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# 1

## Six Promising Directions in Applied Linguistics

*Dick Allwright*

### **Introduction**

What follows started out as a somewhat hastily composed handout for a Masters course I was teaching in Hong Kong. I was seeking to help the students gain a sense of the history of Applied Linguistics (seen narrowly as the study of language teaching and learning), but it is now obvious that all I was able to do was tell my own personal story, of the development of my own thinking over more than forty years of serious involvement with language teaching and learning.

I have revised that original handout to strengthen it generally, and in particular to strengthen its relationship to the general applied linguistics and educational research literature. But it remains a highly personal account (one that helps me get a sense of coherence for my own career in applied linguistics), rather than one claiming to summarize the entire field with authority. I hope it will nevertheless serve as a productive starting point for the other contributions to this volume, whether or not they share my sense of what is *promising*.

### **1. From prescription to description to understanding**

#### **Prescription**

In the 1950s and through to the late 1960s the job of applied linguists was seen as one of doing the sort of research that would enable applied linguists to tell language teachers what to do for the best for their learners. From this came the famous experiments (Scherer and Wertheimer, 1964; Smith, 1970, for example) comparing an exciting new way of teaching a language (audio-lingualism) to an old, and beginning to be discredited, way of teaching (grammar-translation).

## **Description**

The failure of such methodological comparisons experiments in the mid- and late 1960s to get definitive results (and thus serve the above prescriptive aim) prompted a switch to a descriptive approach to pedagogical research, because part of the problem of the comparisons research had been a failure to adequately describe the teaching that actually happened during the experiments (Allwright, 1972, 1988; Clark, 1969; Otto, 1969).

At the same time as the methodological comparisons experiments were being conducted, however, a descriptive approach was already being advocated in teacher training (Allwright, 1972; Jarvis, 1968; Moskowitz, 1971). Initially this too was often allied to a prescriptive aim – to describe what a teacher was doing so that the teacher could be advised to do things somewhat differently.

Gradually, however, as confidence in prescription further weakened, the focus of description in teacher training shifted to emphasize the value already noted by Moskowitz in the 1960s of description as a feedback system for teachers to look at their own teaching and decide for themselves if they wanted to change it in any way (Fanselow, 1977; Moskowitz, 1968).

## **Understanding**

But research through the 1970s kept on revealing, for me at least, more and more layers of complexity (Allwright, 1975; Smith and Geoffrey, 1968), especially when I saw that general education researchers (for example, Mehan, 1974) were arguing persuasively that lessons were best seen as a co-production of all participants, so that you could no longer expect a teacher to be able to simply change what happened in the classroom, unilaterally, at will (Allwright, 1980).

At the same time, this revelation of increasing complexity began slowly to suggest to classroom researchers like myself that the description of what could be seen through direct observation was clearly not going to be adequate to the task of understanding (Allwright, 1987, 1988).

And in teacher training people gradually began to realize that initial training was in some ways less important than in-service work, and that experienced teachers could be helped more by equipping them to better understand their situation than by simply trying ‘to teach old dogs new tricks’ (for an excellent example of this development see Breen et al., 1989).

In my own work I began, in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, slowly to equate this with the idea that the proper concern of both

research and teacher development work was to focus on *understanding* rather than *problem-solving*, and on understanding as something potentially of value in its own right, not simply as a road to technical ‘improvements in teaching efficiency’ (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: Epilogue).

## 2. From simplicity to complexity

Another way of looking at the shift from prescription to description and then to understanding is to think of it more generally as a move from a simplistic way of looking at the world of applied linguistics (for example, thinking, universalistically and causally, that there *ought* to be just one best method for language teaching, for all languages, for all learners, for all teachers, and for all time), towards a recognition of the essential and irreducible complexity of the phenomenon of classroom language learning and teaching.

## 3. From commonality to idiosyncrasy

Part of this recognition of complexity meant that it was no longer worth looking for general solutions to general problems, because all ‘problems’ are reducible, ultimately, and in practice, to ‘local’ ones, and so require ‘local’ solutions, solutions that respect the uniqueness of all human situations, and of all humans (Allwright, 2003). For example, Perpignan (2001), working with seven learners on the development of their academic writing, did find some commonalities, but found their idiosyncrasies to be much more important.

It is quite clear that there are plenty of people still looking for essential commonalities, as if this were the best (perhaps the only) way for them to make a useful contribution to the field, but the more I look, the more I find idiosyncrasy to be the more important phenomenon, not commonality.

## 4. From precision to scattergun

If you accept the notion of the essential idiosyncrasy of humanity, then logically there are two possible responses that can be made. Either you can try to match, on a one-to-one basis, the individual differences of the people around you, which in language teaching could mean trying to tailor your teaching to each learner separately (‘individualisation’ in the north American tradition, see Altman and James, 1980), or you can

acknowledge that this is asking far too much and decide instead to adopt a 'scattergun' approach, whereby you offer a multitude of learning opportunities for learners, and expect them to select according to their own particular needs ('autonomy' in the European tradition, see Holec, 1988). *A less militaristic metaphor would be to contrast the individual planting of seeds in specially dug holes to the traditional technique of sowing seeds by 'broadcasting', throwing them all around you, in the expectation that some will fall on 'stony ground' but that at least some others will fall on fertile ground, by chance alone.*

*Curiously, this 'broadcasting' approach found an early champion in Krashen (1982), who in the late 1970s and early 1980s began advocating that the provision of 'comprehensible input' was best guaranteed by avoiding a linguistic syllabus altogether, and substituting for it teacher talk that merely tried to communicate effectively on any topic of interest to the learners. See also Prabhu's 'Communicational' Language Teaching project (1987).*

*Another development of interest with regard to the issue of precision is 'task-based language teaching' (see Ellis, 2000; Long, 1985; Nunan, 1989). Sometimes it appears that task designers are trying to get more and more precise in their design, to guarantee that particular things will be learned from carrying out particular tasks, and sometimes it appears that the best task design will not seek to determine what shall be learned, but only to guarantee the provision of a wide-range of learning opportunities, among which all the participants will be able to find something of use.*

Behind all such thinking is the idea that the best teaching will be the teaching that gets nearest to a one-to-one relationship between what gets taught and what gets learned. My preferred alternative is to suggest that the 'best' teaching (if the notion has any value at all) will be that which generates the most, and the most productive, learning opportunities.

## **5. From teaching and learning as 'work' to teaching and learning as 'life'**

If we do make the shift outlined above towards the provision of learning opportunities then we may appear still to be buying into the notion that 'efficiency' is the ultimate aim. An alternative take on this is to say that the productivity of learning opportunities may depend less on the quality of the work that goes into them than to the quality of the classroom life in which they arise. But this still accepts that the ultimate aim is short-term productivity – teaching efficiency.

A further, more radical, alternative is to suggest that the quality of classroom life is itself the most important matter, both for the long-term

mental health of humanity (and the mental health of the language teacher!), and for the sake of encouraging people to be lifelong learners, rather than people resentful of having to spend years of their lives as 'captive' learners, and therefore put off further learning for life. I find this shift has very intriguing parallels in management studies (see Blackler and Kennedy, 2001).

## 6. From academics to practitioners as the knowledge-makers in the field

Work on teacher education (for teachers in general as well as for language teachers in particular) has been moving for some time in the direction of looking to the *practitioners* as the people who will conduct the most productive research in the field. This started with the renewed interest in the paradigm of Action Research, whereby teachers were invited to identify practical classroom problems, and then try out possible solutions (the 'action' part), and to continue to make changes until they solved the original problem (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). For this purpose it was considered unnecessary for them to follow standard academic research practice and thus try to run a 'control' group alongside the class they were experimenting with. But in other respects they were encouraged to follow standard academic practices of data collection and analysis, in order to reach professionally valid conclusions about what worked for them and what did not (see Nunan, 1989: 12–14).

I think it is now becoming increasingly clear (within the social sciences more generally, and within management studies also) that a more radical approach to finding a professionally viable research approach is needed, as the emphasis is increasingly placed on the supreme importance of *understanding*, as being logically prior to, and potentially a substitute for, *problem-solving*. My own proposal for a professionally viable alternative research paradigm is '*Exploratory Practice*'. But accepting Exploratory Practice would also mean re-thinking the idea of teachers as knowledge-makers (Allwright, 2003). First, Exploratory Practice would see practitioners as people trying to reach locally helpful *understandings*, not *new knowledge*. And, secondly, Exploratory Practice would specifically include learners as seekers after understanding. Exploratory Practice is thus conceived as a way of getting teaching and learning done, not as a way of getting research done. But it is a way of getting teaching and learning done so that the teachers and the learners simultaneously develop *their own understanding of what they are doing* as learners and teachers. And they

can perhaps best do this, as suggested in the previous section, by focusing on trying to understand the factors that affect the quality of *life* in the language classroom, rather by focusing directly on trying to achieve a high quality of *work*.

## So what?

Using the term ‘promising directions’ in my title suggested optimism, a sense that we know where we have been, that we know where we are going and that we are reasonably confident of making progress towards well-chosen goals. But the concept of ‘progress’ is a very elusive one in our field (Allwright, 2000). Each of us needs a sense (or at least the illusion) of personal intellectual progress, but at the same time we also perhaps need a strong sense that the past was not exclusively populated with fools, and that our own efforts at understanding will no doubt one day look at least as foolish as anything that has preceded us looks foolish to us now.

So, in response to ‘So what?’ we can hope only that our current, apparently ‘promising’, ideas are going to prove worth pursuing at least for a while longer. More than that would be too much to ask.

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