

CURRENT APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE TEACHING: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES¹

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This Volume 2, Number 1, 1992, of *Review of English Language Teaching*, a collection of papers presented at The Budapest English Studies Symposium which took place in November 1989, offers an overview of current British thinking and practice both in applied linguistics and English language teaching. It acknowledges the inevitable limitations in its aim of being comprehensive, accurate and impartial since those committed to the profession in Britain and elsewhere clearly state how much the debates on professional matters are coloured both by the strong opinions expressed and by the different personal undertakings that are being simultaneously implemented. Nevertheless, it is thought these papers "... do indeed reflect the major strengths and weaknesses of current applied linguistics and language teaching." (p. 2), a fact attested to by those among the participants who managed to make their papers available for publication, i.e. Gillian Brown, William Littlewood, Alan Maley, Michael Swan, Martin Parrot, Louis Alexander, Philip Riley, Michael Hoey, Ronald Carter, J. C. Wells and Keith Brown, all of them authoritative names in their field and whose expertise and respected views stem from their long commitment to the different areas they address and the outstanding work thus engendered. From their contributions we can also infer the varied array of conspicuous sub-fields that are tackled within the issues of our concern, i.e. the different research areas and sub-areas which have emerged within applied linguistics such as curriculum design and classroom practice, teacher education, socio-cultural dimensions of language use, grammar, lexis, discourse, phonology and English syntax. We will briefly comment on the papers in the collection, in the certainty that the awareness of their existence in print will make them available to the interested reader.

Gillian Brown exposes her view of the state of the art in applied linguistics, making clear the danger of the field being fragmented into too many specialisms. When reviewing the common core of knowledge regularly presented in postgraduate courses for applied linguists, she finds as central components some aspects of the description of English, namely phonology and syntax; semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics. However, she underlines the great variety that can actually be encountered when the contents of particu-

lar programmes are scrutinized. She also stresses the notable difference that can be found overall in present day courses in relation to those in the early days of applied linguistics in the late 1950s when the concept of 'knowing a language' was considered. Nowadays knowing a language means not only knowing the forms of the target language but also knowing how to use them appropriately, taking very much into account the characteristic indeterminacy of language in use and hence the need to cater for the inferencing the other interlocutor –listener or reader– has necessarily to make in order to meaningfully interact in the language exchange.

Carter addresses the issue of vocabulary mainly as "... a specific stratum or level of language organisation ..." (p. 85), arguing that although it is certainly true that "... lexis is grammaticalised in all sorts of ways in sentences and texts" (ibid.), it should not become embedded within grammar. He contends that the specificity of its own lexical relations should be directly tackled, as recent work on this area has actually done. He reviews research on lexis and discourse –i.e. the role of vocabulary in the organization of texts, written and spoken–, the role of dictionaries in representing vocabulary, and the attempts executed to find out what knowing a word means, at the same time that he keeps referring to implications for language teaching. In his view, it is of crucial importance to see (and to teach and learn) "... lexical items not as single decontextualised units but as discourse-sensitive intersentential markers ..." (p. 88), considering it central to focus upon the discourse environment of lexis because of "... the more mobile and dynamic partnership of words which texts construct." (p. 86). He also urges language teachers to investigate these pragmatic lexical relations, suggesting cloze procedures as a means of exploiting lexical relations of coherence, for example. Here, in order to deal with a discourse cloze proper, deletions would be targeted to lexical items which are relevant as far as the formation of cohesive or coherent textual relations goes.

With regard to EFL lexicography he focuses on information related to frequency and on the use of examples. Concerning the former, he emphasizes the research evidence that frequency lists should not be taken as pedagogic lists, since frequent words cannot be equated with ease of learning. He then warns teachers about the need to distinguish between frequency criteria and learning sequences for vocabulary, reminding them of the usefulness of finding out about the actual frequency of such words in texts and not as mere individual items. It is the teacher, he asserts, who should establish the appropriate sequencing and presentation, although he should be well-informed about which words are frequent text-organizing ones. In relation to the use of examples, he highlights the introduction of full exemplification in recent lexicography, pointing out how offering learners ample examples based on frequent data will foster encoding the socio-cultural and discorsal meanings of words.

Finally, he posits that to know a word is a very complex matter since it involves knowledge of the complexity of its forms and use –its formal and functional properties. That is, we know words not only as single items but also how they function in texts or complete discourse environments. Besides, we can access them when we need them. From all this Carter congratulates himself on the growing research interest in vocabulary and vocabulary learning, restituting vocabulary to its proper place in the description of language and giving vocabulary development the importance it deserves.

Michael Hoey discusses spoken discourse and describes some fundamental properties of casual conversation with a view to providing a basis for syllabus adaptation

and modification. He entertains the possibility that practising language teachers can actually benefit from an awareness of what is involved in a natural conversation, since he understands one of their chief objectives is to foster the development of natural conversation skills in the learners, an ability without which they will not become competent target language speakers. To achieve this pedagogic aim, he posits that language teachers must know how discourses are organized.

Philip Riley considers the socio-cultural dimensions of language use and relates them to language teaching. The two sources which frame his discussion are ethno-linguistics –i.e. the ethnography of communication– and the sociology of knowledge, since he is interested in the relationship between a language, its speakers and the culture and the patterns of thought therein produced, on the one hand, and the interconnection between social structures and thought, on the other. He himself has conducted research on these issues, research into the cultural identity of children, discourse analysis, and intercultural education. He contends that cultural values do exist and are in fact the tissue on which social solidarity is created and is developed, allowing people to form their own group identity and common sense. He also convincingly argues that social facts are cognitive constructs which manifest in discourse through words and expressions. We all learn this socio-cultural knowledge forming our own set of beliefs and way of interpreting reality, with the corresponding kinds of behaviour. According to him, there is a complex interrelationship between socio-cultural knowledge and language use, features teachers should cater for in their classes availing the students of opportunities to encounter pieces of language where these are manifest.

Turning to those contributors who tackled more practical issues relating to classroom pedagogy, Louis Alexander succinctly reviews the general aims of the successive language teaching methods that have been employed, pointing out their own limitations as far as enabling learners to achieve the ability to become communicators in the target language. He underlines the insurmountable task we place upon ourselves when we try to skip teaching grammar, since, as he puts it, “... grammar is language.” (p. 48). He argues that “Communication most frequently breaks down when incorrect syntax and usage make language incomprehensible.” (p. 48 *ibid.*). Thus he posits grammar should be taught by making the learner aware of what a particular grammatical point entails, drawing from different sources in order to achieve this end and with as much recourse to explicit explanation as necessary. However, he stresses that “... the teaching of grammar should be incidental to all our teaching ...”, since explanations should aid communication, not substitute it. He also underlines that teachers should try hard to provide accurate information about the language they are teaching, nurturing, in this way, their students’ acquisition of it. The course to follow, he vehemently indicates, should be to start from the students’ point of view, taking account of their “... possible assumptions and working backwards to English, ...”. We believe that all these reflections Alexander makes in relation to the teaching of grammar and language pedagogy will have a warm and interested reception among practising teachers, at the same time they may elicit some interesting comments on the part of second language acquisition researchers.

William Littlewood deals with the complex issue of curriculum design, reviewing the various definitions, which in relation to the broad and narrow senses of the term ‘curriculum’, have been advanced by different curriculum theorists –Stubbs (1983), Allen (1984), Richards et al. (1992), Robertson (1971 in Yalden, 1987)– and

extracting from them a profile of the various elements he considers should be tackled in ELT curriculum design (see Figure 1, p. 12), being among them: (i) the purposes of education, which should in turn justify the goals of foreign language learning, since language teaching is one of the activities subsumed within the broader educational framework; (ii) a conception held about the nature of language and learning, which will itself charter the possible paths to follow as far as how language should be taught and learnt; (iii) information about specific groups of learners, determining which of the paths above actually take in view of the concrete teaching/learning situation we are in; and, finally, (iv) evaluation of results, which will certainly allow an appraisal of the extent to which the goals set have in fact been achieved through the charted route followed. Littlewood centres his paper on exploring the links between the purposes of education, the goals of foreign language learning, and the kind of language teaching curriculum devised to this end. He examines three educational traditions and their value systems (Skilbeck, 1982 in Littlewood, 1991; Clark, 1987; White, 1988) –i.e.: (i) classical humanism aimed at developing the general intellectual abilities of an elite part of the next generation; (ii) reconstructionism whose purpose is to favour the desired social change; and (iii) progressivism with the goal of nurturing individual self-fulfilment–, summarising the purposes of education as “... a varying blend of elements from various traditions rather than a ‘pure’ version of one or the other ...”, since different important aspects of reality are really reflected in each tradition (see Figure 2, p. 15). He relates foreign language teaching to the three educational value systems mentioned above, and establishes a link between each of the three approaches and the different curriculum goals which accompany them: the grammar-based curriculum, the function-based curriculum, and the process-based curriculum. As the aims of language teaching are so complex and multi-faceted, and so are the nature of language itself and the learning process, he maintains that when encountering actual curricula we will probably find different kinds of blend of curriculum goals.

Allan Maley reflects upon recent and foreseeable developments in the practice of language teaching, both as a foreign and as a second language, taking into account what the participants in the symposium had contributed to this same aim when he ponders on the nature of the relationship between theory and practice. After acknowledging the move towards communication manifest since the 1950s via pragmatically oriented philosophers of language such as Austin, Searle and Grice, through the Chomskyan paradigm shift in linguistics and related fields, to language acquisition studies and socio-linguistics and ethno-methodology studies, he concludes that present practice is only partially fed by linguistics and applied linguistics. Pedagogic aims are nurtured by general education and political policies, which have reset our view of language from a subject to be learnt to an instrument to be used when social intercourse is conducted. He also emphasizes the need to move from language learning models to operational ones, getting away from considering just knowledge. He puts his accent on the fact that “Teaching and learning however is very much about skills and attitudes also”. He recollects Barnes’s (1976) distinction between the transmission and interpretation models, the former centring on school knowledge –i.e. information provided by the teacher– and the latter on action knowledge, which allows negotiation with the learner and the possibility of converting the learning process into a collaborative and exploratory one. With regard to ELT, he characterizes the best current practice as that which meshes fairly closely with an

interpretation model (p. 26), allowing for learner participation at all levels, abundant group work, use of authentic materials, activities which are done creatively anew by the learners thus achieving real communication and cognitive and affective depth (p. 27). However, he recognizes these characteristics are not generally met by most English language teaching programmes, which are carried out in state-funded institutions with all the brunt they have to bear as far as the preservation of the status quo goes. He points out the durability of teacher-behaviour all over the world, what he calls the three T's or Teacher-dominated, Text-based and Trivial, giving the learners very little significance of it all. As far as future directions go, he highlights learner independence, teacher development, action research, materials developments, and technology as the most prominent avenues along which we seem to be moving.

Michael Swan faces the issue of the textbook, the using of texts to present and practice particular language items or skills, as something which should enhance the students' learning, and therefore serve as a means to this end, and not become an end in itself. The students, he asserts, should be the ones who should play the most relevant part in the language lesson, not the textbook or any other teaching materials.

Martin Parrot confronts teacher education and the factors which should be taken into account when designing programmes to this end. He uses four case studies to illustrate the points he wants to make, emphasizing that attempts to implement teacher development courses will not always obtain successful results. From these cases he draws conclusions aiming to improve the design of these courses, i.e. more precise needs analysis, better knowledge of what teachers wanted to achieve when they embarked on these courses, whether they should be pre-service or in-service, full-time short courses or part-time ones, number of hours they should involve, their contents, what methodology to employ, ways of assessing what has been achieved, etc. etc.

We will end this review by referring to other contributions to the Symposium who were more concerned with producing linguistic descriptions with potential use for teaching. Keith Brown's paper on the modal auxiliaries contends that it is not possible to understand this grammatical class without understanding the notions of subjectivity and non-factuality, or how the epistemic judgements or deontic wishes the speaker expresses are based on an overt or covert warrant. Thus, K. Brown brings together into his description of modality in English grammar, semantics and pragmatics, arguing that only by understanding the complex ways in which they interact can we understand how speakers use modal auxiliary verbs to express their attitude.

J. C. Wells addresses the relevancy of theoretical phonology to EFL teaching. That is, he wonders to what extent teachers should be well-informed beyond mere 'sounds' and also deal with knowledge of rules when tackling their students' problems with speech sounds not present in their mother-tongue. He surveys the history of theoretical phonology over the last 100 years and identifies two main parts in it: the taxonomic phonemic approach on the one hand, dating back to the end of the 19th century up to 1960, and directly applied to language teaching since (i) everyday phonetic transcription is based on it and (ii) both dictionaries and textbooks make use of it to indicate pronunciation, and, on the other hand, since the 1960s, the generative phonology (Chomsky and Halle, 1968), which has supplemented and even succeeded it at least from a linguistic-oriented phonology viewpoint. Furthermore, we are now having different kinds of 'non-linear' phonology –i.e. auto-segmental phonology, metrical phonology– which are themselves replacing the latter

model. Wells assesses what each of these phonological paradigms can offer to language teaching and finds relevant elements in them from which both language teachers and language learners can benefit. He also critically reconsiders the acceptability of the Received Pronunciation model for an ELT-type inclined towards British English and proposes ways to update the Jonesian model. In our view both K. Brown and Wells do a great service to the language teaching profession shedding light on ways to connect theory and practice so that principled decisions can inform appropriate classroom behaviours (Widdowson, 1991).

In sum, it can be certainly said that reading this book will enhance both language teachers and applied linguists' own personal understanding of the multi-faceted nature of language and will consequently widen their views in relation to the avenues which can be profitably followed when addressing the complex task of catering for language learning and language teaching (Carter, 1982; 1990; Wells, 1985; 1986; Murphy and Moon, 1989; Cullingford, 1990; Giles and Coupland, 1991; Phillipson et al., 1991; Widdowson, 1992).

Notes

1. Bowers, R. And Brumfit C. (eds.) (1991) *Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching*. Modern English Publications and The British Council. London: Macmillan: 131 pp.

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