Changing Understandings of Classroom Practices

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Abstract

Do understandings of classroom practice change (ergative sense) or does somebody change them (transitive sense) when applied linguistic perspectives meet practitioner perspectives in language teaching? This article starts out as a selective review of the often complex and problematic relationship between applied linguistic thinking and language teaching experience, and develops into a position paper on the place of applied research and reflective practice in a journal such as *e*-FLT. My discussion gives attention to both aspects of this journal's title, namely the electronic medium of communication and the teaching of foreign languages. Essentially, I attempt to renew and promote arguments against externally driven interventionist approaches, and in favour of more sustained interactive and reflective approaches towards understanding events and practices in FLT classrooms, including virtual ones. Closing comments briefly review some implications for teaching and learning investigations and conceptions of change management in education.

0 Foreword

Articles don't normally have forewords, but I offer this one with the new journal in mind, to introduce two genre-related points.

One of my incidental but lasting recollections of MA studies at the University of Reading (1979-80) involves a rather waspish comment by one of our lecturers, Arthur Hughes, suggesting that it was time to put a halt to speculative papers in applied linguistics. (He sought a "moratorium" on them). This observation will surely appear narrowly empiricist to some, and it has not been prophetic. Speculative discussions remain abundant, and I am adding to their number here. Nonetheless, I remain in sympathy with Hughes' concern that applied linguistics ought to engage both with theory and with data, and am at best ambivalent about the extent to which speculative discussions advance understandings as readily as they seem to advance careers.

My first suggestion, then, is that the editors of *e*-FLT should carefully examine the weighting of different kinds of investigation and discussion in submissions that they receive and select. Grounding in both theory and data is generally something to value, even if this is a somewhat impudent observation for the writer of a speculative article to advance. (I do not mean it to apply to every single article, though, only to the balance to be sought across a set of articles). My second comment is that a journal in the electronic medium should provide a good platform for modest generic experimentation. In the present case, a brief foreword is not very radical and the remainder of the article will be conventional in form, yet I hope in its course to suggest one or two alternatives that electronic writing can offer.

1 Introduction

The relationship between applied linguistic thinking and language teaching experience has long been a focus of discussion (e.g. Brumfit, 1997; Corder, 1973; Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1964; Seidlhofer, 2003; Widdowson, 1979, 1980, 1984, 2000; Wilkins, 1972), no doubt largely because it has never been simple or untroubled. One persistent theme in these discussions is that of the applied linguist as some kind of mediator between linguistics and language teaching. This view dates back at least to Halliday *et al.* (1964, p. xv) and is still prominent in Widdowson (2000). Probably few commentators today would find such an account fully adequate, however, or would accept Widdowson's normative claim of two decades ago that the central issue for applied linguistics is "the pursuit of pedagogic relevance, the search for a model which will draw on and appeal to the learner's experience as a language user" (1984: 19). The main reason for scepticism is that many contemporary areas of applied language study have no direct connections with or evident implications for the teaching of foreign or any languages: see the list of topics covered by the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (AILA), in Seidlhofer (2003, pp. 269-270).

Conversely and even more clearly, language teaching experience has never been reducible to applied linguistics, or uniquely describable in applied linguistic or any other research terms (see, e.g., Allwright, 2003; Bolitho, 1986; Hopkins, 1993; Stenhouse, 1984). Accepting and reinforcing that point here, it still remains the case that many students of applied linguistics are language teachers who seek professional relevance as well as academic insight from the studies that they undertake. Connections between applied linguistics and language teaching cannot then be taken for granted, but do still continue to be proposed and sought. This relationship calls for constant renewal, rather than once-for-all intellectual or procedural resolution.

A common preoccupation in the literature about applied linguistics is, unsurprisingly, its relationship to linguistics. The name could imply dependency, suggesting that applied linguists take whatever linguistics is doing and apply it to areas of human activity where language is important, language teaching being one. This implication is often repudiated, as in Widdowson's distinction (1980, 2000) between "linguistics applied" (a dependent view) and "applied linguistics" (an independent area of activity in which several different perspectives upon language-related issues can interact. The wording is my own, though I believe it to be consistent with Widdowson's more elaborate and eloquent accounts). In his 2000 paper, Widdowson reconsiders, and (again predictably) renews his case for, the continuing need for an independent applied linguistics now that some trends within general linguistics have moved further towards the study of language as revealed in texts, notably in corpus linguistics and in critical discourse analysis. (He might also have considered genre analysis.) The case rests in good measure on the importance of pedagogic autonomy. Facts revealed about language do not carry direct or unproblematic implications for how best to teach language. This, in turn, raises a range of questions (see papers in Seidlhofer, 2003, section 5) about the knowledge and authority that applied linguists can bring to bear, and about the basis for any partnership with others, including language teachers, who are experientially concerned with areas of language use that applied linguists seek to illuminate as part of their own professional activity.

An important theme in Widdowson's (2000) discussion is that of classroom contextual conditions, and I quote this at some length because of possible implications for this journal. Widdowson asserts the importance, beyond what linguistics can tell us, of:

> […] the pedagogic perspective, the contextual conditions that have to be met in the classroom for language to be a reality to the learners.
>
> (Widdowson, 2000, p. 7)

Reflecting on engagement with the realities of classroom learners, and renewing his earlier (1979) questioning of the naïve notion that genuine instances of text may suffice to ensure authentic experience of language, Widdowson suggests that:

[…] there seems no good reason why the classroom cannot be a place of created context, like a theatre, where the community of learners live and move and have their being in imagined worlds, purposeful and real for them. To conceive of the classroom in this way is to acknowledge that what is being taught and learned is something designed as a subject, not the language as experienced by its native speaker users but something that native speakers cannot experience at all, namely a foreign language. And its foreignness has to be locally accounted for by the devising of appropriate contexts in the classroom, which have to activate the process of learning.

(Widdowson, 2000, p. 8)

For our concerns here, I found it important and helpful to see how Widdowson highlights learners' experience of a foreign language as something with its own uniqueness and authenticity. He has related such experience to the value of "imagined worlds" that are "purposeful and real" for a learner community. For me, these comments have great resonance for *virtual classroom* contexts that foreign language learners in many situations can be encouraged to construct and explore through electronic communication. The purposeful authenticity of imagined worlds also offers a theme of considerable interest, and perhaps something of a challenge as well, for writers and readers of a new electronic journal to think about.

For his purposes, Widdowson then returns to the role of the applied linguist, observing that: "The design of the subject is the appropriate concern of applied linguistics, whereby descriptive findings are pedagogically treated to make them appropriate as prescription…" (2000, p. 8). Be that as it may, let us leave Widdowson's discussion there, having I hope sufficiently re-established that there exists a relevant space for pedagogic concern and action in which applied linguistics may have some role to play. I would now like to develop a rather different perspective on the relationship, within that space, between applied linguists and language teachers.

A recent reappraisal of the relationship between applied linguistics and language teaching is found in Allwright (2003). Allwright critically reassesses the intellectual practices and justifications of applied linguists, including his own earlier contributions, as they relate to classroom research and teachers' insights into classroom practices. His discussion has refreshed and enriched some of my own professional concerns about the rhetoric of academic expertise and about evaluative criteria that academics apply to their work and to that of teachers, often including their graduate students. These concerns are not with academic criteria as such – in the main, I would defend academic values as part of a responsible approach towards investigation and analysis – as with the place that they may too easily assume in contexts of institutional dominance and managerial expectations, often set against a background of heavy teacher workloads, and sometimes of external criticisms of teachers and their roles. In that light, questions about what applied linguists are doing, and who derives benefit from their work, can soon become challenging and disturbing. To the extent that applied linguists have some influence, how do we exercise this, and in whose interests? If we offer teachers some form of partnership, on what terms and to whose advantage is this offer being made?

As Allwright (2003) indicates, conventional justification of applied linguistic activity is often linked to invocation of some sort of improvement in curricular practice. Such a view is typically (though in my view not inevitably) tied into the perspectives of planners, managers and funding authorities, and implicitly assumes efficiency-oriented ends and clear directions for improving practice. An alternative justification to consider would be that improving understandings of teaching and learning has intrinsic value as a goal for professionally oriented and shared research activity. This view still carries fairly evident implications for reflective practice, but does not prejudge the issue of whether changing understandings among practitioners will lead to improvements, or renewal, or maintenance of curricular activities.

I share the conviction that attempting to extend and deepen understandings of classroom practices is valuable in its own right, both academically and professionally, for all parties concerned with classroom language teaching and learning. This principle clearly includes language learners (Chan, 2002, discusses important parallels between reflective teaching and autonomous

learning), as well as teachers and applied linguists, among others. Despite uncertainties over roles and status, I also believe that interactive and reflective exchanges between applied linguists and language teachers, and exchanges between these roles in the lives of the same professional individuals, can play a considerable part in changing understandings of classroom practices. As Allwright (2003) argues, the pursuit of understanding in language teaching has a humanising value for practice in a very demanding profession.

2 Changing understandings?

The structural ambiguity of "changing understandings" has perhaps already been apparent (see Chomsky, 1957; Lyons, 1968; on ergativity as "a grammatical device for encoding agentless action", see Widdowson, 2000, p. 12; on the blurring of transitivity categories, see Bishop, 2001). Let us briefly consider alternative readings, and just a few among the numerous questions to which they could give rise:

1. "Understandings change" (ergative sense): Do they, in principle? Do they, regularly and readily? When and how do they change, under what circumstances or conditions? Are they currently changing? Have they, or will they? Why, and with what effects?

2. "Understandings are changed" (transitive sense): Are they, in principle? Are they currently, readily, recently, or prospectively? When and how, under what circumstances or conditions? Why are they changed? Who, or what, changes them? If human change agents are involved, do these agents change their own understandings, those of others, or both, and with what intentions and effects?

The first, "ergative" or agentless sense of the expression can be linked to "changing understandings" as a phenomenon (something that is happening). The second, transitive sense lends itself readily to accounts in terms of human agendas (something that someone is seeking to do). Either sense can be related to a process, where the eventual product might be "changed understandings", but these processes are of different kinds, especially when there is a strong probability that agendas to change understandings are externally driven and that someone aims to change someone else's understandings. On the other hand, when there is a question of people changing their own understandings / people's own understandings changing, the senses may indeed become more blurred, perhaps even with some benefit.

One other passing observation is that "the same" question may subtly change in meaning across the two senses. For example, the question "Why?" in "Understandings change" has to do with what may prompt or facilitate a phenomenon. In "Understandings are changed", the question "Why?" probably has to do with what motivates the agendas of people seeking to bring about changes in others' understandings, and perhaps in others' behaviour as well.

Relating these observations to our theme, it can be seen that Allwright (2003) offers grounds for caution and even strong scepticism regarding "change agent" accounts of applied linguistics, whether in research or management practices. Such a sceptical view perhaps presupposes a certain level of professional awareness and commitment within a community. After all, if professional understandings were to become insufferably complacent or fossilised, with potentially deleterious effects upon others, then the human and ethical case for dismissing external calls for change could be seriously weakened. But of course, this last observation applies to professional understandings among applied linguists, or educational managers, just as much as to those among foreign language teachers.

All told, my argument runs, it would seem wiser for all concerned to try to develop a climate in which individuals and groups in partnership seek to enhance their/our own understandings of teaching and learning principles and practices, so that their/our understandings may change or renew themselves, rather than pursuing set agendas for change that probably assume levels of insight that they/we do not have. Some possible implications for change management will be taken up in the concluding discussion. Before that, let us turn more directly to *e*-FLT and consider what a new journal of this kind may aspire to achieve.

3 Implications for e-FLT?

Central to the climate of partnership that I have tried to evoke is the well-established notion of investigation as something that applied linguists and language teachers can jointly undertake. In reaffirming the value of such investigation, I incur certain risks. One is that power relations cease to command our attention, and that conventional academic dominance is covertly reasserted. Another is that understanding learner or teacher practices in classrooms could be seen as quietist (unlike "action research" that is committed towards effecting change), or could be dismissed as merely pragmatic and lacking in theoretical significance. Invoking such dangers does not guarantee their avoidance, but it should at least alert us to them. Others should be added to the list: one example would be continuing gender imbalance as an aspect of conventional dominance. None of these dangers appear to follow necessarily, however, from a commitment to asking questions and finding things out in classroom contexts. Let us now explore both overt components of *e*-FLT*,* the Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, and consider investigative possibilities.

3.1 "e-": The electronic dimension

Because of its associations with novelty, the meaning of "e-" itself keeps changing rapidly over time, with potentially profound implications for reading and writing, and for teaching and learning. I think of myself at this time (of writing) as preparing a conventional academic "paper" that is only coincidentally relayed through the electronic medium. In one sense, this judgement is correct. Many possibilities are not being explored here, notably those afforded by hyperlinks (unless the editors introduce some at a later stage). Yet even the word-processing of text, to which many writers around the world are now accustomed, has already radically changed the writing experience, making it so much easier to redraft and refine text, to move it around, and to make it look more professional. This is an area where electronic writing has become so well established that many of us no longer notice its distinctive quality.

Part of my preparation for this article took me to the digital library of the National University of Singapore. Here, some of the more recently developed potential of the electronic medium becomes apparent. For example, while reading Wedell (2003) on TESOL change, I saw interesting references to Goodson (2001) and Tudor (2003). In the digital world, these additional references were hyperlinked, so that the relevant articles were just one click away. In the case of Goodson (2001), this click took me to a journal that I would not normally have browsed through, and to an article that I found useful (taken up in my closing discussion). The possibility of establishing instant cross-references throughout an extended database of articles is one that a journal such as *e*-FLT might usefully seek to exploit, at the very least across its own contributions as these begin to accumulate.

For experienced scholars, the electronic medium may make it easier to pursue interests and to make connections across bodies of work. In the case of students, on the other hand, many teachers will have faced the problem of advising people who do not yet know very much about which sources they might find it useful to consult in the first place, and whose choices of references from search engines easily assume a haphazard quality. Here again, for the case of academic writing, hyperlinks to references within a particular set of journals may afford a more useful place to begin, from an initially well-chosen journal and perhaps a particular article, than a keyword typed into a search engine. Clearly many possibilities will arise for investigation of readers' search practices and for writers' uses of what they find in their reading.

Another distantly related (and at times rather depressing) dimension for investigation concerns ownership of electronic writing, the potential it offers for text copying, and the challenges this can pose to teachers seeking to bring about learning rather than to elicit sophisticated written products of doubtful provenance. The sort of investigation I have in mind here still concerns changing understandings (ergatively or transitively) rather than carrying out policing activities. The latter has its own importance for professional and ethical reasons, including fairness to other students

whose writing is their own, and will need to be understood as an aspect of professional practice. Much has been written on the notion of plagiarism and on cultural implications of text ownership and copyright (Allison, 2002, gives several references), but clearly the e-world will continue to provide scope for work on this set of phenomena, and on associated activities ranging from the escalation of plagiarism detection software – and of its avoidance – to more supportive pedagogic efforts to engage students responsibly in developing their own writing.

So far, so good: yet perhaps I have begun this section in the wrong place. If one were to start out from the e-world of learners and teachers rather than the concerns of academic writers, possibilities should soon become brighter and richer. As we noted for word-processed writing, the e-medium offers scope for renewal of traditional activities – correspondence with penpals is an obvious example – together with qualitative changes in these activities, such as the vastly enhanced opportunity for rapid replies. School-age learners can share the experience of professionals in sending messages towards the end of a school or working day to correspondents on the other side of the world, and finding replies the following morning. Considering many learners' sophistication regarding webpages, links, visuals, and so forth, the potential that the e-world offers learners for authentic imaginings becomes something that teachers with greater experience in this medium could do much more than I can to describe and evaluate, not least I hope in contributions to *e*-FLT.

I have tried in this outline to evoke something of the enormous potential of the e-medium in the teaching and learning of foreign languages and indeed of all subjects (rich resource, multiple contacts with others, scope for technological and multimodal ingenuity), without being blind to some of the dangers (e.g. uncontrolled and unevaluated source materials, and avoidance rather than pursuit of learning). One certainty is that, in such a medium, understandings of teachers and learners will rapidly continue to change, and will at times be changed, in the course of new experiences. Distances also change, in one sense becoming smaller (messages across the world in seconds), but in another becoming greater (not all teachers and learners have access to these opportunities). How far e-learning and e-communication help users do old things better, or how far they enable us to do new things altogether, may ultimately remain a matter of belief, but the issue also lends itself to allied forms of empirical investigation, such as efforts to establish whether or not new genres are taking shape (e.g. Gains, 1999; Gong, 2004), or to evaluate how far e-learning either replaces or complements more traditional forms of instruction for learners evaluating online courses (e.g. Gapar, 1998). Another large area of investigation, as well as controversy, concerns the contributions and possible pedagogic insights of (nowadays electronic) corpus studies (e.g. Ghadessy et al., 2001; Seidlhofer, 2003). But let me bring these remarks to a close, as I am confident that all these and even more interesting investigative possibilities will in time feature in this journal.

3.2 *"FLT": the teaching of (second and) foreign languages*

For *e*-FLT, it seems likely and appropriate that connections between the electronic medium and foreign language teaching will afford one focus of discussion, as will the relationship between physical and virtual aspects of contemporary "classrooms" (a word that dates from physical sites, and that may become virtually metaphorical). Having said that, the scope of this journal goes far beyond an interface between "e" and "FLT", as it ultimately encompasses all theoretical and practical concerns in foreign language pedagogy. Given the vastness of that field, any review has to be highly selective, which also means incomplete, and has to reflect some point(s) of view. My own emphases will be upon connections between teaching and learning, and upon the teaching and learning of second and foreign languages, stressing the plural form, in relation to discourses of globalisation and the presumed place of English as a global language.

From the specifications for *e*-FLT, it is clear that the editors see the relevance of studies of second and foreign language learning, as well as teaching, for their chosen field. Although I was at first inclined to treat this choice as obvious as well as sensible, a recent look at editorial policy in

another journal, *Language Teaching Research (LTR)*, leads me to reconsider its obviousness, and to comment on its value.

Ellis (2004) looks back at papers published in the first few issues of *LTR*, notes that several involved research into learning rather than teaching, and excludes any more such papers from the journal's current scope, on the chilly but apparently logical grounds that the focus of *LTR* is research into teaching, not into learning as such. That is, of course, an editor's privilege, and in that case it will provide clear directions for some time to come. Yet my own (hardly revolutionary) definition of teaching would centre upon provision of suitable conditions for learning – typically, structured conditions, and presumably always conditions that are thought to be advantageous for learning in limited time. Research into classroom learning, in my judgement, should always be quite readily relatable to an understanding of classroom conditions for learning, even in the absence of what Ellis calls "explicit reference to some aspect of teaching" (2004, p. 2), such as uses or evaluations of instructional events or teaching materials. Let me add to this reaction a feeling that lines between events, materials and activities that are situated "in class" or "out of class" are also becoming more and more fuzzy or even arbitrary, especially in contexts of electronic communication. In this light, I remain very happy to see that *e*-FLT encourages investigation and theorisation of learning, as well as teaching.

As for the focus on second and foreign languages, it is interesting that the title is *e*-FLT, not *e*-SLT or *e*-SFLT, or indeed *e*-TLSOL (teaching of languages to speakers of other languages, by analogy with "TESOL" for "… English to …"). Because of the dominance of English language teaching, and the increasing likelihood that English will occupy some sort of functional, official or professional role for many people in many societies, there is some danger that ESL or ESOL may swallow up or at least marginalise EFL in applied linguistics and language education in the (widening) English-speaking professional and academic worlds. Making FLT the "norm" in the present instance, without of course excluding SLT, seems like a healthy corrective to the dominance in the professional literature of the sort of work that I myself do: primarily in English language teaching, and at advanced educational levels. A small potential danger (that "FLT" in some contexts might confusingly stand for "First Language Teaching") is well worth the price; nobody with any interest in this journal will be deceived as to its focus and purpose.

Let me then welcome the plurality of foreign languages, language families and cultures that *e*-FLT, in its site at the Centre for Language Studies, National University of Singapore, looks set to investigate, and to seek to understand. Besides renewing and recontextualising familiar questions about foreign language learning and teaching, I hope that some future contributions will bring more prominence to relatively neglected areas of FLT that are either language-specific or specific to certain language families (examples might be the teaching and learning of tone languages, or of writing systems with non-Roman alphabetic scripts). Perhaps, contrastingly, the journal will also help to educate members of the university and wider academic communities about some of the commonalities across the teaching of different foreign languages, and about the possible place of applied linguistic investigations in understanding classroom language teaching practices. Similarities across different sites should not be taken for granted, and should not be ignored when they are found.

4 Implications for change management?

To the extent that some applied linguists see their role increasingly as working with language teachers to bring about (in a transitive sense) or to create conditions that may encourage (in an ergative sense) "changing understandings of classroom practices", rather than directly to target and to assess changes and assumed improvements in classroom practices, this could offer teachers a more supportive and less interventionist form of partnership. The underlying theory is one of applied ethnography: working with participants in a situation to construct and understand their realities, a process that is in practice likely to prove inseparable from some form of change, and from participants' own assessments of that change.

How might this relate to more institutional concerns over time, resources and money spent, over learning that may be effected, and over some form of change management? According to Goodson (2001), notions of change agency in education were predominantly internal in the 1960s and 1970s, and later in some places (e.g. Canada), but became predominantly external in the 1980s and 1990s. This appears to have reflected other management trends at the time, including some impatience with absence of clearly demonstrated gains, and a belief in strongly directive leadership. The downside to such externally driven approaches, as I read Goodson's comments, was essentially one of increased alienation among teachers. (Goodson does not use the word "alienation", perhaps wishing to avoid associations with Marxist thinking). This has, in turn, brought about other reactions, among theorists as well as practitioners, including a new sense of the place of personal interests and motivations within (not merely alongside) professional life. Present theories of educational change, in Goodson's account, offer warnings against dated conceptions that try to subsume the personal within the institutional, and call for increasing attention to personal missions and purposes, working towards an ideal in which internal, external, institutional and personal motivations become integrated in an educational community. For broadly comparable views of contemporary approaches to educational change, see Tudor (2003), and Wedell (2003). How far a more inclusive approach towards understanding, investigation and change may effectively take academic and educational communities beyond the kinds of mandated agenda that concern Allwright (2003), as opposed to merely providing such agendas with a new hegemonic guise, must remain to be assessed, across a wide range of educational contexts, but the possibilities are there, and much might be made of them.

The outline I have tried to give of possible partnership between language teachers and applied linguists – and extending also to language learners as the most crucial participants – is surely compatible with such an ideal, integrated approach towards foreign language teaching classroom practices, and towards investigative activities that pursue or encourage enhanced understandings of these practices. Another dimension of integration is that of what is "inside" and "outside" the language classroom, a concern that is far from new, but that is being renewed through the range of opportunities and activities associated with electronic communication. In ending this discursive article on a broadly optimistic note, though, let me fade away with more subdued tones. To recognise these possibilities is not to guarantee their achievement, nor is it to overlook the continuing inequalities of status, time and opportunity that can limit or even utterly subvert the best of intentions.

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