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Concretizing Applied SLA: Design-Based Research as a Methodological Starting Point

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Abstract

Almost a decade after Han's (2016) proposal to delineate Applied Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) as a subfield distinct from Fundamental (FSLA) and Instructed SLA (ISLA), it appears that little research has yet claimed to be ASLA. This raises the questions of whether the boundaries between the subfields are too blurred and whether research is ready to embrace the ecological commitments that ASLA entails.

In this presentation, we argue that Design-Based Research (DBR) (The DBR Collective, 2003) offers an interesting example of methodological response to Han's call. Its cycles of design, implementation, and refinement allow researchers to remain grounded in local classroom realities while also tracing broader individual, structural and ideological forces at play. As such, DBR concretizes Han's agenda for ASLA by supporting research that not only addresses real classroom needs but also contributes to inform theory. This is especially relevant at a time when education is increasingly taking the AI turn, a shift that invites a broader research agenda rooted in ASLA: context-aware, critically engaged, and responsive to the evolving needs of learners, teachers, and institutions. Put differently, rather than examining innovations in isolation or through narrowly defined metrics in lab-like settings, DBR could allow researchers to examine the integration of AI in complex environments.

Keywords: Applied Second Language Acquisition; Design-Based Research; ecological validity; SLA methodology; research–practice gap; classroom-based research; AI in education; pedagogical innovation.

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This paper responds to recent debates on the ecological validity of SLA research (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Han, 2016; Sato & Loewen, 2022) by highlighting how decontextualized studies often fail to inform teaching realities shaped by policy reforms, multilingual classrooms, and the recent integration of AI tools. In line with these concerns, it argues that applied approaches such as DBR can bridge this gap by generating context-responsive and theoretically grounded insights. As a position paper, this contribution does not present empirical data but rather articulates a methodological stance intended to advance the ongoing disciplinary conversation on ASLA.

In this light, the paper takes its cue from Han's (2016) proposal to distinguish Applied SLA (ASLA) from Fundamental SLA (FSLA) and Instructed SLA (ISLA). FSLA typically investigates language acquisition as a decontextualized process under controlled conditions, grounded in cognitive or psycholinguistic paradigms. ISLA brings research closer to the classroom, but does so primarily through experimental or quasi-experimental designs that prioritize internal validity over ecological relevance. As a result, both paradigms often fall short of capturing the complexity of situated teaching and learning. ASLA, by contrast, calls for research that is attuned to classroom realities and responsive to the social, institutional, and ideological conditions that shape them. ASLA seeks to complement FSLA and ISLA by addressing what Han terms "a yawning distance from the real world" (p. 739), and what others have described as a theory-practice dysfunction (Clarke, 1994) or research-practice gap (Nassaji, 2012; Sato & Loewen, 2022). This gap is not only logistical, i.e., arising from teachers' lack of time or access to research (Borg, 2009), but also paradigmatic; it reveals divergent views on what constitutes valid knowledge and who has the authority to produce it. Researchers tend to value generalizability and control; teachers, by contrast, seek situated, usable solutions. ASLA invites a reconfiguration of this relationship through the co-construction of knowledge with practitioners.

Roughly 10 years after Han's proposal, the label ASLA has not really caught up despite a clear need for a paradigmatic shift towards more context-responsive research. For such a reorientation to happen, new research questions and new designs are necessary, and

this position paper argues that DBR (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003) offers a viable epistemological and methodological response to Han's call. Defined by Wang and Hannafin (2005) as "a systematic but flexible methodology, aimed to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design development, and implementation, based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings" (p. 6), DBR supports research that is both theory-informed and ecologically valid. Its iterative and collaborative nature supports inquiries that arise from situated practice and produce principles transferable to similar contexts. This quality, sometimes referred to as "particularizability" in the literature (Clarke, 1994; Spada, 2019), makes DBR especially suited to the complexities of language classrooms (a point already highlighted in Romero Muñoz & Decorte, *submitted*), where local constraints determine what is possible. Unlike action research, which tends to be teacher-led and locally focused, DBR aims to contribute both practical solutions and transferable theoretical insights (McKenney & Reeves, 2018). Its responsiveness to situated realities is also consistent with principles from complexity theory, an essential component in ASLA, which frames language development as an emergent, nonlinear process influenced by the interplay of cognitive, social, and institutional factors (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Lowie & Verspoor, 2015).

DBR and its integrative approach seem particularly promising in contexts where practitioner knowledge has long been marginalized by institutional constraints and academic norms. In French-speaking Belgium, recent studies point to a persistent disconnect between research and classroom practice. For instance, Dachet and Baye (2021) showed that teachers often associate evidence-based practice with top-down governance rather than professional agency. Similarly, Revaz and Draelants (2024) found that even teachers who hold positive views of research tend to privilege experiential knowledge and view academic findings as difficult to access or apply. Both studies put forward the cultural and structural barriers to research uptake in Belgium, rooted in systemic fragmentation and limited opportunities for inquiry. DBR's integration of research and implementation, where pedagogical implications are co-constructed (rather than imposed), offers one way to bridge this gap.

These issues are not limited to the Belgian context; they are compounded by academic incentive structures that prioritize publication in high-impact journals over practitioner-oriented dissemination or research-practice partnerships (Sato & Loewen, 2022). DBR addresses this by positioning knowledge production as an iterative, collaborative process where teachers are seen as co-creators of knowledge (Bungum & Sanne, 2021). In doing so, it aims to generate ecologically valid principles and to reconfigure the relationship between theory and practice.

This ecological orientation also resonates with the multiscalar vision of SLA proposed by the Douglas Fir Group (2016), which urges researchers to connect micro-level classroom interaction, meso-level institutional structures, and macro-level ideologies. DBR offers the methodological flexibility to address these layers simultaneously. Two recent and complementary DBR studies in French-speaking Belgium illustrate this potential: one focused on metacognitive strategy instruction in L2 listening (Decorte et al., *in press*), the other on teachers' evolving engagement with metacognitive oracy instruction over two years (Decorte et al., 2024). At the micro level, both studies document how teachers adapted materials and practices to local classroom realities. At the meso level, they are situated within the institutional context of the *Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence*, a major pedagogical reform in French-speaking Belgium. At the macro level, they challenge top-down models of reform by foregrounding teacher agency in the process of pedagogical innovation.

DBR's purpose and characteristics (situated, iterative, collaborative, and theory-oriented) thus offer a concrete way of advancing ASLA's agenda. This is especially relevant in times of rapid technological change, such as the integration of AI in L2 learning and teaching, when researchers must move beyond asking whether tools "work" to examine how they are accepted, resisted, or reinterpreted in context. These complex and layered questions require precisely what DBR has to offer. DBR does not treat pedagogy as a set of interventions to be tested but sees it as a complex ecosystem influenced by diverse actors and shifting conditions. In this sense, it provides a path for SLA to meet the challenges posed by evolving classroom realities, including those introduced by AI.

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