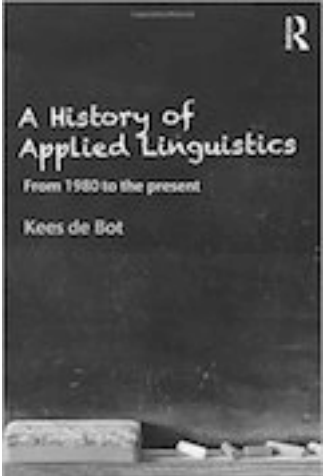


The History of Applied Linguistics: From 1980 to the present

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The History of Applied Linguistics: From 1980 to the present		
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History of Applied Linguistics: From 1980 to the present delivers responses to a survey of over 100 current academics in the field of Applied Linguistics (AL) regarding how the field has been defined over the last 3 decades. The text's goal and strength is to illuminate the various elements that currently contribute to the AL field agenda and is therefore a valuable resource for the Applied Linguist student or researcher. The survey's field of respondents consists of AL leaders such as Claire Kramsch, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Susan Gass, Rod Ellis and over 100 others who are predominantly from Europe and America. The decidedly subjective and themed study is not intended to be a comprehensive timeline or technical list of major pieces in the academic discipline with conjunctions in historical language teaching. Rather, its intent is to serve as a cross-sectional viewpoint consisting of interview data culled from responses to the author's questionnaire.

The questionnaire invited informants to define AL, identify the field's leaders, name the most important books or articles, describe the major trends over the past 30 years, and evaluate whether or not AL research has led to an improvement in language education. Some of the major findings are that AL is an interdisciplinary field (38) and that AL is defined by its aim to solve real world problems through linguistic means. While there is

a broad consensus around AL leaders, there is less consensus regarding canonical publications. Indeed, most of the publications cited by the informants come from outside AL. Chapter 4 and its question, “who are the most important/influential leaders in the field?”, discuss how the resultant rankings demonstrate that there are certain leaders, suggesting that they bind the field together more by their presence than by their shared research topics or publications.

For instance, out of 58 total mentioned AL leaders, the following leaders are generally defined as such, in descending frequency, arguably because “they publish in the same journals, write books for the same publishers, attend the same conferences” (133), etc.: Kramsch, Swain, Lantolf and Larsen-Freeman who are all mentioned 30 times or more by the informants. Regarding publications, while there are 313 different ‘most important articles’ mentioned “suggesting the cohesion of the field is very limited” (56), there is an agreement that the Applied Linguistics journal stands apart from the pack (with 57 mentions) perhaps because the high frequency mentions of the Canale and Swain article from 1980 in the article category. The next three publications, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Language Learning*, and *TESOL Quarterly*, each received between 26 and 31 mentions while the remaining 13 journals garnered well less than 20 each (52), 10 of them receiving 4 mentions or less (52). These journals concern psychology, social issues, educational research, reading and bilingualism.

It is perhaps for this reason that significant portions of the informants do not see AL as a coherent field but as a set of sub-fields, each having their own leaders: is it unifying, fragmenting, or compartmentalizing? To further answer this, informants respond that AL occupies space between the TESOL field which tends to assert an English-only learning and teaching with little research and Second Language Acquisition (SLA), centering on theory-based research with less attempt at classroom or pedagogical application. AL seeks to promote language teaching pedagogy and materials based in empirical content. In response to questioning whether AL research has improved language learning and teaching, the respondents are mixed, although a sizable majority see AL research having a substantial impact, if undecided as to whether that effect is positive or negative.

Invariably, the recurring term used to describe AL by informants and the author is that AL is markedly interdisciplinary. On the one hand, respondents positively noted that the increasing inclusion of the hard sciences over the last two decades has created a rich breadth of knowledge related to second language acquisition spanning many disciplines and conceptual models: cognition and neurobiology to sociology and psychology. On the other hand, according to the informants, this broad contribution and definition is also seen to muddy the waters: theoretical constructs and terminology are often vague and broad, seeing as AL is informed and defined differently by every researcher and the researcher’s associated field. That the theories and empirical content produced by this multitude of fields finds place in comprehending language acquisition highlights the human complexity of the language-learning phenomenon.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover the ‘turn’ from behaviorist approaches of language learning, teaching, and research to a social emphasis. In Chapter 5, several respondents noted that there has been 1) a general decline of the impact of formal linguistics as a major

theoretical basis for AL programs, instead centering on research and real world language issues and 2) a perceived distancing from a psycholinguistic emphasis on mechanisms in individual language users and learners to cognition as socially embedded. The majority of respondents view research as substantially impacting language instruction approaches, less so methods, and has equally significantly produced a post-methods era vision of language teaching and learning in which the 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not prevail. Other respondents argue that assessing how AL research has altered a language learning program remains difficult, even admitting that "poor research, self-interest and too quick jumps into application" (124) exemplify much of the field's research. This again further substantiates the interdisciplinary view of AL and the realization of the complex individual and societal elements involved in language learning.

As a language teacher educated in Applied Linguistics, this survey of the past 30 years fascinatingly demonstrates how those who have contributed to, and continue to contribute to, the field of AL shape the field's direction and influences its canon of foundational literature – and yet how ineffective its assessments measures, as found in the classroom, tend to be. The expanding body of project-based and empirically based content has made AL neither quite nascent nor fully matured; AL is far from being rudimentary or unsophisticated. However, if AL focuses on teaching languages and solving real world problems by linguistic means, then the lack of clearly defined impacts in language teaching and language programs places much of the research efforts in danger of real world irrelevancy. This is reflected in a succinct description provided by Diane Larsen-Freeman, considered a leader by informants, when she states "there has been a tendency in AL to say to teachers: 'We figure things out and you use them'" (85). Perhaps this text and its subjective findings offer an implicit challenge to the AL field that could bring about a new coalescence of identity centered on the further development of rigorous quantitative research and assessment methods and the foregrounding of research and findings in teacher education programs and language learning praxis.

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