

APPLIED LINGUISTICS: WHAT'S THAT?

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This paper traces the historical development of strong and weak definitions of applied linguistics. Strong definitions of applied linguistics assume that the methods and insights of theoretical linguistics are directly applicable to resolving second language teaching problems. On the other hand, weak definitions do not limit themselves to the resolution of second language teaching problems but potentially address all practical language-related problems. These definitions typically assert the autonomy of the field from the mother discipline; and they draw on a broad range of feeder disciplines in addition to theoretical linguistics, whose choice depends on which particular language-related problem is to be resolved. This paper argues that weak definitions are preferable in that they provide a most necessary element of flexibility in the theory and practice of applied linguistics which is in tune with the needs and realities of the wider profession. Finally, the paper illustrates these theoretical principles with a practical example by examining the contributions various feeder disciplines can make to designing a coherent second language curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Applied linguistics (AL) is barely 40 years old. Howatt (1984) cites the first issue of *Language Learning* (1948), subtitled *A Quarterly Journal of Applied Linguistics*, as the first use of this term. Whether this is actually its first attestation or not is less important than the fact that it had gained common acceptance by the mid 1950s in both the United States and Britain as the name for our profession. Other labels, such as educational linguistics (Spolsky, 1978), have been suggested, but these alternatives have not diffused to any great extent among the wider profession. For good or for ill, AL is the most widely used term; therefore, this is the expression that will be used in the rest of this paper.

Given that AL has had such a short history as a recognizably separate academic discipline, it is not surprising that applied linguists differ as to what the defining characteristics of the field are. Is it synonymous with language teaching, in particular English language teaching or with second language acquisition (SLA)? Furthermore, what is its relationship to theoretical linguistics? Is it no more than the sum of its parts, that is, the application of linguistic theory to language teaching, or is it an autonomous discipline which is also concerned with problems that are not necessarily confined to issues related to formal language instruction?

Confusing as this situation may seem, all of these answers have been advanced in the literature at one time or another. This paper will therefore, firstly, argue that there are strong and weak definitions of AL and discuss their specific attributes; secondly, suggest that a weak definition is to be preferred; and thirdly, illustrate the impact of such a definition on curriculum design.

STRONG AND WEAK DEFINITIONS OF AL

The assertion by Fries (1948: p. 13) that “the most efficient materials grow out of a scientific descriptive analysis of the language to be learned *carefully compared with a parallel analysis of the native language of the learner*” (emphasis in the original) is perhaps the first implicit definition of AL. Essentially, the field is viewed as no more than a logical extension of the contrastive principles, methods and procedures of structuralist linguistics into the pedagogical sphere. This strong version of AL, in which AL is inexorably tied to the fortunes of theoretical linguistics, has been enormously influential. Indeed, only slightly modified to conform with recent developments in linguistics, it informs the assumptions of SLA researchers such as Krashen (1981: p. 101), who states: “It appears to be the case to me now that *the major function of the second language classroom is to provide intake for acquisition*. This being a very difficult task, one could also say that the major challenge facing the field of applied linguistics is to create materials and contexts that provide intake” (emphasis in the original).

For historical reasons, this view of AL has been particularly important in the United States. However, not all American applied linguists necessarily share this position. For example, Ferguson (1966) provides a definition of AL¹ which, despite a superficial resemblance with the Friesian position, in practice illustrates a weaker stance. Noting that some scholars argued that more basic research was needed before insights from theoretical linguistics could be applied, while others held that this discipline offered solutions to the problems of language teachers, he states:

The point of view taken here is between such extremes. We can agree that linguists are just at the threshold of understanding human language behavior, and at the same time insist that the small body of linguistic theory and related attitudes and techniques contains much that is of relevance to language teaching. Also, we can acknowledge that linguistics has very little to say directly to the questions of language pedagogy and yet firmly maintain that it should have a special place in the education of language teachers beyond the important place that it deserves, along with the study of foreign languages and literatures, at the very core of any liberal education (Ferguson, 1966: p. 136).

This middle of the road approach is perhaps more fully articulated by British applied linguists such as (Stevens, 1989: p. 9), who defines AL as a “multi-disciplinary approach to the solution of language-related problems”.² He further supports this working definition with the following six propositions:

- (i) AL is based in intellectual enquiry, it gives rise to and makes use of research, and it is discipline-related.
- (ii) Linguistics is an essential, but not the only discipline which contributes to AL.

- (iii) The choice of which disciplines are involved in particular AL circumstances, and which parts of those disciplines, is contingent: it depends on what the circumstances are.
- (iv) The effect of the multi-disciplinary nature of AL is that its practical operations are to be found in a number of different domains of human activity.
- (v) AL is typically concerned with achieving an end, with improving existing language-related operations, with solving language-related problems.
- (vi) Linguists are not exempt from being socially accountable—from displaying a social conscience—and therefore when possible they should use their knowledge and understanding in the service of humanity. (Stevens, 1988: pp. 8–9).

This quintessential expression of a weak definition of the field essentially treats the expression “applied linguistics” as a convenient label, not as a limited technical term. More specifically, if we examine each of the propositions cited above in turn, we can see that the use of this label implies that (i) AL is an intellectual discipline that draws on research from other fields and also generates its own research; however, it is not necessarily theory-driven (as in the model proposed by Fries or Krashen), in that practical concerns have an important role in shaping the questions that AL research will address; (ii) linguistics³ is viewed as an essential, though not the only feeder discipline for AL; (iii) AL redefines itself according to the task at hand; thus a researcher interested in SLA might draw primarily on models of language learning derived from linguistics and cognitive psychology, while a language planner interested in problems of language status might synthesize ideas drawn primarily from sociology and management; (iv) the domains of enquiry that are within the purview of AL are not limited to language teaching, they include such practical problems as language planning, speech communication research, specialized occupational languages, speech therapy, lexicology, translation and the problems of communication between specialists and laymen, etc.; (v) AL typically breaks down large problems into smaller, more manageable problems, which requires practitioner-specialists to (a) find out what the nature of the problem is; (b) design a solution to the problem; (c) implement the solution; and (d) evaluate the efficacy of the solution; (vi) linguists, and by extension applied linguists, should approach problems of human language and communication from a socially-committed perspective and contribute their expertise where relevant to a qualitative improvement in people’s lives.

WHICH DEFINITION OF AL IS PREFERABLE?

A strong definition of AL has undoubted virtues: It circumscribes the field quite neatly, which makes for a ready-made and tight agenda, supported by an impressive array of research methods and techniques, ranging from the empirical to the rationalist. It is also prestigious, in that it enables AL to assume by association the mantle of linguistics understood as a “hard” science (a status which only linguistics has been able to claim among the social sciences). But it is also flawed.

First, this view of AL is extremely hierarchical and therefore implies a rigid structure. The insights of theoretical linguists are handed down to applied linguists (= program designers and materials writers), who translate these data into pedagogical materials, which are then taught by teachers. Such a model is undesirable in a practical sense in that it precludes,

or minimally makes it extremely difficult to incorporate teachers' insights and practical experience in the validation of such theory-driven programs. And indeed, one of the major disadvantages of audiolingualism (the teaching method derived from structuralist linguistics) that historically contributed to its abandonment was its lack of flexibility.

The second flaw is even more serious. As Munby (1978) remarks in a different context, a one-on-one relationship between AL research and any particular school of theoretical linguistics is undesirable. For example, the Mentalist revolution that occurred in the late 1950s and early 60s (see Newmeyer, 1986) had two related effects. It not only discredited structuralism, it also undercut the very theoretical foundations of an AL that was too closely tied to this now outmoded school of linguistics. Thus, when Chomsky (1966) cautioned language teachers against trying to apply the insights of transformational-generative (TG) grammar (then the dominant paradigm in American linguistics) to language teaching, the effect was cataclysmic. If TG could not, or would not provide the theoretical foundations on which strong definitions of AL depend, then such definitions no longer had a principled basis for their existence.

Of course, this is *not* to say that AL should divorce itself completely from developments in theoretical linguistics. An understanding of the fundamental insights provided by different branches of this discipline (for example, the various models of formal and functional grammar, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics etc.) is clearly crucial to the continuing development of AL. And that is why applied linguists have ignored Chomsky's views in this matter and continue to draw on a broad range of linguistic theories, including Chomsky's. But the recognition that AL cannot afford for its own good to be tied to the apron strings of the mother discipline entails moving away from strong definitions of the field to weak ones such as that proposed by Strevens.

Defining AL in these terms is not cost-free, however. Weak definitions suffer from what linguists (and doubtless others) perceive as a diffuseness of aims and purpose. For example, referring to such weak definitions, Newmeyer (1983: pp. 131–132) speaks of the "peculiar conception of the nature of 'applied linguistics'" and charges that "apparently one can do 'applied linguistics' without drawing, even vaguely, on what is normally considered to be 'linguistics'". This attitude, which is based on the misconception that AL is intent on cutting off all interaction with linguistics, should not be dismissed as a misunderstanding of no consequence. It reflects a worrying lack of understanding about what AL is that contributes to the generally low academic prestige of the discipline noted by Swales (1984) and Selinker (1989). Despite these disadvantages, however, weak definitions provide a most necessary element of flexibility in the theory and practice of AL which is in tune with the needs and realities of the wider profession. And for this reason, such definitions are preferable, as they provide a more advantageous framework for the continued development of the field.

AL-FOR-CURRICULUM DESIGN

As already discussed, one of the defining characteristics of AL is that the choice of which disciplines will be appropriate for resolving particular language-related problems is contingent. This final section will therefore discuss how input from a variety of disciplines

can help applied linguists resolve one of the most common problems in AL, designing a language teaching curriculum. More specifically, this particular problem entails combining insights from linguistics, psychology, education, management, sociology, ethnography, language planning and development planning in order to design, implement and maintain a viable program.

Figure 1 shows in diagrammatic form a course design developed at the University of Lancaster by Candlin *et al.* (1978). Such designs are now commonplace; consequently, we will use this diagram as a basis for illustrating how ideas from the disciplines identified above can be synthesized into a dynamic design. In addition, we will explain the positions adopted by the developers of the course and relate these to subsequent developments in curriculum design theory.

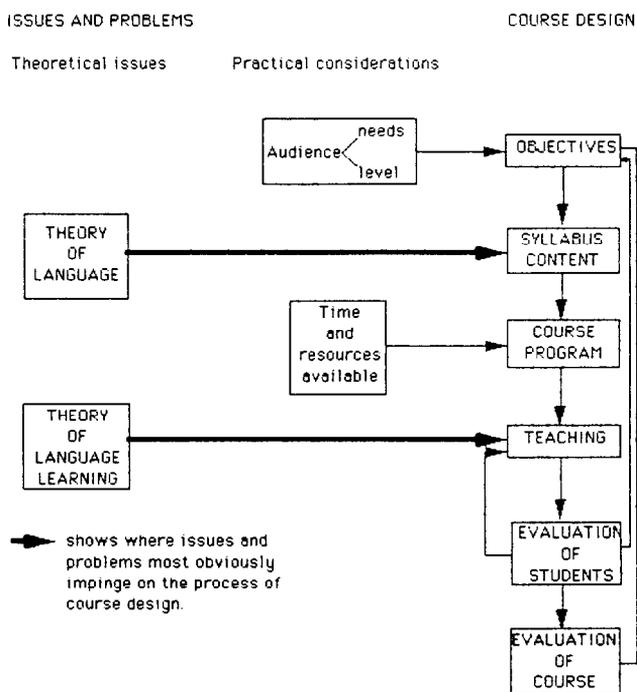


Fig. 1. A model of course design (Candlin *et al.*, 1978, p. 191).

Course design is an educational concept which welds the means and ends of education (be this language or science instruction) into a coherent whole. As Candlin and his co-workers note, “a model of course design needs to show that although each section has its own intrinsic issues, the outcome of the whole process (i.e. the course as actually taught) derives from a consideration of each section in relation to others” (Candlin *et al.*, 1978: p. 192). Thus, language teaching takes place within a general educational planning ecology.

More specifically, this model uses problem-solving strategies derived ultimately from the planning literature in education, sociology and management. (Although not stated in these terms here, the importance of managing educational change in second language instruction is explicitly acknowledged in later work emanating from Lancaster; (see e.g. Breen and Candlin, 1980; Candlin, 1984). Typically, a problem is first identified; a solution to the problem is then devised, implemented and finally evaluated. Thus, the larger problem of providing learners with specialized needs with a relevant program of instruction is broken down into smaller, more manageable problems, which are exemplified by the different phases of the design (i.e. the analysis of needs and level corresponds to the preliminary task of identifying the nature of the problem; the specification of course objectives and syllabus content, and the design of a specialist program corresponds to the design solution (which must take into account relevant implementational constraints, such as the availability of time and relevant resources); the teaching phase corresponds to the implementation of the solution, while the evaluation of both the learners and the program obviously corresponds to the evaluation of the design solution adopted).

As implied by the diagram, insights from linguistics and psychology serve as input for decision-making chiefly during the specification of syllabus content and teaching phases of the program. Thus, the predominantly sociolinguistic analysis of learners' needs in terms of anticipated domains of language use feeds into the specification of objectives and syllabus content. The content of the syllabus is also impacted by the designers' views on the nature of language itself. The authors utilize a notional/functional analysis of sentence-level grammar but also claim that language must be analyzed in discursive terms. Clearly, the particular model(s) of grammar and/or discourse analysis utilized by course designers can vary widely according to the training and personal preference of the individuals concerned; but as Breen and Candlin (1980) argue, instruction must provide learners with the tools for improving both their developing and terminal levels of linguistic and communicative competence.

The view of language just described informs (and is informed by) the authors' notions of how the language learning process operates. Paradoxically, in this paper Candlin and his associates do not discuss their views on language learning, they only describe the solution devised. They opt for a task-based approach to learning, in which particular study skills (listening to lectures, reading texts, note-taking etc.) provide the framework for language instruction. In later work at Lancaster (see Breen and Candlin, 1980; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), the findings and implications of research in SLA and psychology explicitly provide a theoretical basis for understanding, organizing and implementing language learning programs.

More recent work in curriculum design theory has further emphasized the importance of analyzing the context in which a design solution is to be implemented. This trend is particularly noticeable among writers who have a background in aid-funded English for specific purposes (ESP) projects in less developed countries. Thus, Markee (1986a) argues that ESP⁴ in these countries is a language planning solution to language planning problems. He points out that such projects are highly susceptible to politically-motivated debates concerning the status of competing languages in such domains of language use

as education. More specifically, these realities affect the way in which a particular institution functions, often resulting in the evolution of parallel systems: a formal system, which correlates with how the institution is set up on paper; and an informal system, which corresponds to how it functions in practice. This language planning analogy is further developed in Markee (1989). He shows that selecting a medium of instruction and dealing with issues pertaining to standard languages and standards of correctness affect planning at both the national and institutional levels.

A similar concern for situating design solutions within the ecological context in which they are to be implemented is shared by Holliday and Cook (1982), Crocker (1984) and Markee (1986b), who focus on the appropriateness of instruction. Thus, as Kennedy (1988) notes, the design and implementation of language teaching programs must take into account the cultural, political, educational and institutional constraints that obtain in a given context if these programs are to be effective.

Kennedy develops this point further by drawing on the diffusion of innovations literature⁵ in education, sociology and management to argue in favor of developing curriculum solutions that are based on teachers' evolving levels of skill, training and experience in language teaching. The general thrust of this body of work is that identifying students' needs should not be confined to an analysis of the target domains of language use in which learners must be competent. It should also investigate how the variables identified by Kennedy and others affect all individuals involved in a program of instruction (including administrators, teachers and students); furthermore, it should assess how these variables affect the on-going implementation of a program. For this reason, many curriculum design specialists argue that the notion of 'needs analysis' is insufficiently precise. There is consequently an increasingly noticeable tendency to differentiate between target situation analysis (Chambers, 1980) and means analysis (Holliday and Cooke, 1982). The former consists of the traditional socio-linguistic analysis of the target domains of language use, while the latter involves an ethnographic analysis of the means of implementing a design solution within the constraints of a given context of implementation.⁶

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has distinguished between strong and weak definitions of AL and argued that *weak definitions provide the most advantageous framework for the continued development of the field.* Furthermore, it has illustrated how a constantly growing list of disciplines can be called on by applied linguists in their efforts to resolve a particular language-related problem, namely course design.

Of course, as Strevens notes, the kind of definition advocated in this paper allows applied linguists to resolve a broad range of language-related problems. Let us further illustrate this claim with a brief example that pertains to teacher education and training. In this regard, perhaps one of the most important emerging issues for foreign graduates studying at Western universities is the extent to which they can expect to change the way AL is 'done' in their home countries once they return there.

Unfortunately, too many “rising stars” fail to realize their potential once they return home. This is often due to the fact that new ideas tend to provoke opposition among those individuals who have not gone abroad (or who went a long time ago, perhaps) and who consequently may feel threatened by developments with which they are not familiar. This problem is only beginning to be discussed in AL graduate programs in the United States and Britain.

A multi-disciplinary definition of AL also holds the key to resolving this problem. For example, some language educators are introducing their students to the diffusion of innovations literature to help them understand firstly, their future roles as “change agents” (i.e. catalysts for change) and secondly, how the innovations they attempt to introduce might be perceived in their own cultures. Training of this kind will better equip these individuals to comprehend why their ideas might be rejected when they return home and to devise ways of making their proposals for change more acceptable to colleagues. Clearly, this trend can potentially contribute greatly to the further professionalization of AL as a whole. More importantly, however, if these returning graduates succeed in the long term, their efforts will contribute to the growth of the field in areas of the world that have hitherto been on the periphery of AL and practice.

Acknowledgements—I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Peter Strevens, a good colleague and an even better friend. His insightful comments on preliminary drafts of this paper were extremely helpful in shaping the final product. Of course, final responsibility for its contents remain my own.

NOTES

¹ AL is “the application of any of the insights, methods, or findings of linguistic science to practical language problems, in particular . . . to the problems of the acquisition of language in our educational institutions” (Ferguson, 1966: p. 135).

² However, note that the American Association for Applied Linguistics defines the field as “a multidisciplinary approach to language problems and issues” [*Linguistic Reporter* 20 (8) (1978)]. Thus, while it is true that British and American attitudes toward “doing” AL have historically been different (Howatt, 1984), associating pragmatic and theory-driven models of AL with the British and American traditions respectively is unnecessarily schismatic.

³ Or, more accurately, linguistics/psychology; the association between these two disciplines is so close that they are inseparable in both the structuralist and mentalist schools of linguistics.

⁴ While the problems discussed here are particularly contentious in ESP programs, they are not exclusive to the movement: they affect general English programs also.

⁵ Research on the diffusion of innovations is concerned with identifying the factors involved in facilitating or impeding the spread of unfamiliar ideas.

⁶ For further discussion of the complexities of needs analysis, see Hawkey (1984), Maley (1984) and Munby (1984).

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