

# UNDERSTANDING APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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## Abstract

*Applied linguistics has played a significant role in different fields in language studies, such as researching and teaching languages, assessing languages, language policy planning, etc. Therefore, it is essential to understand applied linguistics and its research outcomes relating to language studies. This paper primarily tackles fundamental issues relating to applied linguistics in order to provide readers with basic knowledge of this branch of linguistics.*

**Keywords:** Applied linguistics; Language.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘applied linguistics’ while familiar to many people, especially those who work with languages, e.g. language teachers, would many be able to say what applied linguistics is actually about? When we talk about applied linguistics, we usually refer to the job of teaching language, e.g. TESOL, TEFL, TESL, which is only a subsection of a very broad range of disciplines embedded in the term of applied linguistics.

Misconceptions or under-or overestimations about applied linguistics may lead to misunderstandings in the job of teaching and learning languages, in carrying out research, and in figuring out what to do in the tasks relating to linguistics.

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This paper attempts to provide a brief overview of a branch of linguistics called applied linguistics and its major disciplines, hoping to contribute a better understanding of applied linguistics to those who have been or are doing the work of teaching languages.

## **2. WHAT IS APPLIED LINGUISTICS?**

The term ‘applied linguistics’ originated in the 1950s in the UK when the British Council aimed to promote the practical teaching and learning of English in Commonwealth countries and developing countries. As it is widely recognized, applied linguistics is a branch of linguistics that is implemented to ‘solve real-world language-based problems’ (Kaplan & Grabe, 1992:3).

Apart from the common known branches in teaching languages, applied linguistics covers a wide range of disciplines, e.g. bilingualism, conversation analysis, contrastive analysis, language assessment, second language acquisition, language planning, etc. Applied linguists have been working to provide answers for such questions as, 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? (Cited from the official website of applied linguistics).

According to Strevens (1992: 14), the central feature of applied linguistics is task-based related, problem-oriented, project-centered, and demand-led. Some fundamental propositions of applied linguistics have been widely accepted as follows. First, it is based in intellectual inquiry and disciplined-related; second, although linguistics is essential, it is not the only discipline that contributes to applied linguistics; third, its typical concern is to improve existing language-related operations and language-related problems (Strevens, *Ibid.*).

### **3. MAJOR DOMAINS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS**

#### **3.1. Applied linguistics and language teaching and learning**

Since the birth of the term of applied linguistics, language teaching and learning have been the focus of applied linguists. Language teaching and learning have been a focus of humans in the present world when globalization is a must for all countries. In fact, issues of language teaching and learning, especially of foreign or second languages, have become a familiar and sentential in education institutions world wide.

Applied linguistics has been concerned with language usage; therefore, it has been commonly identified with language teaching. Languages teachers are concerned with the foundation of teaching techniques such as theories of language acquisition, or with which tactics to implement in their teaching to help their students achieve a better acquisition of the target language. Specific researches involves questions such as what types of error students make most in writing, or what role mother tongue has in language teaching.

There has been world wide recognition of the effects of applied linguistics on language teaching. Applied linguistics is said to provide the intellectual bases for advances in language teaching. However, it is a misunderstanding to claim that applied linguistics is the only source of advancement in language teaching. It is possible that a language teacher could do his/her job well without knowing nothing or little about applied linguistics, though s/he would be a better language teacher if s/he had knowledge about applied linguistics.

One of the tasks of applied linguistics, according to Davies (2007: 67) is that it offers the solution not to such questions as how to improve the learning, but what it is not being improved, in other words what it is that is supposed to be being learned. Therefore, applied linguistics has usually dealt with problems such as how to plan for the optimum starting age for language teaching in a school or education system, how to assess language learning success most validly, and how to know whether or not this is

being achieved, applied linguistics has developed a series of methodological approaches to the collection of relevant language data (Davies, 2007: 82).

Applied linguists concerning language teaching and learning often work with three major areas: second language acquisition which is to find the stages of second- or foreign language acquisition, language testing which is to figure out what are indicators of successful language learning, syllabus design which is an attempt to provide teachers what they need to know.

For the area of second language acquisition, applied linguists began with its traditional problem of learners' errors to the abstract problem of learners' interlanguage, a term coined by Selinker in 1972. Regarding testing, applied linguists are concerned with "what the learner needs to know for a particular purpose and what amount of that knowledge counts as success" (Davies, 2007: 85). On the subject of curriculum design, research in applied linguistics provides teachers with knowledge about the appropriateness of stages in language teaching regarding grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, etc.

### **3.2. Applied linguistics and linguistics**

Apart from language teaching and learning, issues in linguistics have been a fertile ground for applied linguistics to exploit. Linguistics has had 'pervasive influence' on 'the core discipline upon which applied linguistics draws' (Grabe, 1992:50).

The first subfield of linguistics that has largely contributed to the field of applied linguistics is phonetics and phonology. For example, when we wish to undertake an oral-discourse analysis of language, the best method is to use the traditional linguistic transcription of speech. Moreover, the traditional articulatory framework is still powerful for solving speech problems and rehabilitation.

Regarding morphology, Grabe (Ibid.) states that applied-linguistics research on lexicology or terminology is still employing descriptive approaches that have been in use for some time.

The most popular subfield of linguistics that has connected to applied linguistics is probably syntax. Although approaches to syntax have been diverging, e.g. Chomsky's Government-Binding theory, descriptive approaches, or functional-systematic approach by Halliday, most of these approaches have proved to be influential on applied linguistics. For example, descriptive syntax texts have been used in the field of second language acquisition, computational stylistics, etc; or Hallidean linguistics, i.e. functional-systematic approach, has proved to be very strong and convincing in the field of discourse analysis.

Semantics and pragmatics have been important to applied linguistics research. The most widely implemented field of lexical semantics is used as a resource for research on how words could be related, or on how words could differ in many ways. Pragmatics is one of the subfields of linguistics that greatly impacts applied linguistics. Take for instance, different interpretations of an utterance, which is discussed in pragmatics, could be applied in exploring the uses of language in discourse contexts and the study of the intentions of speakers underlying the literal message (c.f. Grabe, 1992: 53).

Two more subfields of linguistics that have been important to applied linguistics are discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Researches in language teaching and learning concerning about communicative competence have been a focus for the past few decades. Also, research about conversational analysis and conversational style have developed strongly, playing important roles in second language acquisition research in classroom settings, thus making the contribution of sociolinguistics significant in linguistic and applied linguistic research. Other subfields of discourse analysis, such as oral or written discourse analysis, textual cohesion system, text coherence, contrastive rhetoric, or professional contexts, have proved their significant and direct impact on applied linguistics.

#### **4. THE PROBLEMS APPLIED LINGUISTICS FACES**

As stated in the introduction of this paper that somehow the term applied linguistics is tied with the job of language teaching only, thus leaving its other important fields ignored. As a result, research about applied linguistics have been confined themselves to the disciplines in language teaching and learning, leaving a wide open gap in other areas, such as discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, etc.

Regarding the relationship between linguistics and applied linguistics, it is ‘difficult to imagine an applied linguist undertaking appropriate research without such a knowledge based in formal linguistics’ (Grabe & Kaplan 1992: 285), such as phonology, morphology, semantics and pragmatics, or syntax. However, there is a common sense that research about applied linguistics have been carried out by many people who are not equipped with proper knowledge of linguistics though there have been no corpus studies about the percentage about this.

Concerning the objects of study, much research and publication about applied linguistics have centralized in the English language. It is understandable that in many institutions, English is not only the language of instruction but also a language for students to study as a foreign or second language. It is this that poses constraints to the research in applied linguistics when researchers wish to have references from different sources of different languages.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Applied linguistics has played a crucial role in not only language teaching and learning, but also in language policy and planning. Therefore, a proper understanding of what applied linguistics is and requires would obviously benefit all those concerned. Applied linguists have committed themselves to general obligations and duties of providing theoretical and empirical investigations of real world problems in languages.

It should be taken into account that it is the job of applied linguistics to investigate, to analyze, and to offer recommendations for improvements and then report on the language problems in our real world. The problems do not only confine

themselves to the area of foreign language teaching and learning, but also in the domain of language usage of both foreign and native languages.

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## TÌM HIỂU NGÔN NGỮ HỌC ỨNG DỤNG

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### Tóm tắt

*Ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng đã và đang đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong nhiều lĩnh vực, như nghiên cứu và giảng dạy ngôn ngữ, đánh giá ngôn ngữ, chính sách ngôn ngữ, v.v. Do đó, việc hiểu rõ ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng và các nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng có liên quan với những tiểu ngành nào trong ngôn ngữ là một điều cần thiết. Bài viết này trình bày các vấn đề cơ bản và các lĩnh vực liên quan đến NNH ứng dụng với mục đích cung cấp cho người đọc những kiến thức tổng quát phổ biến của chuyên ngành này.*

**Từ khóa:** Ngôn ngữ; Ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng.

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