

牛津应用语言学丛书



Defining Issues in English Language Teaching

英语教学中的问题

H.G. Widdowson

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Contents

Preface

Acknowledgements

1	The theory of practice	1
2	Parameters in language pedagogy	19
3	Proper words in proper places	27
4	The ownership of English	35
5	English as an international language	45
6	English for specific purposes	61
7	The scope of linguistic description	75
8	The appropriate language for learning	93
9	Pedagogic design	111
10	Metalanguage and interlanguage	135
11	Bilingualization and localized learning	149
12	Taking account of the subject	165
	Conclusion	177
	Bibliography	181
	Index of names	187
	Index	190

1 The theory of practice

There is a good deal of distrust of theory among English language teachers. They tend to see it as remote from their actual experience, an attempt to mystify common-sense practices by unnecessary abstraction. They seem often to show the same kind of impatience with theoretical questions as Boswell records Dr Johnson expressing:

We talked of the education of children; and I asked him what he thought best to teach them first. JOHNSON Sir, it is no matter what you teach them first, any more than what leg you shall put into your breeches first. Sir, you may stand about disputing which is best to put in first, but in the meantime your breech is bare. Sir, while you are considering which of two things you should teach your child first, another boy has learnt them both.

Teaching is common sense; it's just like putting on your trousers. So why do we stand about disputing? Why waste time enquiring into the nature of language, the psychological process of learning, or the relative effectiveness of different approaches to teaching?

If teaching is seen as commonsensical, something that anybody can turn their hand to if they feel so disposed, then, of course, not much prestige attaches to it, and not much respect is accorded to teachers. And language teachers are particularly vulnerable to disregard: everybody who has been through schooling knows what teachers do, and everybody knows what a language is because everybody knows at least one language. If you are going to teach physics, or biology, or history, then you clearly do need specialist knowledge: you have to be a physicist, a biologist, a historian. But English? French? Surely no specialist knowledge is called for here. You have to be a physicist to be a physics teacher, but you do not have to be a linguist to be a language teacher. All you need is a knowledge of the language and common sense.

This view of the language teacher is quite widespread, even among language teachers themselves, and this makes it all the more important to establish what kind of specialist expertise teachers need to have to claim professional authority. It is somewhat paradoxical that the very success of universal education in equalizing access to knowledge leads to a diminishing regard for those who provide it. Once knowledge becomes common property, and common sense, its mystery disappears, and there is no need to hold it in special regard. Familiarity breeds contempt. It was, of course, not always

so. Here, for example, is another literary reference. A contemporary of Dr Johnson's, Oliver Goldsmith, in his poem *The Deserted Village*, describes the village schoolmaster, and the awe he inspired among the locals:

The village all declared how much he knew;
'Twas certain he could write, and cypher too;
Lands he could measure, terms and tides presage,
And even the story ran that he could gauge.
In arguing too, the parson owned his skill,
For even tho' vanquished, he could argue still;
While words of learned length, and thundering sound,
Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around,
And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew,
That one small head could carry all he knew.

The schoolmaster's prestige is based on knowing what the others do not know. He is not just a proponent of common sense. None of the village parents here, not even the parson himself, would venture to tell this teacher what to teach, or how to teach. This is not to say that teachers need to stun people into wonderment by words of learned length, and baffle them into reverence. There should be no need for such ostentation: their authority should surely be acknowledged without it. But if you do not have specialist knowledge or expertise of some kind, you cannot claim the authority.¹

Teachers who insist that they are simply practitioners, workers at the chalkface, not interested in theory, in effect conspire against their own authority, and against their own profession. They have authority as teachers only to the extent that they carry in their heads (small or otherwise) specialist knowledge and distinctive expertise, to the extent that they are intellectually fine-tuned to their task.

The invocation of common sense has a seductive democratic appeal: it has the effect of establishing solidarity among 'ordinary', 'down-to-earth' people against the elitism of academics. It deflates their pretensions, pricks the bubble reputation. But although an appeal to common sense is a good polemical tactic, the concept itself, on closer scrutiny, is not at all straightforward. To begin with, what is common about the sense only applies within a group of like-minded people. Common sense is essentially *communal* sense: a set of socially constructed assumptions which constitute the conventional wisdom of a particular community. As such it has two distinctive features which we need to take note of. In the first place, it has no warrant in other communities, which may have very different ideas about what is self-evident and what is not. Secondly, it is necessarily retrospective, based on situations in the past. It is thought that it has become set in its ways and which deflects critical enquiry. But things change and thinking needs to change accordingly. So when somebody says that teaching is based on common sense, we need to know whose common sense, which communal values it expresses, and how far these

values are relevant to the situations we are currently concerned with. The first thing to do about common sense is to question it; the last thing to do is to accept it as valid. It *may* be valid, but then the validity has to be argued for and demonstrated. It cannot just be taken as self-evident.

But language teachers, we can argue, do not just follow the common-sense assumptions of ordinary non-teaching people, but develop their own assumptions, based on the received wisdom and well-trying ideas of their own pedagogic communities which find expression in established practice. It is widely supposed that the most effective kind of preparation for novice teachers is to develop this common sense or 'know-how' by following the example of teachers who have already become expert by experience (for example, Freeman and Richards 1996). This we might say is a process of initiation by imitation, and it sounds reasonable enough. There are problems about it, however, which it would be as well for us to take note of.

To begin with, it would seem to underplay the imperatives of current reality in that it presupposes that the past experience of teachers, and the expertise they have derived from it, are necessarily relevant to the present. But this does not follow at all, of course, for societies change and students and classrooms change with them. If novice teachers are to have an expertise attuned to changed circumstances, then they will have to discriminate between what it is about the experienced teachers' ideas and practices that is of current relevance and what is not. It is obvious that if novice teachers are to learn from their more experienced colleagues, it cannot just be by means of uncritical imitation. They need to abstract from the behaviour of their colleagues what they feel is significant for their own practices. But this abstraction necessarily involves interpreting particular activities as examples of more general principles and then enquiring into their validity. So even if one accepts that novice teachers can be initiated into their profession by the transfer of know-how, this know-how has to be abstracted from experience and theoretically constructed. Acquiring expertise is not a matter of reflecting what other teachers do, but reflecting on why they do it.

To reflect on practice in this way is to theorize about it, to abstract and make explicit the principles that inform certain ways of doing things. And such abstraction allows for adaptation. Once you have identified the idea about language or language learning that lies behind a particular classroom activity, then you are in a position to make a judgement about how valid it is from your point of view, and if it is how it might be put into practice by an alternative activity more suited to your own teaching/learning situation. The ability to do this constitutes pedagogic expertise which goes beyond experience. For experience itself teaches you nothing directly: you have to learn *from* it, indirectly, and this means discovering something beyond appearances, abstracting something general from particulars. Learning from something necessarily means going beyond that something and abstracting common features beyond common sense that are relevant to other and different situations.

To say this is not to say that personal experience is only of value in language pedagogy to the extent that it can be converted into theoretical principle by the process of rational analysis. On the contrary, what is personal, intuitive, and beyond such analysis is more clearly recognized and more highly prized as a result, for it is only when you have exhausted the resources of explanation that you realize the true value of what is beyond its range. So of course there will always be individual personality factors in teaching which cannot be explained or controlled, and which bring about rapport with students, or lack of it, beyond reason. Teaching, we might acknowledge, is ultimately an art. But it is also a craft. Although the practice and effect of art may, in the last analysis, be ultimately inexplicable, it is nevertheless based on the principles and conventions of craft which can be made explicit.

So to theorize about language teaching is to subject common-sense assumptions to critical reflection. You may, as a result, reject or accept them, but either way, you will have some rational basis for your decision. Thought of in this way, theory is not remote from practical experience but a way of making sense of it.

But if theory is so beneficial and indeed so crucial to good practice, as I am claiming it is, why, one must wonder, is it treated with such distrust, not to say disdain, in the language teaching profession, even by those (indeed, it seems, especially by those) who insist that teachers should be 'reflective practitioners'? One reason is that it is associated with the academic discipline of linguistics, and this is seen to be an abstruse field of enquiry at several removes from the reality of the language classroom. Furthermore, in perverse defiance of this obvious limitation, there are claims by people calling themselves applied linguists that this arcane discipline can nevertheless yield insights of practical pedagogic relevance. What makes matters worse is that applied linguists, exploiting the prestige of the discipline they seem to serve, assume an air of superior wisdom and impose these insights unilaterally on an all-too-deferential teaching profession. In short, as Thornbury has recently put it, language teaching is 'at risk of being hi-jacked by men in white coats' (Thornbury 2001: 403).

This suspicion and resentment of theory are widespread, and misconceived. The misconception is grounded in a misunderstanding of linguistics and its relationship with applied linguistics, and of the nature of theory itself. In respect to the last of these, it is interesting to note that even those who are strident in their opposition to theory are not averse to making theoretical claims themselves. Consider the following text, which appears as a general preface to a series of resource books for English teachers.

A letter from the Series Editors

Dear Teacher,

This series of teachers' resource books has developed from Pilgrims' involvement in running courses for learners of English and for teachers and

teacher trainers. Our aim is to pass on ideas, techniques and practical activities which we know work in the classroom...
(Lindstromberg and Rinvolucris 1990)

This Preface is couched in the form of a letter, a device designed to reduce the usual formal distance between author and reader. But authority is nevertheless retained in this first paragraph by the presentation of credentials: the series is underwritten by extensive experience running courses at this persuasively named institution Pilgrims, not only for learners of English, but also for teachers and teacher trainers too. And the use of the plural of course carries the implication of generality. But we need to ask *which* learners, *which* teachers, *which* teacher trainers are being referred to here, and the extent to which it is reasonable to suppose that they are representative of *all* learners, teachers, teacher trainers. The implication of generality is carried over into the second paragraph. The use of the definite article is significant here: *the* classroom, that is to say, the generic classroom. The assumption appears to be that what works in one classroom will be generalizable to all others.

In short, the authors are extrapolating from what has happened in their particular classrooms with particular groups of learners and teachers and are, in effect, making a global claim for a local experience, backed up by the persuasive assertion of authority: they *know* what works. So although the authors talk about things working in actual practice, what they are doing is abstracting from this actuality and making a theoretical statement about how things work in general. Furthermore, we might note, it looks as if the authors are transmitting their influence unilaterally: they are passing on ideas and practices which bear the mark of their authority. There is no suggestion that these need to be critically examined and their relevance worked out in consideration of local conditions, which will in many cases be completely different from those which obtain in the classrooms from which these generalities have been derived. Knowing how things have worked in particular circumstances is thus taken as know-how in general. What we seem to have here is, in effect, the assertion of theoretical authority disguised as practical down-to-earth advice based on an appeal to illusory shared experience.

To point this out is not to say that one cannot or should not infer general methodological principles from particular practices but only that we need to recognize that in doing so we are making theoretical claims; it is misleading to suggest otherwise. Furthermore, we need to exercise a little caution in making such claims, recognize that they may be based on limited empirical evidence, and resist the temptation to transmit them as the truth. And this applies to *any* theoretical statement, whether it comes from linguists, educationalists, teachers, teacher trainers, and whether it comes covertly in the guise of practical down-to-earth advice, or overtly in the idiom of an academic discipline.

Theory is concerned with the abstraction of generalities from particulars (which is why the statement we have just been considering is a theoretical one

in spite of appearances). As such it is bound to disregard certain differences in order to establish commonalities. Theory then allows us to identify something as an instance of a more general category of things, and this requires us to ignore other features which are incidental and not categorical. But the essential point to note is that theory is always, and inevitably, *partial*. The abstractions of theory can never match up with the actualities of experience. When theory is referred to practice, it is bound to get caught up in the complexities of the real world from which it has been abstracted. The question always is: how can theory, no matter how global its claims, be interpreted so as to be relevant to local circumstances?

There is a well-entrenched belief among many in the language teaching profession that theory is necessarily opposed to practice. It is ironical that this belief is so often encouraged by those who themselves make theoretical pronouncements about how and what to teach in classrooms under the guise of practical advice. But there is no opposition between theory and practice, and to set them up against each other is, wilfully or not, to misrepresent the nature of both. Instead of setting up a pointless polarity and dismissing the relevance of theory out of hand, what we need to do is explore how it can be *made* relevant and turned to practical advantage. And this is where applied linguistics comes in.

Another persistent belief in some language teaching circles is that not only is theory *opposed* to practice, but is *imposed* upon it by so-called applied linguists who, by a process of transmission, seek to apply linguistic ideas and findings directly and unilaterally into language pedagogy. Such a belief is based on a misconception about the nature of applied linguistics, which is aided and abetted by its very name.

For applied linguistics as it relates to language education does not just take linguistics and apply it. To see why this is so, we need to be clear about the nature of linguistics as a disciplinary enquiry, and the extent to which it is applicable to the concerns of everyday life, including those of the practising teacher.

Linguistics makes statements about language in general or languages in particular, but these statements are necessarily abstractions from the actuality of language as experienced by its users. From their different theoretical perspectives or positions linguists will map out language in different ways, giving prominence to some aspects (deemed to be essential) at the expense of others (deemed to be incidental). All models of linguistic theory, and the descriptions based on them, will be inevitably partial and limited in scope. Of course linguists will always find grounds to prefer one to another and claim validity for their own; and, like everything else, linguistic ideas and attitudes are subject to changing fashion. What needs to be recognized is that what linguists represent is a particular version of reality, abstracted and analysed out of the data of actually occurring language. Such representations are necessarily remote from everyday experience, and from the immediate awareness of ordinary language users.

In some people's minds, of course, this is just what is wrong with them, and when looking at the complex algebraic formulations of generative grammar, one might be inclined to agree. But the remoteness and partiality of linguistic descriptions does not invalidate them. On the contrary, such descriptions are revealing precisely because they are partial and informed by a particular perspective. If linguistics could provide us with representations of experienced language, it would be of no interest whatever. Linguistic accounts of language only have point to the extent that they are detached from, and different from, the way language is experienced in the real world.

And this particular version of linguistic reality needs a means of expression that is correspondingly at a remove from the way actual language users talk about their language. It has been suggested that linguists, and other academics, deliberately develop a specialist terminology to keep ordinary people in the dark and sustain the mystery, and the mastery, of their intellectual authority. Edward Said in his Reith lectures some years ago made this observation:

Each intellectual, book editor and author, military strategist and international lawyer, speaks and deals in a language that has become specialized and usable by other members of the same field, specialist experts addressing other specialist experts in a lingua franca largely unintelligible to unspecialised people.

(Said 1994a)

But fields of enquiry are necessarily delimited and plotted by their specialist terminology. It is, of course, true that specialist terminology, in common with any other uses of language, can also serve to exercise power, to sustain group solidarity, and exclude outsiders. But this does not warrant condemning it as a kind of conspiracy to corner specialist knowledge, and sustain superiority by keeping ordinary people in a state of exploitable ignorance. For specialist terminology can also have the entirely legitimate use of expressing conceptual distinctions which define different ways of thinking. And it is not just intellectuals, military strategists, lawyers, or linguists, who develop specialist modes of expression. Everybody does it. Said does it himself. All communities do it because all communities develop distinctive ways of talking about things from their own socio-cultural perspective. In this sense there *are* no unspecialized people but only people who are specialized in different modes of thought associated with different uses of language which are bound to be, in some degree, unintelligible to others. And if you are an outsider, one of the others, you call it jargon.²

The point to be made, then, is that the linguist's representations are not replications of language as it occurs in the real world—the terminology they use, their metalanguage, will be correspondingly remote from everyday usage. What linguists do is to formulate their own version of linguistic reality *on* their own terms and *in* their own terms.

But what good are they, then, to people who live in the real world? What use can they possibly be to people like language teachers and learners who

have to come to terms with realities which linguists, it would seem, have conveniently distanced themselves from? The answer is, I think, that these representations can be used as frames of reference for taking bearings on such realities from a fresh perspective. This involves a process of mediation whereby the linguist's abstract version of reality is referred back to the actualities of the language classroom. And this essentially is what applied linguistics seeks to do.

In this view, applied linguistics is not a matter of the application but the appropriation of linguistics for educational purposes. Its aim is to enquire into what aspects of linguistic enquiry can be made relevant to an understanding of what goes on in language classrooms. And this cannot be a unilateral process, for relevance is obviously conditional on particular pedagogic circumstances. And these circumstances are obviously affected by educational as well as linguistic considerations. Language teachers are teachers, and what they teach is not just a language but a subject on the school curriculum.

Mediation, then, involves neither opposition nor imposition, but the realization of interdependency: practice makes reference to theory only to the extent that theory has relevance to practice. Not everybody would see things in this way, of course. John Sinclair, for example, is sceptical of the idea of mediation:

Applied linguists, I have the impression, see themselves as mediators between the abstract and heady realms of linguistic theory and the humdrum practical side of language teaching.
(Sinclair 1998: 84)

But from my own point of view, it is entirely correct that applied linguists should see themselves as mediators. From the perspective of outsiders, linguistic theory may indeed be a heady realm, and language teaching humdrum practice. And this is just the kind of difficulty that mediation has to deal with by showing that what is commonly dismissed as heady and abstruse can also be interpreted as providing a legitimate intellectual perspective, and that this can be relevantly related to language teaching to make it more meaningful and less humdrum. Without mediation, the heady just remains heady, the humdrum, humdrum.³

Mediation as I have described it here is a way of making linguistics useful, and this, I have argued, is made necessary by the very abstract nature of linguistic enquiry. But what if we make it less abstract? What if we build usefulness into the design of the enquiry and, instead of going to the bother of making theories useful, just make useful theories instead? We could then cut out the mediating middleman. This would appear to be the position that Labov takes. He first expresses the view that linguistics, far from dealing with abstractions, should be involved in the facts of the real world.

A sober look at the world around us shows that matters of importance are matters of fact. There are some very large matters of fact: the origin of the

universe, the direction of continental drift, the evolution of the human species. There are also specific matters of fact: the innocence or guilt of a particular individual. These are the questions to answer if we would achieve our fullest potential as thinking beings.

(Labov 1988: 182)

I do not myself feel competent to judge the factuality of the origin of the universe and the evolution of the species, but my own sober look at the world around us shows that matters of fact are frequently extremely elusive because they are essentially relative. And this is especially the case with specific ones. People have a way of constructing their own facts to suit themselves, figments of their particular sociocultural values and beliefs, and this is surely particularly true of such matters as innocence and guilt. These are not facts: they are value judgements. To treat them as facts is to subscribe to one set of values and disregard others. You may believe you have good moral reasons for doing this, but that is another matter. There are, of course, certain things about the world we live in we can be fairly sure about, and which we can reasonably call factual: population statistics, for example, gross national product, the Dow Jones index. But these are hardly matters which applied linguistics is likely to influence. The kind of issues we are confronted with are not matters of fact of this kind but matters of opinion, attitude, prejudice, point of view. These are the important things which determine the way people think and act. But they are not matters of *fact*. They are matters of *perspective*. And it is for just this reason that mediation of some kind is called for: to see how far these different perspectives, these different fixes people take on the world, can be related, and perhaps reconciled.

As Thomas Gradgrind discovered to his cost in Dickens' *Hard Times*, one should be wary of being too fixated on facts, particularly in educational matters. Not infrequently they turn out to be projections of prejudice. 'Everybody knows that...' but what everybody knows is a social construct, a matter not of fact but convenient belief sanctioned by a particular community. As I said earlier, common sense is always communal sense. So it would be unwise to take such facts as given in advance and then design a theory to account for them. For the theory will then simply confirm partiality, and sustain beliefs without substantiating them. And yet Labov does seem to be speaking in favour of devising theories to fit the preconceived facts. He goes on:

General theory is useful, and the more general the theory the more useful it is, just as any tool is more useful if it can be used for more jobs. But it is still the application of the theory that determines its value. A very general theory can be thought of as a missile that attains considerable altitude, and so it has much greater range than other missiles. But the value of any missile depends on whether it hits the target.

(Labov 1988: 182)

Useful theory, a tool for doing jobs, hitting the target: all this sounds very down-to-earth, even humdrum—certainly no heady realms here. And yet, the missile analogy is a misleading one, and a disturbing one as well. For how can you be so certain in advance what targets you want to hit? What if the targets change, as they are prone to do, so that your fixation on certain particular targets makes it impossible to aim at others? And, crucially, who decides on what is a target and what is not? Missile makers have no say in the matter—they just follow orders, and theory makers would presumably do the same. But whose orders? On this account, theorists would design theories defined as useful for hitting targets determined by all manner of motives: the dictates of commercial profit, perhaps, or political expediency, or whatever. Make me an economic theory which I can use to justify the ruthless exploitation of market forces. Make me a social theory which I can use to justify racism, genocide, ethnic cleansing. Of course, people who talk about useful theories are thinking of benevolent uses. But equally theories can be, and have been, made to measure to match malevolent designs as well.

The application of a theory determines its value, says Labov. Well that, it seems to me, depends on what you mean by value. If you mean its practical use, that is one thing. If you mean its theoretical validity, that is surely quite a different matter. Einstein's theory of relativity turned out to be extremely useful for the construction of the atom bomb. But I doubt if anybody would seriously propose that the validity of the theory was in any way determined by the dropping of the bomb in 1945. That, we can agree, was a pretty large matter of fact. But what, we might ask, of the more specific 'facts' of guilt and innocence in this case? These are not so easy to decide.

Increasingly these days, academics are called upon to justify what they are doing in the name of usefulness. The idea of scholarship itself sometimes seems anachronistic and quaint, and intellectual enquiry for its own sake is something we feel calls for some kind of apology. In such a climate, notions like reality, factuality, usefulness sound particularly appealing: they can be invoked in the cause of accountability, and to counter the charge that linguistics is an elitist academic discipline, an abstract and heady realm remote from the everyday world. But this populist appeal is suspect, and can, I think, undermine the integrity of academic enquiry.⁴ Linguistics as such only exists by virtue of its specialization as a disciplinary discourse in its own right, and only has validity to the extent that it presents reality on its own intellectual authority and in its own specialist terms. If it starts producing theories and descriptions to specification and their validity is measured by their utility value, then its authority, it seems to me, is bound to be compromised. This does not mean that linguists should set out to be deliberately useless. Nor does it mean that particular problems in the world should not stimulate enquiry; rather, the course of enquiry should not be determined in advance to come up with expedient solutions. To my mind, then, it is not within the brief of linguists to make useful theories. On the contrary, as soon as they start doing that, they

lose their scholarly independence and with it their value to the non-scholarly world. This value depends not on making useful theories but on making theories useful. But this is not within the linguists' brief either. For it requires a distancing from their disciplinary perspective and the recognition of its possible relationship with others. This is what I mean by mediation. So the linguist, *qua* linguist, is not in a position to judge what use might be made of linguistic theory and description. Their usefulness potential is for others to realize. One linguist at least has recognized this well enough. I refer to Chomsky, and his often cited comments to the effect that he is sceptical about the significance for pedagogy of insights from psychology and linguistics.

Furthermore, I am, frankly, rather sceptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology.

(Chomsky 1966/71: 152–3)

Chomsky's comments, however, were made in an address to the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and his scepticism is prefaced by an explicit disclaimer to any expertise in language pedagogy. He recognizes that the significance he refers to, and is sceptical about, is not actually for him to decide, and later in the lecture from which these comments come, he makes the following (rather less often cited) remarks:

It is possible—even likely—that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith.

(Chomsky 1966/71: 155)

What Chomsky is talking about here is not the applications but implications of his linguistics and these, as he makes clear, it is not his business to work out. It is not the business of any linguist, for no matter how close they may seem to come to terms with reality, they can only come to terms with reality on their *own* terms. The domains and discourses of linguistics and of such practical activities as language teaching remain as distinct as ever. And Chomsky's comments are as relevant now as they were then.

The usefulness of insights that linguistics supplies must be demonstrated. But a little close analysis of Chomsky's text will reveal a difficulty or two. Note the passive and the deleted agent. The usefulness must be demonstrated. But who is it that does the demonstrating? Who is to be the agent? The teacher. But how do teachers recognize these insights in the first place? Linguists, as I have already said, develop their own specialist discourses to suit their own disciplinary perspective on language, and so they should. So whatever insights might be forthcoming cannot simply be *supplied*, retailed

from one discourse to another. For one thing, as Edward Said points out, the insights will be couched in an idiom 'largely unintelligible to unspecialised people'. And language teachers are unspecialized as far as linguistics is concerned. So we need a third party, a mediating agent whose role is to make these insights intelligible in ways in which their usefulness can be demonstrated.

So linguistic insights for the purposes of the language teacher are created by mediation. But, equally, so is the usefulness. Applied linguistics is often said to be concerned with the investigation of real-world problems in which language is implicated. But this seems to suggest that problems, like insights, are somehow already there as well-defined entities, that somebody in the real world supplies a problem, the linguist supplies an insight and the applied linguist matches them up. But things are not like that. To begin with, problems are perceived and formulated in culturally marked ways; in other words, they belong to particular discourses. So it is likely that they will need to be reformulated so as to make them amenable to investigation. It may indeed be the case that what people identify as a problem is simply the symptom of another one that they are not aware of. In a sense then, investigation, which of its nature belongs to a discourse other than that of the problem, will necessarily reformulate it, and change it into something else, which in turn may create problems that were not perceived at all in the first place. So just as linguistic insights are a function of the mediation, so are the problems they are related to. The process brings together two discourses or versions of reality and this requires an adjustment of fit whereby an area of convergence is created, compounded of elements of both discourses but belonging exclusively to neither.

Since the area of convergence belongs to neither discourse, proponents of both are likely to be somewhat ambivalent about it. Thus language teachers, for example, may, and indeed often do, think of it as an unwanted, and unwarranted, intrusion on their domain. And it is true that there are times when it is: when we get linguistics applied, as distinct from applied linguistics, the process whereby linguistic findings are foisted on pedagogy on just the presumption of relevance that Chomsky warns us against. Conversely, linguists may feel that the area of convergence is a misrepresentation that distorts their discipline. Applied linguists thus find themselves in an anomalous position, in a no-man's land they have made for themselves, and not infrequently under fire from both sides. They could withdraw from the middle ground, of course, and leave the two sides of language teaching and linguistics to get on with their own business without reference to each other. After all, it is the meddling of applied linguistics, one might argue, that has created the conditions of conflict in the first place. But since the business of both sides is with language, there should surely be *some* common ground, some areas of convergence to be explored.

Mediation, then, as I have described it, seeks to identify insights from the linguistic disciplines of potential relevance to the language subject. Its purpose is to stimulate the theorizing process whereby teachers assume the role

of reflective practitioners. But it cannot replace that process, nor can it establish relevance in advance, for that clearly must take the local teaching/learning context into account. There has been much emphasis over recent years on the importance of acknowledging the legitimacy of language teachers' own 'cognitions', their own structures of knowledge and ways of thinking (Woods 1996). Nothing I have said about applied linguistic mediation denies that legitimacy. On the contrary, it is these cognitions that constitute the pedagogic discourse that insights from linguistic discourse need to be reconciled with for relevance to be realized. There are, however, two points to be made about such cognitions. Firstly, it would obviously be a mistake to suppose that they are general to all teachers. As with the generic reference to classrooms mentioned earlier, talking about teachers has a down-to-earth appeal, and the danger is that it might be taken as carrying of itself a guarantee of practicality. But we should recognize that such ideas can be just as theoretical as any that come from linguistics, and need just as much to be validated as relevant by reference to local conditions. Teachers' cognitions—which teachers?⁵

Secondly, the recognition of the importance of teacher cognitions, even giving them priority, does not surely preclude the possibility that they might be extended, modified, even changed out of all recognition by influences from outside, including appropriately mediated linguistic insights. There has sometimes been the suggestion that taking account of teacher cognitions is an *alternative* to applied linguistics, in that it is an encouragement of self-realization rather than an imposition of transmitted ideas. But as I have argued, applied linguistics (as distinct from linguistics applied)⁶ is not such an imposition, but a way of encouraging theorizing, in which the teachers' own thinking would be necessarily involved. There is no reason why teachers should be deprived of the opportunity to develop their cognitions with reference to other ideas, and it is surely the purpose of teacher education to provide such an opportunity.⁷

Applied linguistics, as conceived of here, is, then, a mediating process which explores ways in which the concerns of linguistics as a discipline can be relevantly related to those of the language subject. There are two features of this process which it is important to stress. In the first place, in this view of applied linguistics, it is indeed linguistics that is taken as the disciplinary point of reference. Though not linguistics applied, it is linguistics mediated. And the mediation is not across disciplines, different academic discourses, but across the divide between the disciplinary domains of detached enquiry and that of practical experienced reality, between expertise and experience. The very nature of the problem being addressed is, of course, likely to involve taking bearings from other disciplines as well. But if applied linguists were required to have expertise across the whole range of potentially relevant academic disciplines, they would be in no position to say anything at all. Applied linguistics is routinely referred to as interdisciplinary, as if this were its distinguishing feature. Though this may lend it a certain academic prestige, it is, to my mind, misleading. The interdisciplinary expertise that is evident in most