

Applied Linguistics and Pragmatics

As you read around this area, you will sometimes see the term 'pragmatics' used interchangeably with the term 'applied linguistics', though this is usually found in rather older documentation.

However, the definition of 'pragmatics' – as a study of language from the point of view of the user (the choices they make, the limitations they meet in using language in interactions and the effects their use of language has on others involved in communicative acts) – is a helpful one when thinking about 'applied linguistics'.

Crystal (2008) also notes that:

The field focuses on an 'area' between semantics, sociolinguistics and extra-linguistic context; but the boundaries with these other domains are as yet incapable of precise definition.
(Crystal 2008: 379)

The very fact that linguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics overlap in the way they do means that they are all developing alongside each other – but not necessarily always in step with each other.

Applied linguists concentrate on the learner and their needs, whilst theoretical linguists study language in the abstract.

So, as you can see, the field of applied linguistics is, like sociolinguistics, a broad one. Though the term "applied linguistics" has traditionally been associated with the scientific study of such areas as TESOL, TEFL, TESL, language teaching, acquisition and learning, applied linguists do a variety of things.

Some of the questions that applied linguists ask include:

- **How can languages best be learnt and taught?**
- **What social factors affect language learning?**
- **How can technology be used to contribute to the effectiveness of language teaching/learning?**
- **What are the related problems associated with language disorders? How can these be prevented?**

We are going to look at two of the above areas in more detail below. The areas we will cover are the two that will be of most import to you in the language classroom, namely '*How can languages best be learnt and taught?*' and '*How can technology be used to contribute to the effectiveness of language teaching/learning?*' Let's put the technology issue to one side for the moment, while we take a look at the 'best practice' for teaching and learning languages.

How can languages best be learnt and taught?

As a result of attempts to answer the first question, 'How can languages best be learnt and taught?', the past fifty years have seen a variety of ideas that have, in many cases, come and gone with a relatively short lifespan, but some have continued in either their original form or in some adapted and extended form.

Some of these are Suggestopaedia, The Natural Way, Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), The Silent Way, Task-based Learning, Community Language Learning, and Total Physical Response (TPR). All are worth investigating, and several of the ideas they cover can be integrated into a more all-encompassing approach which takes the needs of various students into account.

We have touched on some of these methods early on in this module but you can see a brief appraisal of some of the approaches to teaching and language learning mentioned above in a summary of Stephen Krashen's 'Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition' at:

<https://calabretta.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/reid-wilson-summary-of-stephen-krashens-principles-and-practice-in-second-language-acquisition.pdf>



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After critiquing some of the key approaches to language learning, and discussing language learning vs. acquisition, Krashen asks;

'So what is better (for language acquisition): the classroom or the real world?'

In terms of language input, he concludes that a classroom environment that provides simplified exposure to language is a good idea for beginners; one that presents language in a graded form that is more comprehensible to the learner than fluent, unfiltered language. He says:

'The best input is comprehensible, which sometimes means that it needs to be slower and more carefully articulated, using common vocabulary, less slang, and shorter sentences. Optimal input is interesting and/or relevant and allows the acquirer to focus on the meaning of the message and not on the form of the message.'

However, Krashen argues that from the intermediate level upwards, it is better to acquire language through natural interaction with the environment where the language is spoken with all the variety of language that the environment provides. He comments;

"Quite simply, the role of the second or foreign language classroom is to bring a student to a point where he can begin to use the outside world for further second language acquisition.... This means we have to provide students with enough comprehensible input to bring their second language competence to the point where they can begin to understand language heard 'on the outside'.... In other words, all second language classes are transitional."

So, he argues, at this later stage of language acquisition, the classroom is a place in which to simulate real-life communication in the target language as much as possible in order to prepare students for these real world communication exchanges.

He goes on to list the implications for teachers and teaching materials if we are to make acquisition rather than learning the focus for our classrooms. (There is also more on acquisition vs. learning in the next section.) It is well worth reading this article to gain a full appreciation of the arguments.

This real-life simulation approach to language acquisition has been seized upon by innovative English language company 'Languages Out There'. In each session with this language school students learn functional vocabulary or grammar, practise it in the classroom or virtual classroom, then go out into the city with the teacher, or onto a social network to use the new skills in real life situations with fluent and native speakers.

They have created a series of English courses designed for use with social media and you can download a free e-book from their site with sample materials here if you are curious as to how this approach might work in practice:

<http://englishoutthere.com/>

This use of social media and online language learning, as promoted by Languages Out There, is a huge growth area and one that is set to develop further as the internet becomes even more accessible.

This brings us neatly to the second question we are going to focus on in our applied linguists section, which is taken from our bullet points on the previous page.