

Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice: The Role of Applied Linguistics

Dr. Muhammedali Chalikandy Puthiyapurayi, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor

Department of English

B S Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology

Vandalur, Chennai

mchalikandy@gmail.com

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Abstract

Linguistic theories provide valuable insights into the nature and structure of language. The relationship between linguistic theory and practice has always been a major concern in language studies. This paper examines the role of applied linguistics in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and language related practices. Applied linguistics is a dynamic field of study linking linguistic theory to practical use of language in real life contexts. The main task of applied linguistics is to transform abstract linguistic theories and concepts into effective concrete practical techniques and strategies to address language related issues and problems in varied real-world contexts. Over the years, applied linguistics has emerged as an important interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary subject that connects theory to practical applications in varied areas such as language teaching and learning, translation, discourse analysis, stylistics, forensic linguistics, corpus linguistics, lexicography, language policy, bilingualism, multilingualism and communication.

Keywords: linguistic theory, practice, applied linguistics, language use

1. Introduction

Language plays the key role in all domains of life and it is central to communication, education, culture, trade and business, science and technology and so on. Linguistics focuses on understanding how language works, whereas applied linguistics is concerned with applying

linguistic knowledge and theories to practical issues related to language use in real life contexts. In the beginning, applied linguistics dealt only with language learning and teaching. Gradually, it has evolved into a significant interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary area of study connecting theory to practice covering wide range of areas of study like language teaching and learning, translation, discourse analysis, stylistics, forensic linguistics, corpus linguistics, lexicography, language policy, bilingualism, multilingualism and communication. This article examines how applied linguistics bridges the gap between linguistic theory and its practical application in various real-life contexts.

2. Linguistics

Linguistics is “the scientific study of language... (whose goal) is the construction of a general theory of the structure of language or of a general theoretical framework for the description of languages” (Ivić et al., 2026). It deals with the form, meaning, and content of language (Mukherjee, 2022). Linguistics also examines the origin of language, its history, structure, meaning, acquisition, uses and changes happened over the years and happening now. The main purpose of linguistics is to study language objectively and to understand the nature of language as an abstract system. “Like any discipline, linguistics looks for generalities underlying actual appearances, and so in some degree is bound to represent an abstract idealization of language rather than the way it is experienced in the real world” (G. Cook, 2003, p. 9). Interestingly, the abstract nature of linguistics became one of the reasons for the emergence of applied linguistics.

3. Applied Linguistics

Applied linguistics is one of the youngest disciplines since it originated in the 1940s (Grabe, 2010). It “derives from the involvement of linguists in America, particularly Leonard Bloomfield and Charles C. Fries, in specialized language-teaching programs during and immediately after the second World War” (Howatt, 1984, p. 265). It is not easy to define the term as “Applied Linguistics means many things to many people” (V. Cook, 2006) and because of the broad areas that it encompasses, varieties of activities that it does and multiple perspectives that it accommodates. According to Grabe (2001) “applied linguistics is trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world” (p. 25). Similarly, Brumfit (1997) defined it as “the theoretical

and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue” (p. 93) and Davies and Elder (2004) point out “Applied Linguistics is... a coherent activity which theorizes through speculative and empirical investigations real-world problems in which language is a central issue” (p.11). Applied linguistics “is the utilisation of the knowledge about the nature of language achieved by linguistic research for the improvement of the efficiency of practical task in which language is a central component” (Corder, 1974, p.24) and employs linguistic theory in real world contexts and the main focus of applied linguistics is language use. It is “a cover term for a sizeable group of semi-autonomous disciplines, each dividing its parentage and allegiances between the formal study of language and other relevant fields, and each working to develop its own methodologies and principles” (Spolsky, 2005, p.36). Furthermore, applied linguistics “opens up a whole new array of questions and concerns, issues such as identity, sexuality, access, ethics, disparity, difference, desire, or the reproduction of Otherness that have hitherto not been considered as concerns related to applied linguistics” (Pennycook, 2004, pp. 803–4). In nutshell, it is a “multi-disciplinary approach to the solution of language-related problems” (Strevens, 1989, p. 9) and an “independent and coherent discipline, which, like similar vocational activities (for example general medicine, business studies, applied psychology, legal studies) seeks to marry practical experience and theoretical understanding of language development and language in use” (Davies and Elder, 2004, p.11) and above all, it is an:

interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of research and practice dealing with practical problems of language and communication that can be identified, analysed or solved by applying available theories, methods and results of Linguistics or by developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks in Linguistics to work on these problems (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, n. d.).

4. Bridging Theory and Practice through Applied Linguistics

The relation between linguistics and applied linguistics is complementary. Linguistics mainly focuses on describing and analysing language, whereas applied linguistics is concerned with the practical use of linguistic knowledge in solving real life issues and problems and it applies linguistic theories, methods, and findings to language related issues. In practice, applied linguistics acts as a bridge between abstract linguistic concepts and real-life practical uses of such concepts.

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4.1.Connecting Theory to Language Use

Applied linguistics connects linguistic theory to practical language use. Theoretical linguistics focuses on understanding the structure and functions of language while applied linguistics attempts to use them to solve issues and problems related to language in real life contexts. Applied linguistics is a “mediation between theory and practice (Kaplan and Widdowson 1992, p. 76) and “the task of applied linguistics is to mediate’ between linguistics and language use” (G. Cook, 2003, p. 20). Furthermore, “applied linguistics is trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world” (Grabe, 2001, p. 25) “whether they be learners, teachers, supervisors, academics, lawyers, service providers, those who need social services, test takers, policy developers, dictionary makers, translators, or a whole range of business clients” (Grabe, 2002, p. 9). In other words, applied linguistics helps different professionals like teachers, translators, lexicographers, police officers, researchers, policy makers, decision makers, learners and anyone who uses language and interacts with human language and AI generated language and text in this era of Artificial Intelligence.

4.2.Integrating theory into Language Teaching and Learning

Linguistic theories are blended in language teaching and learning. English Language Teaching Approaches and Methods have roots in linguistic theories. For example, the impact of structural linguistics on Grammar Translation Method can be seen as the method focuses on deconstructing literary texts into their structural and grammatical components. Structural linguistics contributed to the development of the Audio-Lingual Method which leads to habits formation of spoken structures through repetition and substitution drills. Behaviouristic learning theory is applied in classroom techniques like drilling, imitation and immediate feedback. Introduction of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in English language teaching shifted the focus of teaching from grammatical accuracy to meaningful communication which caused to emerge Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that replaced rigid grammatical drills with communicative tasks like role plays and information gap activities. Socio cultural theories (Vygotsky, 1962) use cooperative learning, pair work and group work in which teachers act as facilitators. Krashen (1982) emphasizes the importance of meaningful input and natural communication which have influenced classroom practices, teaching methodologies, and learner

centred approaches around the world. Furthermore, applied linguistics contributes to syllabus design, curriculum development, and language assessment and it has even changed the focus of classroom practice. For instance, pragmatics and discourse analysis enable teachers to teach language in authentic social contexts and develop learners' effective communicative skills. Applied linguistics addresses practical challenges and the requirements of modern language classrooms.

4.3.Using Technology

Technological advancement and digital innovations have reinforced the relationship between the theory and the practice in applied linguistics. To demonstrate, ICT, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), digital learning platforms and AI powered learning apps and devices integrate linguistic theories with technology to provide learners with innovative language learning experiences. Applied linguistics also plays a significant role in responding to the changing needs of language use in this modern digitalized AI controlled world since Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed language learning, language teaching, and language use, created new types of discourse and redefined the notions of communication. Communication now involves intelligent machines and Artificial Intelligence which function as communication partners. Furthermore, applied linguistics in the age of Artificial Intelligence is shifting from the traditional field of study that deals with only human language use to a modern discipline that investigates blended language model integrating human language and machine language and examines the language cocreated by both human and AI. Corpus linguistics helps researchers and teachers analyse authentic language use and develop teaching materials based on real communication patterns as it uses large collections of authentic language data to identify patterns of actual communication.

4.4.Linking Theory to Address Language Issues

Applied linguistics addresses social and cultural issues related to language using sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, educational psychology and Artificial Intelligence. Studies in sociolinguistics, bilingualism, multilingualism and language policy help researchers understand how language functions in multilingual societies and it examines issues such as migration, identity,

globalization, and intercultural communication. Due to the integration of technology, artificial intelligence and AI tools and platforms in language teaching, language learning and language use, applied linguistics now deals with human language, machine language and the interaction between human beings and machines. In fact, applied linguistics goes beyond classroom teaching and learning to include issues related to identity, migration, intercultural communication, digital communication and language planning by transforming theoretical knowledge into practical applications. In short, “all linguistic study is basically applied linguistics, with applied linguistics seeking out and working on language problems which linguistics responds to by idealising and then analysing in terms of current linguistic theory” (Davies, 2007, p.12). On the whole “‘Applied Linguistics’ 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 solve some problem in the real world” (Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2002, p.1) and applied linguists “are likely to move toward the analysis of new data, rather than continue to argue new theory” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 514).

Applied linguistics functions as a bridge between linguistic theory and practice by integrating knowledge, ideas and concepts from multiple disciplines to address real world language problems and adapt to changing social and linguistic needs.

5. Conclusion

Applied linguistics has emerged as a multidisciplinary field that connects linguistic theory to practical language use in real world contexts. While linguistics provides scientific knowledge about the structure and functions of language, applied linguistics transforms these theoretical concepts into practical solutions for language related issues in education, communication, policy making, language planning and language use in real world contexts. Thus, applied linguistics acts as a bridge between theory and practice.

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