

Edited by Vivian Cook and Li Wei

Contemporary Applied Linguistics

Language Teaching and Learning

Volume 1

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continuum

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VOLUME 1 LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction: Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching in the Twenty-first Century

Vivian Cook and Li Wei

1 General Background

Since the days of Pit Corder, the founding father of British applied linguistics in the 1950s, the discipline of applied linguistics has been usually described as ‘The theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit, 1995: 27). Similarly the members of the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAL) ‘promote principled approaches to language-related concerns’. The International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) proclaims:

applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary field of research and practice dealing with practical problems of language and communication that can be identified, analysed or solved by applying available theories, methods or results of Linguistics or by developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks in Linguistics to work on these problems. (AILA, 2009)

The AILA definition is both broader in including more areas and narrower in relating applied linguistics to linguistics proper. If you have a problem with language, send for an applied linguist.

The broad definition of applied linguistics as problem-solving was certainly true in its early days. Definitions of applied linguistics now are more like lists of the areas that make it up. The Cambridge AILA 1969 Congress encompassed first language acquisition, computational linguistics, forensic linguistics, speech therapy, neurolinguistics, second language acquisition research, and a host more. Gradually many areas have declared unilateral independence from applied linguistics; first language acquisition research soon disappeared from the fold to found its own organizations, conferences and journals, as did much second language acquisition research slightly later. Applied linguistics gatherings these days are far less inclusive, though there is a growth in the Research Networks such as Multilingualism: Acquisition and Use. The AILA Congress in 2008 had 9 papers on first language acquisition compared with 161 on second language acquisition and 138 on foreign language teaching; computational linguistics and forensic linguistics were no longer on the programme, though new areas like multilingualism have been introduced. Professional organizations for applied linguistics are now

more like umbrella organizations, on the lines of the British Association in science, that meet occasionally to bring together people whose main academic life takes place within more specialist organizations; most second language acquisition researchers for instance tend to go to conferences of the European Second Language Association (EUROSLA), International Symposia on Bilingualism, Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition (GASLA), or the International Association for Multilingualism, not to conferences named applied linguistics. Professional applied linguistics is now a fairly restricted area. Most practitioners probably style themselves primarily as SLA researchers, discourse analysts and the like, rather than seeing applied linguistics as their major avocation. Journals too reflect this tendency with say the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* showing the same kind of agenda as the AILA congress, while *Language Learning*, originally an applied linguistics journal, is now primarily concerned with psychological approaches to second language acquisition, having dropped applied linguistics from its subtitle.

The term 'problem' does, however, raise issues of its own. In one sense it means a research question posed in a particular discipline; in another sense it is something that has gone wrong which can be solved. Talking about the problem of multilingualism, say, is ambiguous between defining it as a research area and claiming that it is in some way defective. Calling areas 'problems' fosters the attitude that there is something wrong with them. Bilingualism is no more intrinsically a problem to be solved than is monolingualism. Applied linguists have to be clear that they are solving problems within an area of language acquisition or use, not regarding the area itself as a problem except in the research question sense. Language teaching is not itself a problem to be solved; it may nevertheless raise problems that applied linguists can resolve.

A perpetual controversy has surrounded the relationship of linguistics to applied linguistics. Despite AILA's fond belief that linguistics is the core, many feel linguistics is only one of the contributing disciplines. Applied linguists have explored psychological models such as declarative/procedural memory and emergentism, mathematical models such as dynamic systems theory or chaos theory, early Soviet theories of child development such as Vygotsky, French thinkers such as Foucault and Bourdieu – nothing seems excluded. Contemporary applied linguists feel free to draw on almost any field of human knowledge; the authors in the present book for instance use ideas from philosophy, education, sociology, feminism, Marxism, Conversation Analysis and media studies, to take a small sample. David Block in this volume (p. 229) calls applied linguistics 'an amalgam of research interests'. The question is whether applied linguists have the polymathic ability to carry out such an amalgamation of diverse disciplines, or indeed diverse approaches within these disciplines, when the disciplines themselves are incapable of making this synthesis. It seems inherently unsafe or indeed arrogant when the applied linguist redefines the human mind, human language or language learning to suit the needs of an applied linguistic problem.

Linguistics nowadays plays a minimal role in applied linguistics whether in terms of current linguistic theories or descriptive tools. Linguistic theories of the past

twenty years are barely mentioned by applied linguists. With the exception of Chomsky and to some extent Jackendoff, the theories come from postmodernism, psychology or sociology rather than linguistics. Indeed some practitioners radiate hostility towards linguistics, preferring to draw on almost any other area. One cause may be that the enthusiastic selling of the 1980s generative model by its supporters led to the view that linguistics has nothing practical to contribute and to a lack of interest in the many other approaches to linguistics practised today, say the recent developments in phonetics and phonology.

In a well-regarded book representative of the field called *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, the author announces 'The book . . . will not be concerned with . . . language data, unless it is submitted to non-linguistic analysis' (Dörnyei, 2007: 19). In the west London suburb of Ealing there was a highly successful shop in the 1960s called the *Confiserie Française* (French cake shop), which in fact sold toys. The reason was a clause in its lease that prevented the new owners from changing the name. If language disappears from applied linguistic research, the applied linguistics shop is selling toys. It should relabel itself as teaching methodology or applied sociology or whichever discipline it uses as its source.

So what problems does applied linguistics solve? If you are worried about your child's speech, you are more likely to go to a speech therapist than to an applied linguist. If your country is torn by civil war between people who use two scripts, you ask for a United Nations Peacekeeping Force. If you are drafting a new law, you go to a constitutional lawyer or a civil servant. The problem-solving successes of applied linguistics have included devising orthographies for languages that have no written form and inventing simplified languages for mariners; applied linguists have played a part in EU projects on translation and on linguistic diversity. Most successes have, however, had to do with language teaching, such as the syllabuses and methods that swept the world from the 1970s onwards, particularly associated with the Council of Europe.

At a general level we can draw three implications from this. Needless to say, these personal interpretations are not necessarily shared by all the contributors.

- (1) *The applied linguist is a Jack of all trades.* Real-world language problems can seldom be resolved by looking at a single aspect of language. Since applied linguistics is interdisciplinary, the applied linguist is expected to know a little about many areas, not only of language, but also of philosophy, sociology, computer programming, experimental design and many more. In a sense, applied linguists are not only Jack of all trades but also master of none as they do not require the in-depth knowledge of the specialist so much as the ability to filter out ideas relevant to their concerns. An applied linguist who only does syntax or discourse analysis is an applied syntactician or an applied discourse analyst, not a member of the multidisciplinary applied linguistics profession. In other words multidisciplinary applies not just to the discipline as a whole but also to the individual practitioner.
- (2) *The applied linguist is a go-between, not an enforcer, a servant, not a master.* The problems that applied linguistics can deal with are complex and multi-facet-

ted. As consultants to other people, applied linguists can contribute their own interpretation and advice. But that is all. The client has to weigh in the balance all the other factors and decide on the solution. Rather than saying 'You should follow this way of language teaching', the applied linguist's advice is 'You could try this way of language teaching and see whether it works for you.' Alternatively the applied linguist should be responding to problems put forward by language teachers, not predetermining what the problems are; the applied linguist is there to serve teacher's needs, a garage mechanic interpreting the customer's vague idea of what is wrong with their car and putting it right, rather than a car designer.

- (3) *Sheer description of any area of language is not applied linguistics as such but descriptive linguistics.* Some areas concerned with the description of language are regarded as applied linguistics, others are not. Make a corpus analysis of an area or carry out a Conversation Analysis and you're doing applied linguistics; describe children's language or vocabulary and it's first language acquisition; make a description of grammar and you're doing syntax. Overall making a description is not in itself solving a problem, even if it may contribute to the solution.

Outside language teaching, applied linguists have taken important roles behind the scenes as advisors to diverse governmental and EU bodies, for example Hugo Baetens Beardsmore's work with bilingualism. But they have had little impact on public debate or decision-making for most language problems, the honourable exceptions being the work of David Crystal and Debbie Cameron, whom many might not consider primarily as applied linguists. Problems are not solved by talking about them at applied linguistics conferences; the solutions have to be taken out into the world to the language users. Take the political correctness issue of avoiding certain terms for reasons of sexism, racism and so on. This is based on one interpretation of the relationship between language and thinking: not having a word means you can't have the concept, as George Orwell suggested with Newspeak. Yet applied linguists have been reluctant to contribute their expertise to this debate, despite the extensive research into linguistic relativity of the past decade. Public discussion of language issues is as ill-informed about language as it was fifty years ago at the dawn of applied linguistics.

A recent theatre piece by the Canadian director Robert Le Page called *Lipsynch* was crucially concerned with language. The dialogue took place in three languages with the aid of subtitling running along the front of the stage; it took for granted the multilingualism of the modern world. The heroine was attempting to recover the voice of her father who had died when she was young. All she had was a silent home movie. So she engaged a lip-reader to find out the words, then a lipsynch actor to read them in alternative voices till she recognized her father's. This didn't work until she herself uttered her father's words. In another scene an elderly aphasic patient delivered a monologue, judging by audience reaction the first time that most of them had encountered this kind of discourse. At a dinner-party, film actors and agents attempted to converse simultaneously in three languages, to comic

effect. *Lipsynch* movingly showed the importance of language to people's lives and the language problems they encountered.

As this reminds us, language is at the core of human activity. Applied linguistics needs to take itself seriously as a central discipline in the language sciences dealing with real problems. Applied linguistics has the potential to make a difference.

2 The Applied Linguistics of Language Teaching

This volume attempts to reassert the importance of the applied linguistics of language teaching. It assumes that the unique selling point of applied linguistics that distinguishes it from the many domains and sub-domains of psychology, education and language teaching is language. At its core it needs a coherent theory of language, whether this comes from linguistics or from some other discipline, a set of rigorous descriptive tools to handle language, and a body of research relevant to language teaching.

This is not to say that the language element has to dominate or that linguistics itself has to feature at all but that it does not count as applied linguistics of language teaching:

1. *If there is no language element.* This does not mean it could not justifiably be studied as language teaching methodology, applied psychology and so on. But why call it applied linguistics if there is no language content?
2. *If the language elements are handled without any theory of language.* The theory of language does not need to come from linguistics but might be philosophy or literary theory: crucially applied linguistics cannot treat language as if there were no traditions of language study whatsoever. Nor can the methods of language description be based solely on folk ideas from the school tradition of grammar or the practical EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching tradition, which would be rather like basing physics on alchemy or folk beliefs. Doubtless some aspects of these may be interpreted in a more up-to-date and scientific fashion, but this applies equally to alchemy.
3. *If the research base is neither directly concerned with language teaching nor related to it in a demonstrable way.* That is to say, a theory from outside language teaching cannot be applied without a clear chain of logic showing how and why it is relevant. An idea from mathematical theory, computer simulation or first language acquisition needs to show its credentials by proving its link to second language teaching through L2 evidence and argument, not imposing itself by fiat, by analogy, or by sheer computer modelling. If one were, say, to adopt knitting theory as a foundation for the applied linguistics of language teaching, one would need to demonstrate how warp and weft account for the basic phenomena of language acquisition and use by showing empirical evidence of their applicability to second language acquisition.

Over the years the applied linguistics of language teaching has had its most important relationships with linguistics and psychology. Applied linguists have

designed syllabuses and tests used around the world; some have ventured into coursebook writing. Most of this has been based on general ideas about language learning, going from the early influence of structuralism and behaviourism that led to the audiolingual teaching method, the influence of Chomskyan ideas about the independence of the learner's language and of social arguments by Dell Hymes that jointly led to the communicative syllabus and communicative language teaching, and the wave of cognitivism in psychology that contributed to task-based learning. By and large this has been application at a general level, not based on detailed findings about second language acquisition. It is hard to find teaching drawing on, say, specific information about sequence of phonological acquisition or studies of learners' errors.

The dangers with this have been twofold. One is that for many years it was assumed that the implementation of language teaching ideas was universally beneficial; the applied linguist's hired gun was on the side of the goodies. But it became clear that many changes in language teaching methodology were not culturally, politically or morally neutral. Communicative methodology for instance required a classroom where the teacher was an organizer rather than an authority. In countries where teachers are treated as wise elders who know best, the image of the teacher as friendly helper ran counter to the students' beliefs. So language teachers became proselytes for Western individualistic views, not seeing themselves as serving the students within their own cultural situations for their own ends but as converting them to another role. As a Chinese minister said, 'For English language teaching in China we need a method that is Chinese.' The types of language teaching advocated by applied linguists then commonly incorporated Western values rather than being culturally neutral, if such neutrality were even possible.

Alongside this cultural bias came a growing realization that language teaching was inherently to do with power and politics. The choice of language to be taught was one issue: why choose say French as the language to be taught in English schools? Choosing a language because of its international currency reinforced the language power structure of the globe, adding to the power of ex-colonial languages like English and Spanish or of religion-linked languages like Arabic and Hebrew. Spreading English to the world may provide a neutral *lingua franca* for the world to use or it may impose the hegemony of a hypercentral language on the world if it fails to detach itself from the power of the native speaker.

The choice of the native speaker as the target of language teaching has indeed become increasingly problematic. On the one hand it was a matter of which native speaker: why were dialect speakers in one country excluded, say Geordies or Glaswegians? Why were alternative standard languages across the world excluded, say Singapore English or Indian English? Clearly the choice of which native speaker to use was based more on status and on power than on objective criteria, such as number of speakers or ease of learning.

On the other hand it was a matter of the value of monolingual native speakers. If your goal is to speak English to other people who are not native speakers of English, what has the native speaker got to do with it? While there is an argument

for a form of English that ensures mutual comprehensibility, this does not necessarily imply a status native speaker variety. The overwhelming importance of the native speaker in language teaching has taken away the rights of people to speak like themselves and to express their own identities as multilinguals; Geordies or Texans can show with every word they utter that they come from Newcastle or Houston; Frenchmen must try to avoid any sign in English that they come from France. Hence applied linguistics has had to enter a harsher world where the value of language teaching cannot be taken for granted as it may be a way of establishing or reinforcing a subordinate status in the world.

The other main danger is that applied linguistics may be losing contact with actual teaching and so giving up much of its impact. The interest in theories from different disciplines among applied linguists means that what they are saying gets further and further from answering the teacher's question 'What do I do with my class of 14-year-olds learning French next Monday at 10 o'clock?' One obvious retort is that it is not the applied linguists' job to provide detailed advice of this kind since they do not know the specifics of any teacher's classroom and should not over-ride the teacher's feel for the complexity of their situation and the needs of their students; at best applied linguists can provide general guidance on which teachers can draw for their specific teaching situations.

But, as Michael Swan's contribution to this volume illustrates, the applied linguist still tends to impose theory-based solutions that ignore the reality that teachers face in the classroom and that are unsubstantiated by an adequate body of pertinent research evidence. The implication is still that their recommendations, currently say task-based learning and negotiation for meaning, should apply to the whole of language teaching rather than to the limited area and specific cultural context that is their proper concern. In the audiolingual teaching method of the 1960s, a crucial phase was exploitation; you teach the structure and vocabulary through dialogues and drills and then you get the students to make them their own through role-plays, games and the like: 'Some provision will be made for the students to apply what they have learnt in a structured communication situation' (Rivers, 1964). The language teaching methods advocated by applied linguists such as communicative language teaching and task-based learning have been a great help in developing exploitation exercises. But, as Michael Swan points out, to exploit something it has to be there in the first place; you can't do the communicative activities or the tasks without having the basic vocabulary, syntax and phonology to draw on: communicative language teaching and task-based learning presuppose a prior knowledge of some language. The crucial question for language teachers is how to prime the pump sufficiently for the communicative and task-based activities to take place. Applied linguists have never solved the problem of bootstrapping posed by Steven Pinker many years ago: how does the child get the initial knowledge that is necessary for acquiring the rest of the language? So applied linguistics has concerned itself with the analysis and frequency of vocabulary but has seldom described the teaching techniques through which new vocabulary can be taught. If you want to find out about the techniques for teaching new elements of language, you have to turn to the teacher-training