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What Do We Teach: Applied Linguistics or Language Teaching Methodology?

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In recent years we have witnessed a considerable disunity in using the term *applied linguistics* for designating academic courses at universities or teacher training institutions. The designation is often used for the programmes intended to provide teacher trainees with the necessary knowledge and skills for their future work as classroom language teachers. There are, however, courses more academically oriented also using the same label. This contribution discusses how the term is perceived nowadays and makes an argument for its distinction from other related terms.

Introduction

A random survey of university websites promoting or describing the content of their academic programmes gives some indication of how the term is perceived and interpreted by individual institutions or academics. Two examples, one from the UK and one from the US, will illustrate two different tendencies.

Example 1

The Sheffield University **MA degree programme in Applied Linguistics** consists of four core and four optional modules. The four core modules are *Introduction to Language and Linguistics*; *English Grammar*; *Language Teaching Methodology*; and *Research Methods*.

Four optional modules are selected from a menu, which may vary from year to year: *Language and Mind; Language Programme Design; English for Specific Purposes; Theory and Practice of Language Teaching; Language Planning in Education; Second Language Acquisition; Phonetics and Phonology for Language Teaching; History of English; Language Testing; Discourse and Genre Analysis; Advanced Research Methods; Folklore in English Literature and Culture.*
(<http://www.shef.ac.uk/language/prospectivepg/masters/appliedlinguistics.html>)

Example 2

The **MA degree program in Applied Linguistics** at Boston Graduate School of Arts and Sciences also requires taking four core courses. They are, however, divided into groups:

Obligatory: *Phonetics & Phonology; and Syntax I.*

One course in language structure and linguistic theory:

Semantics or Morphology; or

Discourse Analysis.

One course that provides an introduction to a major area of applied linguistics:

Language Acquisition and Linguistic Theory;

Sociolinguistics;

Psycholinguistics; or

Introduction to Speech and Language Disorders

Plus additional specialised courses, e.g.:

Language Acquisition;

Neurolinguistics and Language Disorders;

Language Structure and Linguistic Theory;

Sign Language Linguistics and Acquisition;

Bilingualism and Language Teaching;

Language and Literacy in the Classroom.

(<http://search.bc.edu/>)

Two major observations may be made based on the study of the above lists of courses. First of all, in both programmes typically “linguistic” courses are included in the core of applied linguistic programmes. In Example 1, *Introduction to Language and Linguistics* and *English Grammar*, and in Example 2, *Phonetics & Phonology; Syntax I; Semantics and Morphology*.

Another observation concerns the position of language teaching methodology in the programmes. In Example 1, a course in language teaching methodology belongs to the core modules and is defined as the module reviewing “the principles, thinking and history underlying contemporary language teaching processes. It explores what we know of the processes involved in language production and reception in a second language and the implications for teaching the language skills. It also reviews and assesses developments in the teaching of the grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language”. Several other optional courses listed in the menu support this concept via a deeper look at selected areas of language teaching methodology.

Example 2, conversely, represents a model of an applied linguistics course not embracing any typical “methodological” issues. Although we are aware of the fact that the latter model may count on students’ previous training in teaching methodology, the structure of the offered programme is indicative of the latest developments in related branches of sciences.

Defining Applied Linguistics

In order to understand current developments in using the term *applied linguistics*, it is useful to take a brief look at the past.

Although the roots of applied linguistics can be found long ago, the notion of applied linguistics as known today emerged in the United States in 1941 after the establishment of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. Among others, the term was used to label a course applying a so-called “scientific approach” to teaching foreign languages. Those who are associated with the beginning of the field are Charles Fries and Robert Lado. Their initiative resulted in the publication of a new journal *Language Learning: A Quarterly Journal of Applied Linguistics* in 1948, which, since then, has always had a prominent position in the development of applied linguistics.

The popularity of the term rapidly grew in the 1950s and 1960s when other new journals and institutes in many countries emerged with this designation. The journals, along with congresses of the AILA (*association internationale de linguistique appliquée*), began the process of shaping applied linguistics and promoting its development. “At the pioneering meeting of 1964 the emphasis was highly theoretical; principal themes discussed were automation in linguistics, language teaching, efforts to coordinate research in Europe. The most recurring topic in plenary lectures was translation, and this continued to be a feature at subsequent congresses in 1972, 1975 and 1984” (Catford 1984: 469). In the early 1970s, two new trends in the development of applied linguistics were observed: contrastive linguistics and the psychology of second language learning, both seen from the perspective of educational needs.

There is no doubt that early applied linguistics was largely associated with language teaching and learning, seeking to bridge the gap between the theoretical achievements of linguistics and the reality of classroom pedagogical practice. Widdowson’s (1979: 1) definition clearly stresses the primacy of language education: “Applied linguistics, as I conceive it, is a spectrum of inquiry which extends from theoretical studies of language to classroom practice.”

The pedagogical preoccupation of applied linguistics gradually gave way to a more extensive focus by including more aspects of the academic study of language. Since the 1980s, the term has begun to be used to refer to any area of study that is language-related, and the growing diversity of the field may be noted. The trend is well illustrated by Brumfit’s definition (1991: 46): “In addition to what has been traditionally regarded as applied linguistic territory – language education (first, second and foreign language teaching and learning) this definition extends coverage to areas such as clinical and forensic linguistics, lexicography, critical linguistics and translation theory and practice.”

Various interpretations of the term may be seen in recent publications. Lyons, for example, explains his understanding of the subject matter by claiming that “theoretical linguistics studies language and languages with a view to constructing a theory of their structure and functions and without regard to any practical applications that the investigation of language and languages might have, whereas applied linguistics has as its concerns the application of the concepts and findings of linguistics to a variety of practical tasks, including language-teaching” (1999: 35). The same approach may be observed in Crystal (2001: 23) who defines applied linguistics as “a branch of linguistics where the primary concern is the application of linguistic theories, methods and findings to the elucidation of language problems which have arisen in other areas of experience. The most well-developed branch of applied linguistics is the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and sometimes the term is used as if this were the only field involved”. This view is also supported by Widdowson

(2000: 4) but only in relation to the past. “It all seemed straightforward enough: linguistics decontextualised language from reality, and applied linguistics re-contextualised it, and reconstructed reality in the process. In this respect, linguistics was the science (like physics) and applied linguistics its technology (like engineering).”

The latest developments in applied linguistics indicate that the term represents up-to-date research concentrating on the linguistic analysis of language disorders (clinical linguistics), the use of language in mother-tongue education (educational linguistics), and developments in lexicography, translation and stylistics. It seems that there is an uncertain boundary between applied linguistics and various interdisciplinary branches of linguistics, particularly those which deal with the practical application of “purely” theoretical sciences.

More recently, applied linguistics has been utilised in the study of spoken and written discourse, gender issues in language use, the social stratification of language and language varieties, neurological factors and language dysfunctions, learning strategies, and special learning needs of specific populations. Some applied linguists are concerned with helping planners and policy-makers develop and implement a language policy, or develop programmes for immigrants coming to the United States or other countries.

In addition, there is a specific area that clearly documents the close interaction of linguistic theory with applied linguistic investigation. It is the area of *second language acquisition*. SLA is now recognised as a successful independent theoretical area within applied linguistics, with its own international journals and its own international conferences.

Discussion

Having analysed various definitions of applied linguistics, we hold the view that the identification of applied linguistics with language teaching methodology is very loose. The main difference seems to be in the degree of involvement of applied linguistics in the subject matter of language teaching. Applied linguistics tends to be concerned only with some aspects of language teaching and learning, namely those which are related to language itself. Strictly speaking, foreign or second language methodology covers a much more extended area than that of linguistics application. Moreover, if we include foreign/second language education, the following conclusions may be suggested:

Foreign/second language education, in its narrower sense, turns its attention to language education policies, student and programme evaluation, and the schooling process. It thus deals with language instruction in particular *institutional settings*. Striving to understand how teachers teach and how learners learn, it is concerned with programme administration, syllabus and curriculum design, and teacher training.

There are, however, contexts when the term is used as an umbrella designation for everything that is concerned with foreign/second language teaching and learning.

Foreign/second language methodology, a language-related field “engaged in developing the most ‘effective’ way to teach foreign languages” (Kramsch 2000: 316), is mainly concerned with the level of **performance** and refers to the systematic application of validated principles to practical contexts. Although it draws on theory, it is generally reserved for practitioners in language *classrooms*.

This level of performance also predetermines the issues of its focus, such as language resources and skills, classroom tasks and activities, management of learning, ways of motivating students, lesson planning, curriculum and syllabus design, error correction, textbook/materials design, selection and evaluation.

We are aware of the fact that the term methodology is sometimes used in different contexts and for different purposes. Historically, methodology tends to be used in its narrower

sense and is equated with specific methods and approaches to language teaching (see e.g. Strevens 1985). In order to distinguish this interpretation of the term from the above concept, the term “methodics”, introduced by Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964), and later referred to by Stern (1983), may be considered.

Applied linguistics is generally perceived as an interdisciplinary field of research for the study of all aspects of *language use*. Being a non-language-specific field, it primarily deals with mother, foreign and second language acquisition but also examines the relationship between language and such areas as the media, law, or communication. It draws on such well-established disciplines as linguistics, social and educational psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education. However, “applied linguistics in this sense must be practised by teachers too if it is to have an effective operational relevance at all” (Widdowson 1991: 6). In contrast to (pure) linguistics, it is driven by real-world problems rather than theoretical explorations.

The question that may arise when considering the names of the courses labelled *applied linguistics* is whether, or to what extent, (practical) language learning and teaching problems are or should be included in applied linguistics courses. The two examples quoted in the introduction illustrate two different perceptions of the term. Example 1 represents the understanding of applied linguistics as a language-related discipline closely linked with the level of performance.

This understanding of applied linguistics as an academic discipline is also applied – in a modified way – at the University of Alberta. (This finding excludes an assumption that the model quoted in Example 1 represents a “European” perception of applied linguistics.) According to their website, applied linguistics may be said to deal primarily with issues in these fields:

second/foreign language acquisition, e.g. theories of language learning and acquisition, cognitive processes involved in learning and acquiring a second/foreign language in various educational contexts, language learning strategies and styles, and attitudes and motivation for acquiring a new language;

sociolinguistics, e.g. the impact of the social and cultural context in which a language is being used within a society, intercultural difference and second/foreign language learning and teaching, and/or variation in language use;

discourse analysis, e.g. communicative aspects of language use, linguistic structures of speech acts, conversational sequences, speech activities, and/or oral and literate registers;

bilingualism, e.g. code-switching, storage of multiple languages in the brain, and/or issues of bilingual education;

contrastive linguistics, e.g. comparative analysis of the phonological, semantic and grammatical features of a native tongue and a target language, or of any two languages or groups of languages;

second/foreign language pedagogy, e.g. theories and practical issues of second/foreign language teaching (<http://www.ualberta.ca>).

Example 2 offers a programme of a more interdisciplinary nature, more academically biased and with a larger scope of interest. It reflects one of the latest perceptions of the field being nonterritorial, i.e. not linked to any specific academic territory, including foreign language departments. There are even voices that applied linguistics should establish itself outside the departmental structure as a minor.

A certain compromise in comparison with the above two models of applied linguistic programmes may be seen in the concept dividing the area under focus into strands.

Northumbria University, for example, offers “Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma/MA in Applied Linguistics” in three strands:

- (1) *TESOL strand* with four core modules: Second Language Acquisition; Language Teaching, Methodology, and Curriculum; Critical Perspectives on Global TESOL; and Research Methods in Applied Linguistics.
- (2) *ESP strand* with slightly modified core modules: Language for Specific Purposes; Language Teaching, Methodology, and Curriculum; Analysing and Teaching Written English; and Research Methods in Applied Linguistics.
- (3) *Language Studies strand* with modules corresponding to its orientation: Communication and Language; Language in Society; Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis, and Research Methods in Applied Linguistics.

The intention of its designers was to provide a programme informed by a distinctive, holistic perspective rather than the application of narrowly focused linguistic theories and concepts to special educational or other issues.

The current perception and scope of “applied linguistics” as a research area is best seen in the organisation of conferences and symposia. For instance, the “World Congress on Applied Linguistics” to be held in Madison, WI, U.S. in July 2005, announces the following areas of interest:

- Adult language learning
- Child language
- Communication in the professions
- Contrastive linguistics and error analysis
- Discourse analysis
- Educational technology and language learning
- Evaluation, assessment, and testing
- Foreign language teaching methodology and teacher education
- Forensic linguistics
- Immersion education
- Interpreting and translating
- Language and business
- Language and ecology
- Language and education in multilingual settings
- Language and gender
- Language and the media
- Language contact and language change
- Language for special purposes
- Language planning
- Learner autonomy in language learning
- Lexicography and lexicology
- Literacy
- Mother tongue education
- Psycholinguistics
- Rhetoric and stylistics
- Second language acquisition
- Sign language

Conclusion

With regard to these latest developments in applied linguistics, and considering major issues within its focus, it seems reasonable for educational institutions to reserve the term 'applied linguistics' for the large area of interdisciplinary language-related study, while all relevant issues related to its educational application and classroom work be reserved for language teaching methodology. Thus, courses providing primarily vocational study, i.e. education-biased, should be named *language teaching methodology* courses, and courses providing primarily academic language study, i.e. linguistics-biased, should be named *applied linguistics* courses. This suggestion does not mean that certain overlapping is excluded.

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