

## 2. Do language teachers and applied linguists understand each other?

### *Abstract*

*In this article, my aim is to enhance the increasingly fruitful relationship between the two groups engaged in the language education endeavour. I do not think this relationship has always been mutually respectful. Indeed for three decades it seemed to be quite dysfunctional. But in the last ten years the discourse has changed and the inter-relationships have improved. After outlining some of the developments of the last 40 years, bad and good, I make suggestions about who needs to do what in order to become the best professional they can be.*

### *Some issues*

I first posed the question of Teachers vs Applied Linguists at the IATEFL Conference in Brighton in 1984. At that time, there was a clearly definable sociology within the worldwide community of language professionals, and it went something like this.

Since the Second World War, English had established itself as the world language, courtesy of the commercial and technological dominance of the USA (not the UK it has to be said). Pragmatic English language teaching of the sort epitomised by John Haycraft's International House in the late 50's, was one effective response to the consequent mushrooming need, and pragmatic teacher training developed as a result. By the mid 60s, the UK became associated with short teacher training courses sending young graduates, equipped with their new 'TEFLs', off to live in foreign parts for a few experience-packed years. It was a time of tremendous amateurism (in the true sense), naivety, energy, and creativity. And yet, with all the trial and error, a truly workable system of teaching emerged by the early 70s. What characterised the atmosphere of those times was adventure. Everything we did, from language analysis, to 'acting out', mime stories, songs, balloon debates, . . . . was based on the question: 'Does it work? Let's try something different and see if it works better'.

Meanwhile, these intrepid young diplomats for the English language, were only a very small part of the total global picture. In the second large development, the teaching of English to children constituted (and still constitutes) the biggest group of English language teachers. National school curriculums all over the world, from Uganda to Singapore, were adjusted to take account of the new demand for English. The training of non-native speaker teachers of English in those countries remained, however, much as it had been in the previous 50 years, firmly based in linguistics, philology, pedagogy, and psychology. And in some countries, such as the then Soviet Union, many English teachers were required to be educated to PhD level.

A third large development originated in the USA in the 50s and gained momentum by the 60s. The worldwide spread of the US military necessitated a massive language teaching programme, and certain universities were put to the task of coming up with a fast method of language training. Thus began the United States' involvement in language-learning-psychology research. By the 70s, a significant number of US universities were working in the field, with the underlying assumption being: 'if we can crack the secret (i.e. the correct theory) of *language*, and *language learning*, we can say how *language teaching* ought to be'. So language learning research became the *raison d'être* of the relevant US universities, and this remains largely true today. Two developments further enhanced the US role in the world effort for better language teaching – the massive influx into the USA of immigrants needing second language tuition, and the stepping up of the Peace Corps English language programs

abroad. Both schemes needed teachers, and a large effort of training ensued, based on the theories being developed.

The fourth 'wave' of interest came from the UK universities. In 1965 only four universities concerned themselves with either training TEFL teachers or doing research into applied language issues. By 1975 that number had risen above ten, and many were offering Masters courses in Applied Linguistics. It is now nearer thirty, and rising. The interest of these universities was in turning out thoughtful and rounded professionals. But they nevertheless had as their starting assumption that theory came before practice, and that a thorough knowledge of competing theories of language, or society and culture, or learning psychology, or even of teaching (yes, it was in the UK that there began the development of theories of *teaching*), had to come before the practical business of being in the classroom.

It was thus that, in the early 80s, the world of language teaching was divided. Universities in the USA were theory-driven, their tutors were largely academics with little actual experience of classroom language teaching, and their aims were to research and theorise about language learning issues and provide language teachers with the starting point for their actions in the classroom. Universities in the UK were also theory-driven, but far less so, and their aim was to set the agenda of questions that teachers should be asking themselves whenever they went into the classroom.

On the other hand, practical teacher training schemes in the UK such as the UCLES scheme (there was only one practical course at that time in the USA – the School of International Training in Vermont), were based on the pioneering brilliance of John Haycraft, and were practice-driven, always evolving, always self-questioning, always experimenting, always based on what teachers were observing in the classroom every day.

Finally, in other countries, universities and state teacher training programmes were changing rapidly, some taking the US approach, some taking the UK approach, some developing their own approaches. One thing was certain, in countries like Russia and Poland, something extraordinary had been happening in the 60s and 70s, much of it based on the learning theories of Vygotsky. Despite relative isolation from English during the Cold War, speakers of almost perfect English emerged, from what on the face of it were 'archaic' teaching methods. Clearly they had something to teach us native speakers about language teaching, but I am not sure enough people noticed, so the moment was lost!

The sociology of language teaching in the early 80s, then, had produced the potential for considerable misunderstanding among the various groups, not least between pragmatically trained teachers and academics in universities.

But who, of these two groups, was in the best place to set the research agenda? What were the key questions to ask? Did the groups use the same terms, speak the same language? Who, indeed, was higher in the hierarchy, teachers or academics?

Well, Thomas Kuhn (1962) and the radical philosopher Paul Feyerabend (1975) both agree that all social groupings, including professions, naturally throw up elites. These elites are often self-appointed, or are unwittingly accorded superior status by other members of the group. More insidiously, however, they are also self-perpetuating and self-aggrandising.

Elites ensure their perpetuation by consciously promoting the superiority of their value to the group. Can we say that in those days academics saw themselves as the elite? Sadly, I think many of them felt so. They defined themselves: by the level of sophistication (e.g. academics deal in complex ideas, while teachers only teach and therefore deal in simple ideas); by the language they used (e.g. academics use conceptual labels, while teachers only use their own classroom vernacular), by the information they hold (e.g. academics know more about Chomsky, while teachers only know about their students and their textbooks), and by the qualifications they hold (e.g. a PhD is worth more than an ELT Diploma). Of course, all these unquestioned assumptions are highly questionable, but in those early days they seemed to be accepted right across the spectrum.

In those days, in my experience, this dynamic not only extended from academics to teachers, but was also sometimes observable between US academics and their slightly more practically-oriented UK counterparts. Most reprehensibly, it manifested itself from the native-speaker academic elite towards the non-native-speaker academic community around the world.

But now it is 2004. And my impression is that, mercifully, the problem is much reduced on all fronts. A kind of maturity has descended on the profession, and many of those who were 'only' teachers in the early 80s are now university lecturers.

As a result of these divisions, however, there were definite problems, and it is worth rehearsing what those problems were, so that we can assess to what extent they still exist today. The problems centred on specific themes, which were as follows.

1. **The world of concepts and terms – the discourse of language teaching.** The first thing to establish are the principles of theory and practice. What is the status of theory, what is the status of research and evidence, and what is it to think well?.

First, a 'theory' is merely an invitation to look at the world in a certain way. It is no more than an invitation, and has the mere status of one. Theory is not fact. Theory is not superior to practice.

Second, 'academic research', especially in human sciences, is unlikely to be more true than a teacher's own observation, because they are a professional observer, and what they observe counts. For example, if 'research' tells them that controlled practice is useless, but their observation tells them different, they should trust what they observe, not trust the research. Evidence is that which one knows to be true from observation.

Third, logical thinking skills are invaluable for anyone who is going to be able to think through what they believe, scrutinise the thoughts of others, and argue their case.

Teachers have not always taken these views, however, and I think many would accept that they have been somewhat 'awed' by theory and by academic discourse on theoretical concepts.

Let us trawl through a few of the important concepts of the last 25 years: use vs usage; signification vs value; communicative competence; strategic competence; transfer of training; relevance theory; transformational grammar; second language acquisition theory; functions and notions; accuracy and fluency; pragmatics; schema theory; stylistics; acquisition vs learning; cohesion vs coherence; vague language; form vs meaning; the input hypothesis; prefabricated chunks; connectionism; consciousness-raising; multiple intelligences; etc.

These concepts come from many sources: some were from pure psychology; some were from pure linguistics; some were from pure linguistics; some were from first language acquisition research ; and many were especially constructed to address issues in the second language learning context.

Indeed it was one of Henry Widdowson's major contributions to language teaching that he established a conceptual framework for talking about second language learning and teaching as branches of applied linguistics in their own right. So, those particular concepts were in the right ball-park, not borrowing from pure linguistics, but creating an special applied linguistics of second language learning.

But even though these concepts were meant to be more relevant, the question still was: how useful were they, and did teachers understand them? Well, the answer is, in the early days, many did not. Good examples of misunderstandings were:

- *'Language is rule-governed creativity'*. This was taken to be about ELT Grammar Book rules, but is actually about Chomsky's transformational rules.
- *'Notional/functional language analysis implies a communicative methodology'*. Early on, functions were taken to imply a methodology of 'communicative' free speaking, but it is actually a *syllabus* organising principle, and so does not imply a methodology at all; indeed if any methodology were appropriate it would be 'listen-repeat' and 'repeat-extend', because the stuff of the functional syllabus was the functional expression, which was often best learnt by drilling and memorising.
- *'Form-focused activity vs meaning-focused activity'*. This has been taken (and still is taken) to mean activity focussed on *language* per se, as contrasted with activity focussed on *communication*. This is a misuse of words by academics, which has caused tremendous misunderstanding, and has even provoked some naïve commentators to claim that form-focused activity is a 'bad thing' because it is not communicative. 'Form-focused' actually means focus on language phenomena, such as lexis or grammar, so that students have their attention drawn to both the linguistic form *and* linguistic *meaning* of these items. 'Meaning-focused' means activity focused on the use of language to achieve a purpose, or in other words, genuine communicative language use. I would suggest that more transparent terms would be 'language-focused' and 'communication-focused'. Or even the traditional and perfectly good terms 'accuracy' and 'fluency'.
- *'The lexical view of language implies the irrelevance of grammar'*. The lexical view of language has been taken to imply that grammar focus in language textbooks is not relevant to the communicative syllabus. In fact, the lexical view of language changes our view of the *nature* of grammar, but it actually enhances the *need* for grammar in the classroom.
- *'At last, in corpus linguistics, we have found data which tells us how native-speaker language is truly used and therefore we should teach only corpus-based language to students'*. This conceit is actually one of the more pernicious effects of the self-appointed superiority of academic 'research'. The conceit is this: we should teach what native speakers say, because now we really *know* what they say. Many argue that this logic is wrong. They argue that the sole principle for syllabus choice in an L2 course surely has to be 'what is useful?', not 'what do native speakers say?' Indeed, the absurdities of trying to use listening texts full of rarified or overly-colloquial 'native speakerisms' in the classroom, is an experience I suspect most of us share. No, the principle should never be 'teach it because it is there', but 'teach it because the students need to be able to use it'.

In some teachers' minds, academic terminology often has the effect of confusing and obfuscating, not clarifying and enlightening. To these teachers, Chomsky, strategic competence, and pragmatics, are less important than: how to get across the meaning of target language? what are fixed and semi-fixed expressions and are they useful for students? how to ensure the focal language point of the lesson is practised in a way that is personally relevant for the student? how to keep the attention of seven-year-old language learners? how to approach the handling of listening texts in the classroom? and so on.

The discrepancy between these two world-views was quite marked in the 80s, but began to dissolve in the early 90s, by which time a significant number of teachers had started to do Masters courses. This attraction of teachers to Masters courses achieved a number of beneficial consequences.

Teachers had to read widely and historically, they had to make sense of the raft of applied linguistic concepts (several mentioned above) and fit them to their own experiences, they had to learn the true nature of scientific enquiry and what distinguishes good theory from bad theory, and they had to learn what are the requirements of academic discipline, logical argument, and sound research. By the same token, academics had to attend to the concerns of their new type of Masters students who wanted to research into the real, and often small, aspects, of the everyday classroom. I remember one such fascinating project came by me – the researcher watched a number of lessons by a teacher and then gave the teacher and each student a questionnaire on what they thought had happened during the lessons. The findings were stark . . . the discrepancies between what the *students* thought had happened and what the *teacher* thought had happened, in the same lesson, were wide and revealing. The researcher posed the questions: (i) could it be that students do not learn what we teach? (ii) indeed, might they learn *more* than we teach?

I started by suggesting that the question 'what is theory?' is an important one for teachers, and indeed academics, to address, because I think we need to play down the role of theory in the scheme of things. Theory is an aid to seeing, but it is no more than that.

I would actually go further, and say that, at least in a practical activity like language teaching, *there is no division between theory and practice at all*. I see the questions we ask, and the way we find answers, as part of a continuum. Do I need to study Gardner's 'theories' of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation before I can understand the motivation of my students? Of course not. I have to study their motivation, but I can do it with a set of questions that I generate for myself, based on the students I have in front of me! From those questions, and from the answers to them, I will generate my own 'theory', and I will test that theory with successive observations of future classes, and I will be able to say to myself after a while, that I understand a little better the motivation of my students. That is what theory and practice should be about.

- A call to teachers
- don't close your mind
  - consider old things in a new light
  - never accept theory without applying your own observations
  - trust your own observations above the findings of 'research'
  - develop the mental discipline of logical thinking and how to recognise good data
  - remember that theory is only an invitation to see things in a certain way
  - ask the question: what is really going on here?
  - don't let yourself believe that there is one method above others
- A call to applied linguists
- teach regularly and keep your classroom awareness sharp
  - learn a language in a classroom
  - accept that theory is only an invitation to see things in a certain way
  - focus research on what is useful for teachers
  - maintain the 'helicopter view' of the teaching endeavour that you are in a position to have, and use it wisely
  - with an abundance of time to think, you have a privileged role as providers of analysis for the profession, so make sure that analysis is relevant to teachers.

See Bowen and Marks (1994) for a similar view of these roles.

2. **Setting the agenda for what is important research.** The mid 80s saw a number of, I think, patronising appeals by academics to teachers to realise that they should be standing back more and becoming 'problem-oriented' not 'solution-oriented'. It was held that that their teacher training (short, practical, 'tips for teachers' courses) had only equipped them to wheel out a set of fixed responses and ritualised procedures in the classroom context. Given this fact, it was further argued, teachers were not in a position, until they had been properly 'educated' (on a Masters course – you could only be 'trained' on a short teacher training course!), to ask the real questions about what was important in the classroom.

In my experience, there was little or no validity to the academics' claim. Even on the short four-week course, trainees went off with a host of questions, and a desire to experiment. The course provided them with a set of workable fall-backs for the early stages of teaching, like a driving test. But for the adventurous among them, continuous questioning and self-development was the norm, and most developed into career-long learners of the arcane art of teaching. On the longer 'Diploma' courses, a deep and questioning approach was encouraged from the start, and all comfortable assumptions were to be challenged. So these courses were quintessentially problem-oriented.

As time went by into the 90s, the setting of the agenda became less contentious. Teachers were no longer made to feel guilty if they were not, say, testing the students' ability to absorb comprehensible input at 'i + 1', or developing the students' strategic competence, or promoting rule-governed creativity, or ensuring integrative motivation, or including enough vague language in their lessons. Instead they were encouraged to set up their own experiments, to observe themselves (using video for instance), and to feed into the ever-growing body of hard research into classroom realities.

However, in 2004, while there is more democracy about what it is important to research, and what it is important to pursue as legitimate activity in the classroom, I am still troubled about the tendency for single issues to become the focus of everybody's attention. Why for instance was 'learner training' the big event in the early 80s, and why were 'lexical approaches' the big thing seven years ago, and 'vague language' the big issue five years ago. And why is 'task-based learning' the big issue today, or 'grammaticisation', or 'corpus language data', or 'multiple intelligences', or 'English as a Lingua Franca', etc? Each of these has surely a place in the frame, but each surely does *not* have a claim, in the pantheon of classroom issues, to pre-eminent status.

Another problem that developed in the 80s was that some research was treated with a reverence it did not deserve. For instance, in 1987, Dr Rod Ellis 'proved', in a highly questionable study, that focused language practice of language accuracy does not improve a student's language performance, a finding that influenced a small army of teacher trainers, some of them in International House. In a million classrooms daily, teachers' own experience of their students demonstrated the opposite, but many trainers swallowed the research and regurgitated it in their training courses, and it gained a foothold which survives today.

Generally speaking, I feel the atmosphere today is more relaxed and mutually respectful and knowledgeable, but I would caution that teachers especially should remain on their guard against any resurgence of academic authority over their work.

3. **Self confidence.** In those early days, I don't think teachers trusted their own depth of thinking. This is a crucial issue, because a teacher with a trained mind and working daily in the classroom is in the strongest position of all to both pose and test the questions that need to be raised about language and about learning. The only thing they don't have is lots of time. Superficially, the Action Research movement of the mid 80s was meant to take care of the issue of teachers being more at the forefront of research, but it was hamstrung by cumbersome frameworks and predicated on narrow frames of reference put forward by academics.

Relating to the previous Section 2 also, I believe the future is for teachers, with a new confidence, to take over and set the agenda for language learning research. And the IH Journal has long been one of the best places to publish that research. If academics want to join them in this agenda, great. But I think that, ultimately, the best questions come from teachers.

4. **Academic proliferation.** I am not a knocker. On the contrary, I love change and new ideas. But as one of the dwindling band of grandfathers of modern ELT, I feel I have an obligation to opine about some of the less desirable characteristics of the academic side of the profession, having been part of it for a while. A thousand university lecturers in several hundred ELT departments around the world are made to produce papers every year. This leads to a proliferation of 'new' ideas all vying for our attention. I am very in favour of first-class thinking, and well-argued cases. And occasionally, one article can break a mould or shift a paradigm, such as that by Ben Rampton (1982), when he managed to get us all to re-consider our notion of 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker'. But much of academic writing frankly does not meet that requirement. When it is written by people who have neither an authentic sense of the classroom nor an authentic sense of what it is like to learn a language in one, it lacks credibility. Just as a simple rule of thumb, ask your local university how many of their ELT professors recently (i) learnt a language (ii) taught English for an extended period. Some of course will have, but not as many as there should be. I welcome academic contributions to the ELT debate. But they have to be good. And practice has to drive theory, not vice versa.

### ***Continuity or change?***

Academics and teachers often seem to feel that new ideas should do away with old ones. Only last week, I heard an experienced teacher say ‘I always tell my students “We don’t teach grammar here, we focus on communication”’. Maybe what she meant was “We don’t do grammar lessons as such, with lots of presentation-style grammar analysis followed by exercises”. What I hope she did not mean was that we don’t teach grammar. Because grammar is as essential to communication as lexis or pronunciation. And the notion that the two are mutually exclusive is both bizarre and wrong. What I hope she meant was that we focus on grammar ‘rules’ as reference points not launch-pads, and in a less up-front way than the student may have been used to.

The way forward for the historically fraught relationship between applied linguists and teachers is, first of all, as is happening in almost every other applied field in society, for mutual respect to break out at every level. Secondly, everybody has to come to a shared understanding of (i) what is important (ii) what are the key questions to ask (iii) what is the acceptable terminology with which fruitful communication can take place effectively (iv) who are the most important players in the endeavour – teachers or academics. I suspect that the answers to the first three questions will eventually be agreed by everyone.

The answer to the fourth question, however, is likely to be more contentious – because the answer is of course the teachers. Yes, it is ultimately the students. But it is only the teachers who can make a difference. Whether at the top political and planning level, or at the headteacher level, or at the departmental supervision level, or at the university academic level, or at the teacher training level, or at the chalkface level, it is the personal hardwon experience of the teacher in the classroom which really counts in those posts, not academic achievement. And I believe everybody really must take this principle on board. The top person, even though they have their PhD, will always only be a strong link if they also have that teacher’s view from their past experience.

### ***Conclusion***

Fashion comes and goes, in language teaching as in retail trends and popular music. Therefore it is essential for every professional, whether at the chalk-face or in the university seminar room, to be able properly to evaluate whichever new idea is being claimed as the ‘new answer’, in the light of the wider picture. The love of the new is a natural emotion, since nobody likes to accept that things will always be the same. I think we need continuity *and* change. As I say in my next article, integration is more organic than eclecticism. If there has to be change, it should be evolutionary and principled, and it is teachers, albeit informed by academic discipline, who have to be the ones who manage how that evolution and principle is carried out.

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