as a Foreign and Second Language (GFL/GSL) students and introduced students to re-

search methods in interaction and conversation analysis. The course involved a virtual exchange (VE) and claims that VEs can prepare pre-service teachers to become reflective practitioners and researchers.

The next study by Carla Cixì and Paola Celentin focuses on the bias that surrounds teachers who propose engaging in research within language schools and educational institutions. The researchers argue that more is needed regarding actionable strategies and awareness-raising initiatives concerning the integration of research in teaching and reflective professional development in language education.

Following on from Cixi and Celentin's article, Daniela Ceroni undertakes a contrastive analysis of teaching practices at a German university's language centre. The focus was on the teaching of six languages. The study concluded that teachers of technical language often taught technical language without the required training and with a higher level of responsibilities compared to general foreign language teaching. Also, the author found differences between English and other languages in terms of how teaching Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) is defined.

Having described the first three classroom-based research papers, the next article is by Chiara Bambagioni and Valentina Carbonara who carried out a piece of action research. The research concerned B1-B2 level Italian language learners (L2) and aimed to foster learners' academic success through supporting quality, equitable and inclusive education. The investigation also aimed to raise awareness of and encourage best practices among Italian language teachers at the University for Foreigners of Perugia.

Moving on to summarise the classroom-based research paper, Susana Benavente Ferrera investigates university students' perceptions of self-regulation tool that were implemented in C1 level Spanish certification preparation courses at the University of Verona's Language Centre. The study found positive attitudes regarding language learning towards personalised recorded feedback on written assignments and a collaborative multimedia glossary for oral exam preparation.

The final classroom-based research paper is by Elisabetta Pavan. The study shows that Project-Based Learning improves the retention of content,

promotes autonomous learning and fosters an authentic experience of language use while enhancing language proficiency.

Three of the contributions concentrate on multilingualism and plurilingual approaches to language teaching.

The article by Capponi, Gardelli, Gallo and Obexer "Perché non andiamo a mangiare einen Knödel zusammen? Un'Escape Room multilingue" presents a multilingual escape room which was created by the authors and was undertaken for the first time during a German and an Italian intensive language course at the trilingual Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. The authors describe Escape Rooms as an educational tool based on gamification and game-based learning, with the aim of fostering active and collaborative learning, in addition to developing linguistic skills.

In their contribution, Paola Celentin and Silvia Ricchiuto present the results of a study conducted at the Language Centres at the Universities of Verona and Trento. This research analysed the influence of other languages on the learning of Italian as a foreign language (Italian as Lx). The findings suggest that a teaching approach that values learners' linguistic repertoire meets the needs of this type of learner and produces positive effects not only on language proficiency but also on motivation and metalinguistic awareness.

Finally, Annalisa Iannelli and Renata Cavosi examine the teaching and learning of specialized language in a multilingual academic context through a case study at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. The learners had strong subject-matter knowledge but heterogeneous and generally low L2 proficiency, thus requiring the teachers to adopt effective strategies for language teaching. Data from questionnaires and written and oral tasks assigned during the course show that diversified didactic strategies, especially the use of plurilingualism as a bridge between languages, can effectively support the acquisition of technical vocabulary.

The final articles address the use of technology in language teaching and learning as well as data-driven approaches in language education.

The article by Behrens and Müller-Karabil explores how combining AI-writing tools and peer feedback shapes students' experiences in advanced (C1.2) English academic writing courses. Through questionnaires, integrated

feedback practices, and focus groups, the study examines how learners perceive and respond to the different types of feedback. Findings show that peer feedback is viewed as meaningful and trustworthy, while students recognise the limitations of AI tools. The study highlights the need for explicit pedagogical guidance in critically integrating human and AI-generated feedback in English language courses which teach academic writing.

Ennis highlights the importance of test statistics in relation to the reliability and validity of high-stakes exams. The author claims that data on language exams has often been sampled from pen and paper-based tests. This can be both time-consuming and impractical, so the researcher presents a data science approach to item analysis and test statistics. The paper describes a unique way of estimating the reliability of writing and speaking exams.

The final article in this volume by Christina Rosén and Christine Fredriksson reports on a pilot study exploring the use of ChatGPT as a feedback tool in process-oriented writing among learners of German in a Swedish upper-secondary classroom. The study investigates the teacher's attitudes toward AI-based feedback and its impact on learners' metalinguistic awareness and text reflection. Although students responded positively to ChatGPT, particularly for vocabulary and sentence structures, both teacher and learners noted problems with overly advanced language and unreliable suggestions, highlighting the need for guidance in effective prompt use.

Together, the contributions in this volume exemplify a research-informed, practice-sensitive approach to language education in higher education. They show that relatively small-scale, context-sensitive studies can yield insights of broader relevance when situated within coherent institutional frameworks and shared professional communities. The volume thus contributes to ongoing discussions on how university language centres can function as laboratories bridging the research–practice gap and advancing the quality of language teaching and learning.

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