Grounding Our Teaching in Research: Implications from Research in the Teaching of English, 2009–12

The best teachers never stop being students themselves and, in particular, they are students of their field. Knowing the field of English education is essential to being a strong English educator. We cannot hope to transform the discipline without considering what we presently know, and do not yet know, about the teaching and learning of the English language arts. Reading professional journals is one of the many ways that English educators stay abreast of the field, and many practitioners read professional journals such as English Journal, which provides information on the teaching of reading, writing, language, and literature, as well as the use of technology to support teaching and learning. In our experience, however, fewer practitioners read research-oriented journals, such as Research in the Teaching of English (RTE), which publishes current research on all aspects of English language learning and instruction, and provides educators essential information on recent developments in the field.

As part of our efforts to support the professional development of preservice and inservice English educators, we recently examined current research published in RTE. Our goal was to synthesize the findings of that research to help practitioners develop a clearer “reading” of the current state of the field, which could inform their pedagogy and practice. Specifically, we examined the research published in RTE from May 2009 through August 2012. Our analysis examined the research problems or topics the researchers investigated and the major findings reported across the 39 research studies that were published during this period. In this article, we share the findings of our content analysis (Hoffman, Wilson, Martinez, and Sailors) and discuss the significance these findings may hold for English language arts educators.

Results
A list of the 39 articles we examined in our content analysis is included in Figure 1. The most commonly examined topic across the three-year period was the intersection of identity and literacy learning and instruction. In 13 articles, researchers explored the impact of race, class, gender, and/or culture on the teaching and learning of the English language arts. The second most commonly studied topic was writing pedagogy; in eleven studies, various issues related to writing pedagogy were examined, including theory, assessment, and teacher preparation in writing. Seven studies examined the ways in which new literacies, social interaction, and composition in digital spaces affects literacy teaching and learning. Four studies examined the teaching and learning of English among English language learners. Four studies addressed issues related to the teaching of literature, both informational and narrative texts. In the sections that follow, we report the major findings related to each of these research topics.

Major Findings
We organized the major findings into five categories that reflected the most commonly examined topics: identity, writing pedagogy, new literacies, English language learners, and the teaching of literature.
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**FIGURE 1. Studies Included in the Review**


Roozen, Kevin. “‘Fan Fic-ing’ English Studies: A Case Study Exploring the Interplay of Vernacular Literacies and Disciplinary Engagement.” *Research in


Identity
Studies addressing identity examined the intersection and impact of race, class, gender, and/or culture on literacy learning and instruction. Findings related to racial identity revealed the tensions that occurred when students’ literacy interests that reflected their racial identities were marginalized by the classroom teacher (Ives). In fact, students’ linguistically and culturally linked literate resources and abilities were positioned as peripheral to, or at odds with, the teacher’s instructional agenda. Results also revealed the tensions that racially and linguistically diverse new teachers must navigate in their classrooms, as well as the benefits these identities afford teachers in connecting with their students (Haddix). Findings also demonstrated that critical literacy instruction related to race resulted in students taking on issues of social justice and self-initiating social action projects, highlighting the fact that teachers cannot always predict the ways in which students will respond and act on the lessons that are taught (Wolfe).

Findings related to social class revealed that in textbooks used in English classes the circumstances of poverty were presented as situational and failed to recognize the generational poverty that many students experience ( Dutro). Results also demonstrated that when students completed senior-year career portfolio assignments, they used discursive practices related to social class to show their positive qualities and plot their career trajectories. However, the portfolio requirements and assessments reflected the dispositions of the upper middle class and the institutionalization of white, middle-class values, thus reproducing social hierarchies. The portfolio served as a gatekeeping mechanism, privileging the discourses and values of those in power, with consequences for the postsecondary careers of students from less powerful social groups (Collin).

Findings of studies related to bringing cultural identity into instructional settings revealed the complex ways in which children and their families draw on past incidents (e.g., racism, uncaring teachers, getting pushed through school) and broader social histories to make sense of literacy and schooling (Compton-Lilly). Results also indicated that the instructional practice of academic tracking contributes to the extent to which students can use their cultural experiences to read texts; for example,
students in upper tracks were encouraged to read “against” texts while students in lower tracks were encouraged to read “on” or “with” texts (Gritter). Moreover, the social contexts of academic tracking may influence the ways in which students reveal or hide their identities during textual talk. Students in lower tracks tend to know of their lower status and this may affect their classroom identity and discourse. Findings also revealed that classroom literacy activities can engage students in reflection related to their social and cultural position and identity in the world and foster compassion for peers’ unique experiences (Camangian; Wilson and Boatright; Wissman). One study portrayed the struggles of an English educator to achieve a balance between culturally responsive teaching and addressing curricular requirements, highlighting the importance of reflection and dialogue in the teaching process (Gort and Glenn).

**Writing Pedagogy**

Studies addressing writing pedagogy examined teaching writing, the conventions of writing, writing assessment, and students’ writing processes. Findings related to the teaching of writing revealed the ways in which high school students’ talk about model essays that are used to prepare for high-stakes testing takes on a performative function as the students discuss aspects of the essays that they consider to be most important given the ideological context, and that these comments were often clichés. This finding suggests that teachers need to more consciously look at the use of language in writing instruction and not assume that students hold a shared vocabulary for talking about writing (Samuelson). One study illustrated how a writing teacher learned to teach writing within an educational context that required her to combine competing ideas, goals, and practices (McQuitty). The teacher recombined and reproduced the competing ideas, goals, and activities of her undergraduate and graduate courses, her school district, and her own classroom to develop new understandings about writing instruction.

Findings related to teaching the conventions of writing suggested that studying corpus use increases students’ understanding about lexicogrammatical language uses, especially when used in the context of a problem-based learning approach to grammar instruction (Liu). Results also indicated that as students develop academic identities, they often produce writing that counters the conventions of grammar and usage, highlighting the importance of teachers recognizing students’ emergent competencies and honing in on areas where students need additional support in developing their academic voices (Carbone and Orellana). Additionally, researchers found that there was not a statistically significant consensus among college students and instructors regarding when it was and was not necessary to cite sources, illustrating that what counts as common knowledge is subjective and varies according to audience (Shi).

Findings on writing assessment revealed flaws in a university’s writing placement test in predicting incoming first-year students’ future success in college writing, raising awareness about the importance of validating automated scoring programs according to local institutional objectives (Elliot, Deess, and Rudniy). Results also indicated that when teachers evaluated secondary students’ writing for voice they associated voice with the author’s perceived intention to construct an imagined context for writing and authorial subjectivity, characteristic of literary genres. Teachers preferred the use of intensifiers that communicated explicit affect and appreciations (Jeffery).

In terms of students’ writing processes, one study demonstrated that in the absence of sufficient content knowledge of a specific literary text, a high school senior used her familiarity with the genre of academic writing to create the impression of having sufficient content knowledge, a strategy the researchers called “bullshitting” (Smagorinsky et al.). Another study demonstrated that most students report making minor changes to specific words and sentences in the name of revision rather than the global revisions that teachers expect, and, as printing a manuscript to revise becomes less common, the concept of a singular draft is becoming more fluid due to the use of word processing programs (Dave and Russell).

**New Literacies**

Studies that examined new literacies investigated how the use of media and composition in virtual environments relates to literacy. Findings of these
studies revealed that participants used social network sites in their daily literacy practices to create self-presentations that transcend cyberspace into their everyday lives and work within the constraints of existing templates to author selves for various audiences (Buck). Participants use the Internet to make transnational social connections based on fan-based literacy interests that foster language development and experimentation with genres (Black; Roozen). Moreover, participants used multimodal composition forms, such as social networking sites, fan-based sites, video production, and Instant Messenger (IM), to create nontraditional compositions to represent ideas in ways not possible with traditional print-based compositions (Black; Bruce; Buck; Haas and Takayoshi; Roozen). Findings also revealed that student interest in computer technologies that provide social interaction and entertainment increases between sixth and seventh grades. Moreover, students’ skill level with reading was related to the ways in which students used the computer in seventh grade, with more skilled readers using the computer for IMing and conducting searches on topics of personal interest and less skilled readers using the computers for games and visual media (Agee and Altarriba). Participants whose first language was not English used entertainment-oriented media such as television and fan fiction as a self-initiated means of developing English literacy practices (Black; Perry and Moses). Both adults and children viewed television as an important resource for learning, and television viewing was connected to children’s development of real-world literacy practices (Perry and Moses).

**English Language Learners**

Studies focusing on teaching the English language arts to English language learners (ELL) revealed that students used “Spanglish” in creative, skillful, and intelligent ways despite students’ perceptions of a lack of proficiency in either Spanish or English, creating opportunities for metalinguistic instruction centered on applying these skills to academic tasks using English (Martinez). Results also revealed that knowledge of ELL writers’ extra-textual identities, informed by watching a short video of the writer, affected raters’ assessment of their writing, suggesting that knowledge of and interactions with students are likely powerful influences on classroom teachers’ assessments of students’ voice in their writing (Tardy). Findings demonstrated that writing workshop pedagogy was found to be a statistically significant means of improving the writing of Chinese teachers of English, challenging notions that learner-centered strategies are incompatible with the Chinese culture of learning (Spalding, Wang, and Lin). One study revealed deficit discourses surrounding English language learners among teachers in a teacher study group, and as a result of recognizing these discourses, the researchers also identified deficit discourses toward the teachers in their own interactions with them. Moreover, because the researchers did not problematize and challenge the teachers’ deficit views of English language learners, they effectively reinforced those views (Crumpler, Handsfield, and Dean).

**Teaching Literature**

Studies that addressed teaching literature examined issues related to texts, instruction, and teacher development. Research that investigated text selection and use in classrooms found that instructional time with informational texts increased from grades 2 to 4, but common practices were round-robin reading and worksheet completion, suggesting that professional development needs to center on engaging students in talking, listening, writing, and reading activities using informational texts that are cognitively stimulating (Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi). Eurocentric and Anglo-centric literature and texts of US origin dominated the curriculums of both US and Canadian schools and did not equally represent the historical and contemporary backgrounds of the students in the schools (Skerrett). Findings also indicated that students who use the discourse of literary scholars in their essays received higher scores by English professors, and students who received explicit instruction in these conventions reported higher levels of engagement and enjoyment in instruction (Wilder and Wolfe). Lastly, a longitudinal study following one teacher from her teacher preparation through her beginning years of teaching literature raised questions about the linear nature of stage theories of teacher education. This finding highlights a need for theories of new teacher development to
include a horizontal dimension that accounts for the relationship between new teachers and social contexts (Newell, Tallman, and Letcher).

Discussion and Implications

We were not surprised by the focus in RTE on the intersection of identity and literacy learning, as this topic has been addressed by a number of scholars in the field (e.g., Fairbanks and Ariail; Sutherland). Despite widespread discourse among educators about the importance of attending to and exploiting students’ linguistic and cultural resources and abilities, the findings of these studies indicate that some language arts teachers continue to marginalize students’ literate practices and experiences. These findings suggest that teachers and students may benefit from honest, critical discussions with one another about the ways in which race, social class, gender, and culture affects teaching and learning. Language and literacy activities that purposefully engage teachers and students collaboratively in meaningful reflection on these important aspects of identity construction also are needed. Moreover, teachers can structure the language arts curriculum in ways that provide time and space for students’ linguistically and culturally linked literate interests and abilities (Ives). We can invite students to write about their lived experiences in ways that increase students’ sense-of-self and help them to position themselves within the classroom in ways that create a more compassionate classroom community (Camangian). Teaching all of our students (not just those in upper tracks) to read “against” texts (i.e., to read critically) is essential to their academic success and growth as learners. Academic tracking affects both teacher and student discourse, and teachers need to think reflexively about how the level of tracked courses may affect the ways in which we lead or facilitate text discussions (Gritter). We want to be sure that our discourse is not socially stratified according to academic track. Moreover, being aware that the ways in which we respond to and evaluate student writing may reproduce social hierarchies can motivate us to change the nature and characteristics of our writing assessments so that they do not
disadvantage some of our students (Collin). Teachers must also understand that students’ current attitudes and behaviors toward literacy and schooling may be rooted in previous experiences with racism and marginalization. Recognizing these dispositions as acts of agency and identity rather than disaffection with schooling may help teachers to more carefully attend to and value students’ linguistically and culturally linked resources and abilities (Compton-Lilly). Finally, we must acknowledge that teachers’ identities also are influenced by race, class, gender, and linguistic affiliations.

Findings related to the teaching of writing suggest that high school students have learned a number of strategies for managing academic writing assignments and high-stakes testing that reflect their perspectives on the inauthentic nature of these assessments. Students’ tendencies to counter the conventions of grammar and usage, rarely revise their compositions, and fail to cite sources also suggests that they do not understand the importance of these conventions to academic success. As educators, we need to target instruction in such areas and help students develop a writer’s voice through effective language use and deliberately crafted prose (Elliot, Deess, and Rudniy; Jeffery).

Third, findings related to students’ use of new literacies suggest that these information and communication technologies may foster aspects of both language and literacy development. Educators will want to recognize the ways in which students’ out-of-school literacy practices such as IM (Haas and Takayoshi), fan fiction (Black; Roozen), and watching television (Perry and Moses) influence their in-school literacy practices. Teachers also will want to consider the ways in which students construct identities and present themselves online (Buck) and encourage students to reflect on the ways their online representations of self may permeate their relationships both online and offline. Given the considerable growth in research more generally on educational applications of digital technologies (Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes), we were surprised that this topic was not examined more frequently in RTE (only seven of 39 studies). At a time when many adolescents can be considered “digital natives” (Hargittai; Prensky)—acquiring fluency with digital technologies in much the same way they acquire language—researchers’ attention to the impact of new literacies on the teaching and learning of the English language arts seems warranted. In fact, this may be a time when teacher-researcher projects on the use of new literacies to facilitate and enhance the teaching and learning of English is in order. Investigating the varying factors that influence students’ reading and writing in digital contexts is essential to understanding the impact of these new literacies on students’ literacy learning.

Findings related to teaching English language learners (ELL) suggest that writing workshop pedagogy is an effective approach to improving these students’ writing (Spalding, Wang, and Lin). Results also indicated that teachers may need to help their ELL students to recognize students’ levels of proficiency in both their native language and in English (Martinez). As educators, all of us must be conscious of our dispositions toward English language learners and reflect on how our extra-textual knowledge of students affects our assessment of their writing (Tardy). We want to identify, challenge, and change any deficit discourses in our interactions with one another and with our students and not allow labels to influence our interactions with and the instructional goals we have for our students (Crumpler, Handsfield, and Dean). Moreover, instead of considering television as detracting from students’ learning, we need to recognize the ways in which television viewing can enhance the language and literacy development of English language learners. Teachers can provide guidance on quality programming and help students exploit the content they are viewing, including knowledge and information about the US context (Perry and Moses).

Finally, findings related to the teaching of literature and the use of textbooks suggest that educators need to critically analyze text portrayals of specific life experiences (such as poverty) and be prepared for student responses that are counter to those portrayals. Teachers must consider the lived experiences of students when making instructional decisions (Dutro). The texts we use in our classrooms should not further marginalize students through a disregard for their lived experiences. This seems particularly important in light of supporting students’ identity construction during language and literacy instruction. We want to reflect on how we can encourage students from traditionally
marginalized backgrounds to explore their literacy interests and agendas in our classrooms (Ives) and particularly through the texts we engage. We must all work toward including more multicultural and world literature in our classrooms to combat the prevalence of Eurocentric and Anglo-centric texts that continue to dominate curricula (Skerrett). Moreover, we want to apply concepts of disciplinary literacy to our teaching practices, include the discourses of literacy scholars in our teaching of literature, and encourage the use of this discourse in students’ writing (Wilder and Wolfe). Doing so will support students’ growth as readers and writers.

Conclusion

In this article, we have synthesized the findings of empirical research recently published in RTE to assist classroom teachers in developing a clearer “reading” of the current state of English education. We have reported a number of findings related to identity, writing pedagogy, new literacies, English language learners, and the teaching of literature with the goal of informing English language arts teachers’ pedagogy and practice in these areas. These are, or perhaps should become, the topics of discussion in our professional lives.

To be strong English educators, we must be engaged in continuous improvement of our craft. Good teaching is dynamic, as is our profession, and we are responsible for staying abreast of current developments in our field. Being aware of current research findings, such as those presented in this article, and the implications of those findings for one’s pedagogy and practice is essential to learning to teach well and to meeting the needs of our students.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Resources such as Research in the Teaching of English have also influenced resources on ReadWriteThink.org. In this lesson, students analyze their schooling experiences by imagining what their education would be like if service learning was a requirement for graduation. They engage in a preliminary classroom debate—either agreeing with the proposed change in curriculum, opposing it, or taking a middle-ground stance—before they have all of the facts. From here, students research service learning and work in groups to prepare informed debates. At the end of this lesson, students reflect on the implications of making uninformed versus informed arguments as well as what it takes to build a strong, successful argument. This lesson cites “Audience Analysis and Persuasive Writing at the College Level” as the theory to practice. http://bit.ly/1HrK3pj