

PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL BASES OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

[UYGULAMALI DİLBİLİM VE İKİNCİ DİL EDİNİMİNİN FELSEFİ VE KURAMSAL TEMELLERİ]

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at delineating the bonds between applied linguistics (AL) and second language acquisition (SLA) research within a philosophical and theoretical framework. The article initially traces the philosophical and theoretical basis applied linguistics along with the birth of SLA research, and then draws connections between applied linguistics and SLA. To do this in detail, issues that are inherent in applied linguistics research are examined in detail and points of connection are highlighted. It is stated that second language acquisition is one of the most important areas of study for applied linguistics. The article also handles the relation between applied linguistics and language teaching. Finally, a comparison of applied linguistics and educational linguistics is undertaken.

Key words: applied linguistics, second language acquisition, language teaching.

ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı uygulamalı dilbilim ve ikinci dil edinimi arasındaki bağlantıları felsefi ve teorik bir yapı çerçevesinde ele almaktır. Öncelikle makale, uygulamalı dilbilim ve ikinci dil edinimi araştırmalarının teorik ve felsefi başlangıcını açıklamakta ve daha sonra bu iki alan arasındaki bağlantı noktalarını belirlemektedir. Bunu detaylı olarak yapabilmek için uygulamalı dilbilimin kendine özgü araştırma konuları belirtilecek ve ikinci dil edinimi araştırmaları ile bağdaşan yönleri ele alınacaktır. Temelde ikinci dil edinimi çalışmalarının uygulamalı dilbilim alanının en önemli çalışma konularından birisi olduğu vurgulanmaktadır. Makale ayrıca, uygulamalı dilbilim ile dil öğretimi arasındaki ilişkiyi de incelemektedir. Son olarak uygulamalı dilbilim ve eğitimsel dilbilimin dil öğretimi bağlamındaki etkileri tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: uygulamalı dilbilim, ikinci dil edinimi, dil öğretimi.

INTRODUCTION

Many changes in certain disciplines like philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and education have influenced the area of second language acquisition by and large. At first, that is, prior to the Second World War, the main discipline that lent itself to the study of teaching and learning of second and foreign languages was *philology*. The time period between the First World War and the Second World War witnessed important developments in psychology and educational sciences, which gradually became the intellectual basis for the study of second language learning. After the Second World War, linguistics flourished as a science and got to be the “mentor discipline” (Kramersch, 2000) for FL learning and teaching.

One of the issues with which language teaching theoreticians have long been grappling is the question where to locate second language teaching and learning within social sciences. Is it a science on its own or a sub-branch of linguistics or applied linguistics? Some thirty years ago the answer to this question would be that language teaching is a sub-branch of applied linguistics (AL). Today, even though applied linguistics is not viewed as the sole parent science for language teaching in that applied linguistics, it has a lot to offer to cover many of the topics that are inherent in the acquisition of second or foreign languages. Applied linguistics does not seem to offer much in the name of pedagogy in as much as applied linguistics is mainly concerned with accounting language rather than providing solutions to the problems of what happens in language classes.

As a central construct in language teaching, applied linguistics itself suffered from discussions regarding its status. At the heart of these debates lay the question of whether applied linguistics is a science on its

own or whether it must be thought to exist under the auspices of FL departments of universities. Such questions boil down, within the framework of the present paper and in regard to SLA, to the question of whether SLA and teaching and learning of second or foreign language are branches of applied linguistics or independent areas of study. Developments and ongoing discussions in linguistics, psychology, and SLA research indicate that applied linguistics research contributed a lot to language teaching and learning and still continues to do so. And the connection between language teaching and AL is a tight one.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL BASIS OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Ludwig Wittgenstein brought language-related questions to the fore for those who were not professional linguists. As explained in *Science Encyclopedia*, he accomplished this in two main ways. First, by his discussion on the philosophy of language and second by elaborating those logical theories. Wittgenstein was a protégé of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), absorbing features of the analytic philosophy of Russell and Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), but fundamentally posing a whole series of innovative questions of his own devising. Wittgenstein's genius is enshrined in his *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1922)*, a brilliant work that is only about seventy-five pages in length. Despite its extreme brevity, the *Tractatus* manages to raise provocative questions concerning the nature of language, logic, ethics, death, and other, often disturbing, topics. How is language possible? How does a sequence of words come to mean something? How can it be understood? For Wittgenstein, a sentence is a depiction of reality, thus he presents what might be called a picture theory of language. The *Tractatus* deals, above all, with the limits of language: "What can be said can only be said by means of a proposition, and so nothing that is necessary for the understanding of all propositions can be said" (In such statements by Wittgenstein, "said" means "represented").

The limits of language correspond to the limits of thought; hence there are certain things that cannot be thought, which account for the famous sentence: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

Here the importance of language in human is clearly implied. Being one of the most important disciplines, linguistics, deals with the investigation of language, and applied linguistics, as a sub-branch of linguistics, which flourished as of the 1950s, focuses on more practical issues that are related to language and language acquisition and language learning. In this article, we look at the theoretical and philosophical connections between applied linguistics, second language acquisition, second language learning, and foreign language learning.

The philosophical basis of applied linguistics assumes importance in terms of addressing issues that are vital in legitimizing foundational framework for the discipline. The philosophical framework for the discipline is primarily needed in the discussion of the findings of research besides drawing the borders of the field of applied linguistics. Another important reason why philosophical accounts of applied linguistics are important substantiates in the critical analysis of the research basis of the field. This means that we need a philosophical frame of mind in order to get an understanding of the changing paradigms within the field of applied linguistics. This requires a theoretical approach for accounting the new paradigms that emerged within the development of the field. These paradigms are as follows:

Table 1. Seven paradigms within applied linguistics.

Paradigm/Tradition	Characterized by
Linguistic/behaviourist	'scientific' approach
Linguistic 'extended paradigm model'	language is a social phenomenon
Multi-disciplinary model	attention not only to

	language, but also to learning theory and pedagogy
Second language acquisition research	experimental research into how languages are learned
Constructivism	knowledge of a new language is interactively constructed
Postmodernism	political relations in teaching; multiplicity of perspectives
Complexity theory	language emergence organic and non-linear, through dynamic adaptation

(adapted from

Weideman 2007)

In reading this table, one may be tempted to follow the developments as occurring one after the other and thus one paradigm shift has ended the previous one. However, McNamara (2008, p. 304) indicates that “it is important to keep alive an understanding of the theoretical perspectives that have been proposed in the past so that their enduring relevance is appreciated and we do not go on reinventing the wheel”. As we can see, SLA is one of the major paradigms in applied linguistics research. And it is one that will never fade away from the research agenda of applied linguistics.

The birth of SLA (second language acquisition) as an interdisciplinary field took place in the 1970s with the concurrent developments in linguistics, psychology, and education. Born out of the studies on child language acquisition and fueled by the need to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to a growing number of ESL learners around the world, SLA research mainly focused on the study of teaching and learning of

second and foreign languages in educational settings. (Ellis, 1990 in Kramersch, 2000)

In its early stages, SLA research focused on *contrastive analysis* of languages on account of the fact that at that time field linguists were mainly concerned about description, classification, and cataloguing of native Indian languages. And by time they were asked to apply their findings on the teaching of some of these Indian languages because these languages were facing extinction and had to be taught. As a result, applied linguists of that time found it the best to compare and contrast the data that they had gained during the description and classification of these languages. In a similar vein, translation was also influenced by the works of these early linguists because, as Nida (1969, p. 79) pointed out, translators go through stages of analysis, transfer, and reconstruction. In short, the prevailing paradigm at those times was to describe languages on the basis of their common structural patterns and learning of languages was thought to benefit from such studies. (Rajagopalan, 2004)

Such a conceptualization of language and language learning came to be researched under the heading of *contrastive analysis* (Lado, 1957), which undertook to find out similarities and differences between L2 and L1 of learners and how these similarities and differences determined learnability of L2 at hand. This approach did not last long on account of the fact that learners were not ready to imitate L2 structures and it was not easy to conduct contrastive analysis within languages.

Later developments in SLA, that is the appearance of Chomsky to the stage, downgraded the validity of contrastive analysis and as a result approaches or techniques related to contrastive analysis were abandoned. Chomsky's transformational grammar shook the ground. However, the fact that Chomsky's theories were solely concerned with L1 acquisition stirred a lot of discussion among the researchers of the time. Some argued, based on the assumption that L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition

were identical processes; Chomsky's claims could be applied to language teaching. Some time later, though, it was understood that Universal Grammar did not have much to offer to language teaching. Cook (1994, p. 45), for example, is of the opinion that research goals associated with universal grammar and L2 acquisition were too promising but the result did not turn out to be conclusive. That is to say, Universal Grammar "does not have to be taken into account in language teaching". (Cook, 1994) The ongoing dissatisfaction among some of the scholars led them to formulate another branch of theoretical linguistics, namely, SLA, to study how languages other than L1 were learnt, leaving issues related to teaching and other practical matters to AL specialists.

The growing understanding in the 1980s was that having theoretical linguistic accounts does not ensure success in language learning in actual practice. Canale (1983) claimed that the term communicative competence was a *buzzword* stating that "the distinction between communicative competence and actual communication remains poorly understood, and, somewhat surprisingly, of marginal interest in second language acquisition. Similarly, Newmeyer (1982) pointed out that the term was an unfortunate one in that "it created pernicious ambiguity where none existed previously". Yet, despite the fact that there were complaints on the part of some scholars in regard to the very substance of the term communicative competence, Davies claimed that the term had at least stripped us from the inaccurate depiction of language and language learning that was imposed by Chomsky's linguistic competence. (Davies, 1989, p.157)

The emerging view, as a result of the competence debate, was that what the field needed was not to add to the existing theories to form new ones in order to shed light to language teaching and learning, but to come up with groundbreaking ways of accounting for L2 learning, that are independent of and unaffected by existing theories. (Rajagopalan, 2004)

APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND SLA/FLA

Aiming at studying all aspects of language use, applied linguistics was founded in the late 1950s by linguists and educators. Areas of study for applied linguistics are

- LI and L2 acquisition
- SLA-related fields
- communication in the professions
- communication disorders
- language and the media
- language and the law
- language policy and planning
- translation and interpretation
- language and technology
- stylistics and rhetoric
- literacy
- discourse and conversational analysis
- sign language research

As it can be seen from the list, the areas applied linguistics aims to focus are many and varied. However, what makes these divergent subjects as feasible areas of research is initially the relation between psycho- and sociolinguistic theory, and then the consideration that they are dependent on acquisition and use of languages. (Davies, 1999) In regard to L2 or FL acquisition, the following questions are some of the fundamental questions applied linguistics research attempts to answer.

- What norms of language use should one adhere to in the face of linguistic variations and regional differences?

- What is the status of standardized (written) national languages vis-à-vis the large linguistic databases of authentic spoken language use? (e.g., Stubbs, 1996)
- Is the notion of native speaker an artificial construct of grammarians, and to what extent should nonnative speakers speak and behave like native speakers? (e.g., V. Cook, 1999)
- What stylistic differences do learners bring with them to the acquisition of another language?
- How does language in discourse both reflect and create social structures and political ideologies? (Pennycook, 1994; Pennycook, 1998)
- What is the relation of language to social and cultural identity? (Peirce, 1995)
- To what extent does institutional discourse define what is taught and learned in schools and language classrooms in particular?

These questions seem to be highly relevant to the teaching and learning of languages. To be more specific, according to Kramsch (2000), there are two important areas that are tightly correlated to applied linguistics and L2 teaching and learning. The first one is related to the acquisition of textual competence, which can be defined as the ability to understand the symbolic values of written systems of the target language and how they are perceived by native speakers. The second concerns issues of *legitimacy, social and national identity, and voice* (Kramsch, 2000), and, particularly in the case of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), problems of language socialization into Anglo-Saxon culture (Gnutzmann, 2000) as learners of English as a foreign language.

The connection between SLA and applied linguistics was once tight. Linguistic and psychological theories were at the forefront in accounting how second language learning took place. Initially, issues in applied linguistics research were handled on the basis of structuralism as a

linguistics theory and behaviorist psychology as a learning theory. As such, language was described as a combination of grammatical structures and sound systems that operated to create meaning, and language learning was seen as habit formation in which students imitated and practiced sounds and structures of language in exchange for reinforcement.

It is also possible to treat applied linguistics as a non-territorial field, just as Seidlholder (1999) did at the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA), with the premise that applied linguistics can be located somewhere in between teaching and research. This idea paves the way for the application of applied linguistics research within the fields of cultural or literary studies. Now that teaching and learning of languages have bounds with cultural studies, it may be asserted that SLA and language teaching can be considered to have a legitimate place within the framework of applied linguistics. Thus, according to Kramsch (2000), applied linguistics can be a *bridge* between recent theory in literary and cultural studies and FL teaching programs.

Pica (2005) observes that “the study of SLA is a rich and varied enterprise, carried out by researchers, whose interest and training lie often in broader disciplines of linguistics, psychology, and education” (p. 263). Pica also makes the point that SLA research is, among the others, tightly connected to applied linguistics on account of the fact that applied linguistics deals with practical problems and issues in language teaching by applying linguistics research methods.

In order for the discussion on the place of AL in language teaching to be fruitful and conclusive, one can get help from how certain scholars defined AL. Brumfit (1997, p.93) defines AL as “the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a

central issue”. Brumfit’s definition seems to be too broad. Schmitt and Celce-Murcia (2002, p.1) offer the following definition: “AL is using what we know about, (a) language, (b) how it is learned, and (c) how it is used in order to achieve some purpose or to solve some problem in the real world”. To be more specific, they indicate that second language acquisition theory and second language teaching pedagogy and the relations between them has been the central issue in AL. In addition, Grabe also seems to assign a similar role to AL in language teaching. He defines it as follows:

the focus of AL is on trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world, whether they be learners, teachers, supervisors, academics, lawyers, service providers ... policy developers, dictionary makers, translators, or a whole range of business clients.
(Grabe, 2002, p.9)

Compared to Brumfit and Schmitt and Celce-Murcia, Grabe (2002) was more straightforward in including language learners and teachers in his definition. To be more general, however, it can be inferred from the given definitions, which are from remarkable scholars in the area of language and linguistics, that they seem to converge on the point that AL may involve areas of interest, besides some other language related issues, for language teachers and learners.

Widdowson (1979) stressed the need that linguistics must be used selectively in language teaching, stating that “linguistics requires mediation of an interpreter for its own potential usefulness to the language teachers to be realized”. What Widdowson was trying to underline was that language teachers could borrow related knowledge from AL research. This meant that AL was seen as an interdisciplinary field that functioned as a *bridge* mediating between language teachers and linguists.

This line of thinking is accordance with the ideas of the author of the present paper, who in the light of what has been discussed holds the view that AL can explain and help language teachers in terms of the depiction of the language itself; however, when we say language teaching we mean two things: (1) what is language, and (2) how it can be taught. AL research seems to provide important data and expertise for the former one, but the latter one does not seem to be covered by AL. Similarly, Rampton (1995, p. 223) observes that “there is tendency in AL to move away from influence of linguistics, pedagogy, and psychology to areas such as sociology, anthropology, media studies and so on as areas of study.

Contemporary scholars are leaning towards more practical issues rather than discussing where to locate language teaching. McKay (2002, p.128), for example, draws attention to the fact that there are many contexts where English is learned and spoken and we must be alerted to this fact for the betterment of language teaching practices. It is possible to conclude from both McKay’s quote and ideas of many others who, instead of discussing the knowledge gained from theoretical linguistics, opt for the discussion of more practical issues and realities pertaining to today’s case in language teaching, that language practitioners or theoreticians are as dependent on applied linguistics as they are to other disciplines like psychology, sociology, or anthropology. Yet, SLA and AL seem to be inextricably linked to each other in terms of their research areas and research methods. Any attempt to set them apart would fail due to the fact that they both investigate language, language related problems, and language acquisition or learning. In short, they cannot be thought as separate.

APPLIED LINGUISTICS OR EDUCATIONAL LINGUISTICS?

The discussion above, which supports the view that *applied linguistics* can provide the link between FL teaching programs and literary or cultural studies, may seem to be a sound scaffolding to cater the need for research in regard to language teaching and cultural or literary studies. Nevertheless, what language teachers need is not only confined to what can be gained from cultural or literary studies. The teaching of languages also necessitates considering what is going on inside the learner, how learning takes place, or what pedagogical issues are, etc. These questions do not seem to be answerable within the realm of applied linguistics research agenda.

Initially, language teaching was closely linked to the findings of AL research. The founding father of “contrastive analysis”, Robert Lado’s book, which was titled as *a scientific approach* (Lado, 1964); can be taken as an example of such an association. Furthermore, Alan and Corder (1975) stated that their main aim in AL was to make use of the knowledge and insights gained from scientific investigations into the nature of language to solve some of the problems which may arise in the planning or implementation of language teaching programs. Similar to some other important scholars like Halliday, McIntosh, and Stevens (1964), Corder made the point that AL’s indulgence in language and teaching of languages was a fraction of AL research.

Terminological dissatisfaction led some scholars to look for new avenues. Spolsky, for example, complained that “the term applied linguistics is not a happy one; in one way, it is too broad, failing to suggest what linguistics is applied to; in another, it suggests a level of practicality that lacks the dignity of “pure linguistics”. (Spolsky, 1978) Spolsky proposed “educational linguistics” as an alternative to the issue.

This term enjoyed relative popularity. Van Lier, for example, in the support of Spolsky, stated that “the linguistics in AL has veered off in the direction of theory, leaving pedagogy to cope with the practical side of things”. (Van Lier, 1994, p. 203) However, the term educational linguistics was as narrow as the term applied linguistics was broad, and, according to Rajagopalan (2004), educational linguistics left out too many important areas like translation, lexicography, bilingualism, multilingualism, speech pathology, literacy, language planning, language teacher education and so forth, which were available under the rubric of AL.

CONCLUSION

AL is an interdisciplinary area that prevails in areas like linguistics, social and educational psychology, and sociology, all of which deal with the issue of language teaching and learning. Moreover, AL attempts to connect theory and practice in language acquisition and use. Therefore, stripping language teaching from the AL research would be a futile enterprise. Yet, as a conclusion, AL, SLA and language teaching are so interrelated that they are not easy to think as independent of each other.

SLA, within AL, can be considered to be an intermediary discipline that functions between theory and practice of language study. To be more specific, it can be said to be the theory of the practice of language acquisition and use. Either covertly or overtly, theories of language make statements on how languages can or should be taught in classrooms. Ongoing efforts that undertake to justify AL and its sub-discipline SLA handle different issues in regard to language learning and teaching like linguistics and psychological validity or educational reliability.

As it can be understood from the discussion above, language teaching was initially tied to AL research, the contemporary issues then being *contrastive analysis* and then the competence debates like that of Chomsky's *linguistics competence* or Hyme's *communicative competence*. Later developments within the philosophy of AL guided it to a slightly different direction, which made it less concerned with language teaching. Yet, at no point in the history was language teaching completely dissociated from AL research.

The controversy does not seem to have been resolved in the view of the fact that educational linguistics, proposed by Spolsky to replace the towering hegemony of applied linguistics, appears to be as limited in scope as AL is broad. That is to say, AL research goes far beyond issues that are relevant to language teaching whereas educational linguistics remain far restrained. This is because the term educational linguistics connotes that it is available for the study of the issues that are related to language that is to be taught. However, when we say language teaching there are too many issues involved, like psychology of learner, learning theories (in general), policy issues, and the like. Therefore, as a general conclusion it is possible to say that AL is one of the disciplines which provide data for language teachers for some important issues, but it is not the only one, and educational linguistics is there waiting to be discussed whether it can become a sound ground to base language teaching practices. Now we seem to be at a juncture to decide whether to place ELT under auspices of applied linguistics or SLA research. This does not, however, come to mean that opting for one of them discards the other totally. Due to the interdisciplinarity of L2 learning, language teaching practitioners or theoreticians are invariably bound to borrow from a wide range of disciplines.

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