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The prevalence of pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics: extending the debate

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Abstract

In this article we respond to the special issue “Definitions for Applied Linguistics”, where the past and future of applied linguistics are discussed, and the place of pedagogy in the field’s scope is debated. In the issue, Hellermann (2015) uses data from 1980-1984 and 2009-2013 to show a shift in the field towards an emerging range of language-related problems, coupled with the declining prominence of pedagogy-related research in the journal. In this paper, we extend Hellerman’s work in order to investigate whether this trend is reflective of other published work in applied linguistics. In our investigation, 336 research papers published in 2015 were analysed from 10 self-identified applied linguistics journals. Data revealed language-pedagogy related studies constituted 32 percent of all empirical research, although this representation was unevenly distributed across the journals. Findings suggest a number of practice-oriented journals now take the lion’s share of pedagogical research, allowing other key applied linguistics journals to focus on a diverse range of non-pedagogy related language problems. Nevertheless, in general, pedagogy remains a key topic in the field.

Is pedagogy the main focus for applied linguistics?

Agreement on a definition of applied linguistics has beset researchers since the field’s inception, and has been the topic of recent renewed interest (e.g. de Bot and Thomas 2015; de Bot 2015). The latest special issue of *Applied Linguistics* on definitions showcased the current views of key scholars in the field. In the introduction to the special issue, Hellermann (2015) reviewed definitions from journals and organisations, which suggested that the applied linguistics focuses on the identification and betterment of language-related problems. Issues surrounding language pedagogy were notably absent from definitions, except the one proffered by the British Association of Applied Linguistics. This marks a conceptual departure from the initial stages of applied linguistics, which Cook (2015) argued was concerned primarily with explorations of linguistic theory within the scope of language pedagogy. Both Cook (2015) and Kramsch (2015) highlighted the important relationship between linguistic theory and teaching practice in applied linguistics in these early stages, followed by a rapid widening in scope to include a diverse range of topics from non-linguistic epistemologies.

Hellermann's comparison of published articles in *Applied Linguistics* between the years 1980-1984 and 2009-2013 highlighted the current diversity of applied linguistics research, which has resulted in a drop in pedagogy related articles from 19 to 8 percent, concluding 'the journal is publishing fewer articles focusing on language pedagogy' (Hellermann 2015: 423). In the same special issue, Mauranen (2015: 489) claims that educational theory no longer 'holds a privileged place' in applied linguistics, and indeed linguistics is no longer the only 'relevant discipline'. We sought to investigate whether the decline in pedagogy-related research in *Applied Linguistics* was indicative of a wider movement in the field, and thus also evident in other journals. We aimed to respond to the research question: How prevalent is the topic of language pedagogy in published applied linguistics research today?

Widening the sample

In order to extend the work by Hellermann (2015), we sought to investigate how applied linguistics research was positioned in other relevant research journals. While it was not feasible to examine all journals, we established sampling criteria in order to capture articles that exhibited quality research within applied linguistics. The sampling criteria sought to include articles:

1. in high-impact journals
2. that self-identified as publishing applied linguistics research
3. that represented current research in the field
4. that contained empirical research, or provided a survey of research on a topic

In order to meet the first criterion, we consulted the SCImago Journal Rank Indicator, which is based on information from the Scopus® database. The top 50 journals listed under "Linguistics and Language" were short-listed. 50 were deemed a manageable amount for two researchers to cover in a short time period.

We then consulted each of the journal's home pages in order to identify those journals that positioned themselves as applied linguistics journals in their scope; this yielded a short-list of 9 journals. In order to ensure we did not miss any vital journals in the field, we confirmed the list with three full professors of applied linguistics working in three regions (Europe, North America, and Australasia), asking them to nominate key omissions, with the intention of adding any journal nominated by two of the three professors to our sample. This process added the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, giving a final list of 10 journals. In order to sample current research, we elected to do a complete survey of all articles published in these journals in the year 2015. We then reviewed each issue of the 10 journals, and extracted titles and abstracts to identify those which reported empirical research, including research surveys. We excluded from this investigation forum pieces and perspective articles, unless they included original research.

We acknowledge that there are certain limitations to our methodology. Journal rankings do not necessarily indicate that all articles published in them will have high impact; however, they do suggest a level of rigour and scrutiny. We also acknowledge that some key journals may not have made our final

shortlist due to not explicitly positioning themselves as journals of applied linguistics research; for example, *Language Teaching Research*, and the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, which do not explicitly use the term applied linguistics in their scope, were not included, despite being in the initial short-list of 50 journals. The use of sampling criteria, while restrictive, was nonetheless an objective way to obtain our dataset, without injecting our own judgement of what applied linguistics was, and where it was published. Although the study would have benefited from a wider review of journals, we have endeavoured to work with a manageable sample, in keeping with the purpose of this forum piece to raise issues and report on data that do not warrant a full-length article (Sealey 2015).

Findings

In total, we reviewed 336 articles from the 10 journals, as summarized in table 1. As with the analysis of *Applied Linguistics* by Hellermann (2015), we coded the articles according to key topics in applied linguistics. While at times this proved challenging, particularly when topics intersected, we independently categorized the articles, and consulted on those on which we disagreed. We also undertook a moderation exercise, categorizing *Applied Linguistics* articles from 2009-2015 as Hellermann did, to confirm that our categories were consistent with his.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

To facilitate comparability of results, we present our findings alongside Hellermann's, according to the same topics and in the same format (Table 2). Results suggest that language pedagogy remains a key topic in the field, representing over 32 percent of published articles. These findings provide a slightly different overview of applied linguistics than the special issue, which showed that only 8 percent of articles in *Applied Linguistics* were language-pedagogy related. There are two possible explanations for the contrast. First, our sample included a number of practice-oriented applied linguistics journals that focused specifically on pedagogy. Secondly, our findings may indicate a fragmentation of the field, which, as suggested by Cook (2015), has resulted in different journals showcasing different topics.

[TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

We hypothesized that the prominence of pedagogy-related research in journals such as *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*, and the emergence of newer journals such as the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, may have allowed other applied linguistics journals to focus on non-education areas of study. To confirm this theory, a chi-square test (with a Bonferroni adjustment) was conducted to check journals against article types (pedagogy vs non-pedagogy) in order to confirm differences where pedagogy-related research had appeared. Results revealed a significant association between

journal title and topic $\chi^2 (1) = 82.2, p < .001$, and the *Cramer v* statistic (4.95) indicated a medium effect size. Standardized residuals were significant at $p < .001$ for language pedagogy articles to appear in *ELT Journal* ($z = 4.4$) and not to appear in *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* ($z = -2.9$) or *Language Learning* ($z = -3.4$), the two highest impact-factor journals in our data set. Standardized residuals were also significant ($p < .05$) for language pedagogy articles to be associated with *TESOL Quarterly* ($z = 2.1$). All other associations between language pedagogy articles and journals were not significant, indicating they fell within normal distribution, including *Applied Linguistics*.

Implications for Applied linguistics researchers

The results of the study, which was designed to extend Hellermann's (2015) findings with a wider sample, have revealed that language pedagogy is indeed strongly present in applied linguistics journal articles. However, findings indicate that pedagogic topics within applied linguistics may be unevenly distributed, now appearing in particular segments of the field and their associated publications, which would be consistent with trends reported in the special issue. Cook (2015), for example, noted a methodological and theoretical separation of sub-fields in applied linguistics—some of which operate independently within different epistemologies. The results of our study indicate that language pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics, once the centrepiece of the field, is now mostly found in journals that place practice at their core (e.g. *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*). Furthermore, Kramsch (2015) claims that as the field has intellectualized, the gap has widened between researchers and practitioners, meaning that teachers no longer have the theoretical knowledge or desire to read journals like *Applied Linguistics*. Our findings support this notion, but we would argue that teachers may still find more substantial pedagogical content in *Applied Linguistics* than in journals such as *Language Learning* and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*.

As a discipline, education may be perceived as having a 'comparatively low status', albeit unfairly (Shuy 2015: 436), which could account for applied linguistics research, in contrast with other linguistic disciplines, being 'tainted by the association' Mauranen (2015: 491). Thus, some applied linguistics journals (especially those with a cognitive or SLA focus) may purposely align their research with their 'parent discipline' of linguistics, rather than with education. This may also help to explain two further tendencies: on the one hand, that of some education-oriented journals to self-identify as applied linguistics, and, on the other hand, the decision of many applied linguists to publish in journals which do not state education in their scope.

Finally, in spite of the diversification illustrated in this review, our study has also showcased a degree of uniformity in the field. In our sample, 6 of the 10 journals illustrated a similar balance of pedagogy and non-pedagogy related research, including the journals *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *Language Teaching*, *English for Specific Purposes*, *Modern Language Journal*, and *Applied Linguistics*. Although

pedagogy may not be a main focus for these journals, it nevertheless maintains a key position, if only for the reason that applied linguistics needs to remain 'parasitic on practical language teaching and learning' (McNamara 2015: 467). We would argue that this balance will likely remain in the foreseeable future, due to the sheer volume of research emerging from the booming field of English language teaching. Thus, while the profile of research topics in certain journals might change, pedagogy is unlikely to lose its foothold in applied linguistics research in general.

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Table 1: The final selection of articles (i.e. those appearing in the ten selected journals that report empirical research findings)

| Journal Title | No. of articles |
|---|------------------------|
| Annual Review of Applied Linguistics | 13 |
| Applied Linguistics | 34 |
| ELT Journal | 32 |
| English for Specific Purposes | 31 |
| Journal of English for Academic Purposes | 40 |
| Language Learning | 42 |
| Language Teaching | 36 |
| Modern Language Journal | 53 |
| Studies in Second Language Acquisition | 23 |
| TESOL Quarterly | 32 |
| TOTAL | 336 |

Table 2: Categories of topics represented in the journal samples

| Topic | Applied Linguistics 1980-1984 (Hellermann 2015) | Applied Linguistics 2009-2014 (Hellermann 2015) | Our sample of 10 journals in 2015 |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| L2 acquisition and use | 49% | 34% | 25% |
| Discourse (text) analysis | 17% | 25% | 21% |
| Sociolinguistics | 0% | 11% | 6% |
| Language pedagogy | 19% | 8% | 32% |
| Other¹ | 15% | 22% ² | 16% |

¹ 'Other' included: assessment, language policy, multilingualism, pragmatics, linguistic theory, research methods, etc.

² Hellermann (2015) did not report an 'other' category in his results, so this figure represents the unreported percentage