

Applied Linguistics and ELT: Some Historical Perspectives

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Research (CALR), Arab Open University – Lebanon
conference on ‘Multiple perceptual frames on
English language teaching and research’, 22/3/11

Introduction

- My interpretation of the conference theme of 'multiple perceptual frames': allegiance to constructivism (vs. positivism)

Positivism vs Constructivism

	Positivism	Constructivism
Ontology – the nature of reality	There is a single, observable reality	There are multiple realities
Epistemology – the nature of knowledge	We can know the world as it really is	Knowledge is socially and individually constituted

- The central practical issue I shall keep in mind – improvement of English language teaching
- Central question: how can / ‘should’ we construe the relationship between applied linguistics and ELT?
- Adopting a historical approach to answer this question, I highlight different available ‘perceptual frames’, making reference to sources from the Warwick ELT Archive (www.warwick.ac.uk/go/elt_archive)

Plan

- Some past conceptions
- A current crisis in the relationship between applied linguistics and ELT?
- Some further historical perspectives (indicating future possibilities)

1. Some past conceptions

1. Applied linguistics in the USA

Michigan (1948 +)

A climate of positivism / universalism / confident applicationism

The early work of Raja T. Nasr





2. Applied linguistics in the UK

Edinburgh (1957 +)

Corder (1973): Linguist -> Applied Linguist (course designer) -> Teacher

Widdowson (1979, 1980) – ‘linguistics applied’ vs. ‘applied linguistics’ (as an autonomous, mediating, problem-oriented discipline)

‘I want to question the common assumption [...] that a linguistic model of language must of necessity serve as the underlying frame of reference for language teaching’ (Widdowson 1979: 9)



The 'golden years' of ELT-oriented applied linguistics in the UK (1970s-80s):
Communicative Approach (syllabus design and principles of practice)

2. A current crisis in the relationship between applied linguistics and ELT?

1. A crisis of faith?

Critiques of applied linguistics as 'interested knowledge' (e.g. Pennycook 1989, 1994, Phillipson 1992) ->

The up-side to this: As yet unfulfilled possibilities of building on 'local knowledge'

‘[R]ather than trying to understand our practice according to some form of totalizing or universal discourse, we need to recognize the complexities of language teaching and its contexts, and strive to validate other, local forms of knowledge about language and teaching’ (Pennycook 1989: 613)

2. A crisis of neglect?

Applied linguistics, defined as ‘the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit 1997: 91) is no longer so centrally engaged with ELT.

-> Unchecked commercial interests / danger of doors being reopened to linguistics applied?

Some related arguments against Widdowson's
LA vs AL dichotomy:

From a critical perspective *both* LA *and* AL (e.g. in the form of Communicative Approach) have been involved in similar 'hegemonic' (centre-periphery and top-down) relations with ELT practice

They have tended to share a 'technical' / 'universalist' focus on linguistics / latterly, SLA as primary sources of insight

However, at least in the past both LA and AL were (similarly) focused on and engaged with ELT practice – more so than applied linguistics may now tend to be.

What does the British Council *Directory of UK ELT Research* (2005-2010) indicate?

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/elt-research>

- Background / aims
- Great diversity but no 'unifying idea'
- International networks

3. Some further historical perspectives (indicating future possibilities)

- Reasons *for* an applied linguistics concerned with ELT: ‘post-methodism’ (‘principles’ vs. rampant commercialism / patented methods) – Kumaravadivelu. Historical precedents: Prabhu, Stern, Mackey, Palmer, Sweet.
- Possible need for a ‘rapprochement’ between LA and AL perspectives, with a united focus on ELT practice (cf. Palmer 1917, 1921, 1924)?



- Continuing value of the (non-AL/LA) UK 'ELT' tradition: expertise derived from principled eclecticism / practical experimentation in context (e.g. Palmer, Hornby, etc.)

Cf. Nasr (1972)



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- Needs for collaborative research with teachers, and prioritizing their needs (cf. Palmer in Japan, and his advocacy of ‘multiple lines of approach’ (1921, 1924))

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OF

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EDITORIAL

Looking Two Ways

For thirteen years the Institute for Research in English Teaching has been under the expert guidance of Dr. H. E. Palmer. He has now retired from the position of Director, and although we are fortunately to have his services as an "Honorary Corresponding Member," the main work of the Institute must in future be carried on by others. The occasion is a suitable one for a review of past achievements and an examination of what yet remains to be done.

When Mr. Palmer came to Japan in 1922, his first task was to investigate the situation as it then was, to inquire into the aims of English teaching and into the methods commonly used. Subsequently, with the foundation of the Institute, research into the fundamental problems of linguistic methodology became more important. A detailed programme of research work was drawn up. Side by side with this work, and in co-ordination with it, the task of writing and publishing a large number of model textbooks was taken in hand. For the benefit of those readers who have not been associated with

Need to tap into desires for reform and perceptions of ‘good teaching’ among ‘non-native speaker teachers’ in primary and secondary school education – cf. roots of the UK ELT tradition (via Palmer) in the late 19th century Reform Movement led by e.g. Vietor, Passy, and informed by academic, though pedagogically oriented phonetic descriptions (Sweet etc.)



DHI FONÈTIK TÏTCER

Dhi organ ov dhi fonètik tÏtcerz' asóciécon

édited bai PAUL PASSY

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Korespondens (1).

From Dr. Klinghardt. — Dhi niu prógram ov dhi F. T. A. iz kwait fæst-rét. For mai

(1) Scem ov aur korespondens tætt grét péns tu rátt dhi amól lékital N az wi print it. Thankiv dhem, wi wuó sé dhat N iz ónil a mék-clift for Mr. Pitman's saia, hwitc iz not found in aur printin-óffis. In skript, wi ólwe yúá dhi fonéipik lèter (an órdineri n wídh a tél), hwitc aur printer nés wæl-and trans-litèrét bai n.



DER
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ZUR
ÜBERBÜRDUNGSFRAGE
VON
QUOUSQUE TANDEM
(WILHELM VIÉTOR).

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AUFLAGE.



LEIPZIG.
O. R. REISLAND.
1905.

At the same time, we need to recognize limitations of both the 'applied linguistics' *and* the UK 'ELT' traditions:

- Dominant linguistics/language emphasis
- Limited, technical orientation (vs. social / political / educational considerations)
- 'Universalist' / hegemonic tendencies

‘The key point, I think, is the need for teachers to keep their own counsel regarding what works and what does not work and to insist on an interpretation of events and ideas that includes, implicitly or explicitly, a validation of their own experiences in the classroom’

(Clarke 1994: 23)

An end-point / starting-point

[Within teacher education / ELT research / applied linguistics]: recognize the importance of context, and work in a 'constructivist' manner, collaboratively with teachers/learners, 'from the bottom up', on the basis of *their* priorities and their 'multiple perceptual frames', referring when this is appropriate to linguistic insights and insights from other disciplines.

References

See separate handout