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Issues in applied linguistics

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Foreword

My partner and I have regular lessons in traditional Irish fiddle playing from an expert teacher. She has a PhD in musicology, and specialises in traditional fiddle styles. Each week she teaches us a new tune or set of tunes. We learn them by ear, with no reference at all to ‘theory’, no writing down or reading from notes, and they are committed to memory. Occasionally, the teacher steps back from playing and talks about the music, its distinctiveness and character; sometimes she talks about the instrument and what it can do. She encourages us to listen a lot to the great exponents of the tradition. All this teaching is never done in a threatening or obfuscating way. In between lessons we practise our stock of tunes for about two hours daily. Sometimes we take them very slowly, to improve accuracy and intonation, sometimes we blast them out in a carefree way, which helps with overall rhythm, feel and the general pleasure of ‘performing’.

The parallels with language teaching and learning strike me regularly and profoundly. In learning the fiddle I am learning a new language, one that has deep historical roots and which expresses the emotions of a people to whom I am only related through my grandparents and through an abiding love of their land and culture. This new language has substance (musical in this case), form (the various structural patterns of jigs, reels, etc.) and meaning (it is dance music, it communicates with and ‘lifts’ dancers; it generates emotions; it is Irish, not Spanish or Rumanian). Many people – not only Irish people – use it, and play together for enjoyment in pubs, clubs, schools and homes. It is difficult and complex to learn. There seem to be so many things to remember at once. Progress is slow, but very rewarding, and depends on my ability to practise a lot, and my motivation to persevere. Sometimes I wonder if I might have learnt better and faster if I had taken it up at the age of six or seven, so I could dazzle audiences as many young children do in present-day Ireland. Other times I am glad I can bring the wisdom of experience, feeling and understanding to this encounter with a different culture. And so on.

But what has all this to do with applied linguistics? A good deal, I would argue. Applied linguistics is about the relationship between knowledge, theory and practice in the field of language, and my fiddle teacher seems to me to be the epitome of an ‘applied language practitioner’, though not in verbal language. She knows all there is to know about music in general and the violin in particular. But her task is not to impart that knowledge and theory to me. What she does is to mediate it and use it to inform a very practical task: teaching this typical, stumbling but basically willing learner to play and enjoy the fiddle. Her knowledge and her practice are interdependent, but are not the same thing. She uses her knowledge to solve practical problems, like why I make a squeaky sound at times (perhaps the angle of the bow), why I lack fluency (perhaps my shoulder and wrist are too tense), and how much new input I can take and process at any one time, as well as whether I am covering a wide, useful repertoire to enable me to play with people I’ve never met before but who share my new language.

In this spirit have I put this book together, as an exploration of what it is applied linguists in the field of language teaching do, why they do it, and purely personally, how I think they should be doing it. I am aware of the near-impossibility of writing a book that covers applied linguistics adequately in its multifarious branches as we tread gingerly into a new Christian millennium, and this book does not claim to be a definitive survey, or even an introduction. It is an expedition into various ways of looking at language and how they influence language teaching. It comes from my own 35 years of involvement in language teaching and teacher education, both as a teacher of English and Spanish, and as a learner of French, Spanish, Welsh, Latin, Catalan, Swedish and Malay, and a lifelong learner of English as a mother tongue, with widely varying degrees of success, and through a wide range of methods and approaches. It also comes from my more recent identity as an academic, when I ‘quit the road’ and put down roots in British university life.

In recent years I have immersed myself in the academic study of language and language teaching and learning, and have been overawed by the volume of academic work published in relation to our profession. No one can read it all. In this book I therefore refer to what I have read (recall, this is no survey) and what I have found useful, illuminating, sometimes downright irritating, but mostly thought-provoking, and provoking thought, above all, is what applied linguists should be doing for their consumer audiences. This book therefore claims to do no more than this:

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to raise questions that have nagged at me over the years and questions which regularly preoccupy the profession in general, and to look at how the academic- and practice-based study of language can help to provide answers to practical problems, or at least point us in promising directions. Much of the ground will be familiar to my peers and betters, though I do invest a personal degree of commitment to the historical dimension of our profession, which is not always so much to the forefront. I hope that younger, and newer, entrants to the community of applied linguists (graduate students, practising teachers given the opportunity to step back from the chalkface and engage in study or research, anyone curious to know what role the study of language plays or can play in language teaching) will find something in it of merit. There are, to be sure, gaps, and all I can do is hope that the works of other scholars will fill those. If serious shortcomings remain in this book after the endless work put into it by reviewers and editors during its development, the blame for these should all be laid fairly and squarely at my door.

Cambridge, June 2000

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This book has taken a long time to write. Although the background research for it was done mainly in the highly conducive reading rooms of the Cambridge University Library, no book is ever really the product of the solitary scholar. Many colleagues, friends, conference presenters, academic collaborators and professional contacts have influenced me and what I have written here. They are too many to mention. However, as with all my academic work, no one has influenced and helped me more in recent years than Ronald Carter, friend and colleague. Ron is the epitome of the unselfish intellectual, always ready to give and share ideas, to be critical without being carping, to see connections and to push me to think differently. To Ron goes a big thank you for inspiration, support, companionship and collegiality. Other scholars who have had an immeasurable influence on my overall thinking include John Sinclair, Henry Widdowson, James Lantolf, Doug Biber, Amorey Gethin, Mike Hoey, Malcolm Coulthard and the never fading memory of David Brazil. To all these I owe a massive debt. There are also many other colleagues, friends and professional contacts who have contributed directly or indirectly to what is in this book, and who have influenced and inspired me in different ways, amongst whom I would like to extend special thanks to the following: Jens Allwood, Susan Conrad, Guy Cook, Justine Coupland, Zoltan Dörnyei, Carmen Gregori Signes, Martin Hewings, Almut Koester, Koen Van Landeghem, David Nunan, Felicity O'Dell, Anne O'Keeffe, Luke Prodromou, Randi Reppen, Mario Rinvulcri, Helen Sandiford, Diane Schmitt, Norbert Schmitt, Yasuhiro Shirai, Diana Slade, John Swales, Hongyin Tao, Mary Vaughn and Linda Waugh. At CUP, both Alison Sharpe and Mickey Bonin have had input into this book, but Mickey gets special thanks for bearing the irksome burden of guiding me through successive reviewers' reports, scolding me for slowness and encouraging me because he believed in the book, adding his own academic comments and editorial expertise, so that he got his manuscript at long last. And thanks to Cathy Rosario, whose expertise and efficiency in the final editing process removed

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This book is dedicated to the fond memory of my late brother-in-law, Warwick Partridge, an ‘applied’ man, if ever there was one.