

How to Deal with Applications in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching (FLLT)

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Abstract As a technical term, applications are understood as results of pure research useful in optimizing the phenomenon under investigation. The sources and strategies of deriving useful, that is, applicable, knowledge in the field of FLLT are a serious challenge at present in view of the fact that English is a global language taught professionally in our educational system on a mass scale. Professional activity on a mass scale must have solid, that is, scientific bases. So far, although the problem of applications in the field of FLLT has a fairly long history, satisfactory solutions have yet to be developed. The manner in which the problem has been posed or contextualized, conceptualized and addressed, has evolved in the past decades. Characteristically, both the nature of the relationship between the providers and the recipients of applications as well as their status have changed. In the chapter, I highlight the main stages in this development and argue that at present a qualitatively different approach to applications in FLLT is needed.

Keywords Applied linguistics • Applications in foreign language learning and teaching • Empirical discipline

1 Introduction

First, I briefly outline how views on the nature of applications in the field of FLLT have evolved. They were initially conceptualized in the context of strong ties between practical language teaching and descriptive linguistics, treated as its source discipline. Next, these bonds were redefined as a less direct relationship, mediated by an interface called *applied linguistics* where linguistic ideas were modified “somehow” to inform practical language teaching. This mediating level was introduced not only for the sake of foreign language teaching, but also for other language-related fields. More recently, as a result of their dynamic growth and

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specialization, these fields, including FLLT and second language acquisition research (SLAR) have become disciplines in their own right. As a result, applied linguistics is regarded as an alliance of various language sciences rather than an interface between linguistic theory and practical activities. Second language acquisition research, for example, without breaking its ties with applied linguistics, follows its own research agenda and, rather than seek applications for second language teaching in linguistics, it develops its own contributions to language teaching, called *language pedagogy*.

Applications as a technical term can be understood as the discipline's ability to generate, rather than derive, knowledge which is useful in influencing, controlling, regulating, reinstating, cultivating, meliorating or otherwise rationalizing the phenomenon it investigates. Therefore, the question arises: Can the problem of applications in the field of FLLT be moved to a more systematic level? It is argued in this chapter that applications may be elaborated as a result of this discipline's incorporation of a number of constraints in its own science format. These constraints bring to bear on representing "language" as the discipline's subject matter, defining the goals of scientific research which distinguish between basic and applied research. This discipline's feasibility of generating its own applications (being applicable) is inseparable from constituting itself as an empirical discipline, that is, a discipline which has material basis to communicate with the real world rather than a discipline which investigates the abstract construct of language as a self-contained system. An empirical discipline targets language use by human beings. As a result, to have systematic applications, the field of FLLT must elaborate them within its own confines, with reference to its own empirical phenomenon under investigation in the real world rather than import them from an even closely related field of investigation.

2 The Nature of the Problem

In any discipline, producing applicable information is a noble goal: Nobody takes pride in generating useless knowledge. The trademark of real knowledge is the ability to do something with it. In the field of FLLT, however, this issue still remains a complex, ill-defined problem with various, sometimes conflicting ideas dominating literature on the subject. Following Hayes (1978), a complex problem is characterized by such a vast problem space that neither a systematic nor an unsystematic method for solution search is useful. While well-defined problems offer solutions which are the same for all problem-solvers, ill-defined problems involve specifying the problem itself. The solver is actively involved in defining its nature and structure or filling the missing elements in his or her categorization of the problem space. Since people make selective use of various sources and types of knowledge which they see relevant, there is a clear possibility of reaching different solutions to the same question, depending on the individual contribution of problem

solvers to its definition. Evolving conceptions of applications in the field of FLLT illustrate this point very well:

1. First, applications in foreign language teaching were understood as the top-down flow of information from the science of linguistics to practical language teaching, especially the use of linguistic concepts, terms, ideas and theories in order to format the uncultivated area of practice with linguistic infrastructure.
2. Next, following some negative feedback from the practical activity of foreign language teaching, the top-down flow of information had to give way to a more cautious attitude to the influences from linguistics. As a result, there was a growing awareness of the qualitative difference between the linguist's angle on language and the learner's one, which spurred a growing recognition of its own identity on the part of the representatives of foreign language teaching.
3. The need was also voiced for a less direct relationship between linguistics and foreign language teaching so that applications could be elaborated at a level between linguistics and other more practically, or should we say, empirically, oriented language fields, including foreign language teaching; this mediating level was called applied linguistics.
4. More recently, as a result of strong demands for research on language in the real world, applied linguistics has gradually become an alliance of language-related fields rather than a mediating platform for developing linguistic applications; members of the alliance continually grow as academic disciplines in their own right.

Yet the problem of applications in FLLT persists as a major challenge at present in view of the fact that English is a global language, professionally taught in our educational system on a mass scale. Professional knowledge for language teaching on a mass scale must have solid bases in scientific understanding of the phenomenon in question.

3 Linguistics as an Authority in Language Teaching

It is generally recognized that the field of foreign language learning and teaching in the middle of the 20th century was revolutionized by the influence of more mature disciplines such as linguistics (and psychology). At the time, the idea of modernizing foreign language teaching was understood as the import of scientific foundations from linguistics (and psychology) in order to construct effective methods of language teaching some of which became the success of the Army Specialized Training Program developed in the United States (Moulton, 1962).

A significant aspect of this impact is the participation of linguists, for example Fries (1945) and Lado (1957, 1964), in designing materials and formulating teaching principles for foreign languages in the United States. Their active role had a lasting effect on the relationship of foreign language teaching and linguistics for

years to come. In contrast to the earlier period, influenced by traditional grammar, there was a growing awareness of the complexity of language teaching and of the need to support it with more solid bases. Therefore, it was assumed for quite some time that linguistic and psychological theories had the power to optimize foreign language teaching by virtue of being scientific (Rivers, 1964, 1982); they were automatically treated as the theories of foreign language teaching. It seemed so natural and obvious that specialists did not even attempt to justify this idea, so that this attitude to linguistics was called a “complete dependence position” by Krohn (1970).

The influences of linguistics (and psychology) in this “early colonization” stage run fairly deep, stimulating the field’s internal specialization; linguistics as a source of applications impacts not only global but also specific issues in the field of foreign language teaching, such as methods of teaching, teacher training and testing, criteria of difficulty and syllabus design, the role of the native language, the priorities in the development of the four language skills, the nature of the teaching materials and classroom techniques, the form and role of grammar, the function of language rules, error correction policy and lesson planning (Dakowska, 1987). These influences are more profound than just applications: They format, that is, give structure and content to the whole area of foreign language teaching. However, as some of us recall, Newmark and Reibel (1968, p. 149) questioned this logic, pointing to the main problem in this bond between linguistics and language teaching:

The logical flaw arises when the linguist attempts to draw simple and direct conclusions about the manner of acquisition of language from his knowledge of the abstract structure of language and claims that the success or failure of language teaching programs depends to a large extent on the degree to which the language course writer or language teacher orders his pedagogical material to reflect a theoretically sound description of the native and target languages.

3.1 Cracks in the Relationship

The predominantly uncritical attitude of the field of foreign language teaching to linguistics was put to the test when Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) and cognitive psychology emerged as new schools of thought in the source disciplines and started their career by criticizing their predecessors. In this context, language teaching specialists felt that their theoretical carpet had been pulled out from under their feet, and, willy-nilly, they had to choose between the older schools and the more recent, equally, or even more “scientific” ones. The fact that there were options in the linguistic offer meant that they had to formulate some criteria for choosing one school of thought over the other. Moreover, the whole situation evoked a wave of disappointment with, and skepticism towards, the source disciplines, first and foremost linguistics.

Many articles appeared at that time questioning linguistic influences in language teaching (e.g., Bolinger, 1972; Brown, 1970; Carroll, 1971; Cooper, 1970; Gefen, 1966; Hill, 1967; Johnson, 1969; Kandiah, 1970). In this regard, Lamendella (1969) and Oller (1973) argued that, undoubtedly, what TGG offers was scientific and probably linguistically more adequate than the structural linguistic description, but it referred to language as a self-contained system depicting relationships between forms. In the structural descriptive view, language is disconnected from the human being it is living in (see Engels, 1973), that is, the psychological processes which make it possible for us to acquire, store and use language knowledge. Therefore, it is irrelevant to the field of foreign language learning and teaching, in which a psycholinguistic description is needed. A cognitive theory describes people, not languages in the sense of abstract representations of an autonomous system of forms with the human subject factored out. As Mackey (1973, p. 6) puts it: “Linguistics is not language learning”. Oller (1973) emphasized that a theory which aspires to adequacy must take the communicative function of language into account.

However, this critical, criteria-oriented attitude toward linguistic and psychological transfer of conceptions into the field of language teaching, and fine discriminations between various perspectives of language should not overshadow the fact that the impact of linguistics as a source of applications remained very strong: Its influence went right into the core of the field, into the definition of its subject matter, which represented three entities each individually illuminated by the respective source discipline. Linguistics provided conceptions of language, psychology defined learning, and pedagogy defined teaching. Although the view of language was different from the early audiolingual one, the subject matter was still envisaged as a sum of three parts rather than a coherent whole, a system of factors. Language learning and teaching was treated as an art or a practical activity informed by linguistics as a source of applications.

3.2 *Signs of Change*

Difficulties in the relationship between linguistics and the field of teaching had positive consequences for our understanding of the nature and status of linguistic descriptions of language in the field of foreign language learning and teaching. The growing number of linguistic schools which emerged and seemed relevant necessitated a qualitative change in the manner in which the potential and real linguistic influences were viewed. They were no longer perceived as adequate or inadequate, scientific or not, but as different models, that is, representations of language, reflecting a specific perspective of its functioning and specific goals of linguistic research. This was a fundamental leap in the direction of distinguishing language “as such” from its approximate, scientific representations.

Leontiev (1963) explained the nature of modeling a language as constructing an object, real or imaginary, that is isomorphic with the object it represents in certain essential features, for example, in that it captures its governing principles.

Subsequent empirical research demonstrates to what extent the model reflects the real patterning or structure of the phenomenon in question. An absolute model of linguistic description is neither feasible nor necessary because each model is determined by the purpose for which it is constructed. Widdowson (1979) stressed that a model which aspires to being useful must focus on the language user. The following quote comes from his article “The partiality and relevance of linguistic descriptions” (1979, p. 232):

It is a common assumption among language teachers that their subject should somehow be defined by reference to models of linguistic description devised by linguistics. This does not mean that they try to transfer such models directly into the pedagogic domain (although such attempts are not unknown): there is usually a recognition that they have to be modified in one way or another to suit a teaching purpose. But the basic theoretical orientation is retained. The same assumption dominates applied linguistics. The very name is a proclamation of dependence (...). In this paper I want to question this common assumption, axiomatic in its force, that a linguistic model of language must of necessity serve as the underlying frame of reference for language teaching.

Widdowson objects to the notion expressed by Halliday, McIntosh, and Stevens (1964) that the contribution of linguistics to language teaching is to provide good descriptions of the language being taught. He sees no evidence for the assertion that the best description of language is derived from linguistics. It is a kind of propaganda, a declaration of faith. Widdowson (1979, p. 244) concludes:

It is this kind of description, participant rather than observer oriented, deriving from the beliefs and behavior of learners as users and not as analysts of language, that I believe applied linguistics needs to develop as relevant to its concerns (...). Such a description will be necessarily partial, and it will probably not meet the approval of others with different axes to grind. This should not trouble us. We have our own conditions of relevance to meet and our own independent way to make in the world.

Widdowson’s point of view is interesting, but it is progressive and misleading at the same time. It is progressive in stressing that the status of description provided by applied linguistics, which is the theoretical level of language teaching, is one of many possible descriptions so, to be accepted, it must be relevant to our concerns. It must focus on the language user, the participant, and his or her perspective on language. However, Widdowson’s position is misleading in that it supports the *status quo* whereby the field of language teaching is merely practical (e.g., Widdowson, 1979, 1990, 2003). While foreign language teaching as a practical activity is very strongly anchored in the empirical reality, what is misleading in his idea is that without the benefit of a coordinating view of language learning as an empirical phenomenon required by scientific research agenda there is no chance of formulating these criteria of relevance. In his conception, there is certainly no place for constructing a coherent model of the domain in which practitioners operate, or seek explanations of this phenomenon at some level of generality. The real catch in this program, deceptive in its simplicity, is that if we make a point of saying nothing systematic about something, nothing systematic will be said, with all the ensuing consequences.

To sum up the ideas on the role of linguistics as a source of applications, it must be reiterated that this field serves as authority for language teaching, either with or without the mediation of applied linguistics. Linguistics provides a description of language, which must “somehow” be incorporated into teaching. The recognition of the plurality of language models calls for the criteria of their relevance for the purposes of teaching, especially their focus on language users as opposed to formal descriptions produced for the sake of linguistic analysis. All told, however, the field of foreign language teaching is still perceived as a practical matter or art illuminated by linguistics.

As has been pointed out, the initially submissive attitude of language teaching toward the related fields resulted from the scarcity of relevant knowledge about language learning and teaching available to specialists. This information shortage attracted various tenets from the academically more advanced neighbors. However, the whole relationship was challenged when the sophistication of these theories grew beyond the point of supposedly easy, one-way flow of the source findings to the field of foreign language learning and teaching.

4 Applied Linguistics as a Mediator

Interesting ideas were elaborated to convert the direct impact of linguistics into an indirect one. Of our interest here is the notion of applied linguistics mediating between theoretical linguistics and the practical activity of language teaching, responsible for converting linguistic ideas into more specific recommendations for the classroom. It had many followers, but while inserting a connecting level between the two fields, it sanctioned the *status quo* in the area of language teaching (Brown, 1970; Corder, 1971, 1973a, b; Roulet, 1975; Wardhaugh, 1974; Wardhaugh & Brown, 1976; Widdowson, 1979). At that time, foreign language teaching was not regarded as a discipline in its own right, but as a “special” field, partly practical, partly an art, subordinated to applied linguistics. The view of linguistics, or even macro-linguistics, as the provider of theories for foreign language teaching puts the latter into the position of a consumer of these theories, precluding systematic focus on its own concerns (e.g., Cook & Seidlhofer, 1995; Davies & Elder, 2004; Ewert, 2013; Grabe, 2002; McCarthy, 2001; Schmitt, 2002; Widdowson, 1990). This conception is clearly conducive to developing a variety of connecting paths between the two areas, mostly leading from linguistics to the field of teaching rather than a representation of the phenomenon of non-primary language learning and teaching as the field’s subject matter, a unique research territory of an autonomous discipline within language sciences. Grabe (2002) admits that applied linguistics has emerged as a genuine problem-solving enterprise, a discipline that addresses real-world language-based problems rather than theoretical explorations based on the recognition that no one discipline can provide all the tools and resources needed to deal with these real-world problems. He goes on to say (2002, pp. 4–5):

By the close of the 1980s, a common trend was to view applied linguistics as incorporating many subfields (as indicated earlier) and as drawing on many supporting disciplines in addition to linguistics (e.g., psychology, education, anthropology, sociology, political science, policy studies, and public administration, and English studies, including composition, rhetoric, and literary studies). Combined with these two foundations (subfields and supporting disciplines) was the view of applied linguistics as problem-driven and real-world based rather than theory driven and disconnected from the real language use.

Nowadays applied linguistics incorporates such fields as first language literacy research, language processing, neurolinguistics of verbal communication, second language acquisition, second language reading and writing research, forensic linguistics, language testing, corpus linguistics, lexicography and lexicology, translation theory and translation studies, speech pathology, bilingualism, language policy, and so on. These research areas grow, mature and become increasingly specialized and sophisticated. Among them foreign language teaching is no longer seen as an art or a practical endeavor but a fully-fledged academic discipline in its own right.

5 SLA and Language Pedagogy

It may be tempting for the foreign language teaching specialists to replace the former linguistic authority and a source of applications with a new one, the vibrant and dynamically developing field of study called *second language acquisition research*, which separated itself from the concerns of foreign language teaching in the 1980s. Central to this split was a shift of interest from language teaching to language learning, or acquisition, linked with the idea that learner language should be investigated as a linguistic system in its own right, and it should first and foremost be described and explained; this idea initiated the field of SLAR (e.g., Corder, 1981; Davies & Elder, 2004; Gass & Madden, 1985; Ritchie, 1978; Richie & Bhatia, 1996; Seliger & Long, 1983; Selinker, 1972, 1992).

Corder (1981) and Selinker (1972) were instrumental in forging the view of learner language as a system which develops according to its built-in syllabus. Within the past decades, SLAR has developed dynamically both in terms of empirical and theoretical research increasing our understanding of non-primary language learning and providing vast evidence for countless research questions (e.g., DeKeyser, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Doughty & Long, 2003; Ellis, 1985, 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Long, 2007, 2012; Long & Doughty, 2009). It seems clear that the main point of interest of SLA researchers is to describe invariant developmental processes of second language acquisition in order to develop explanatory theories (Crookes, 1992; Gregg, 1993; Gregg, Long, Jordan, & Beretta, 1997; Jordan, 2004; Long, 1990, 2004, 2007). It would be a mistake, therefore, to expect that all the solutions for foreign language teaching would come from SLAR because, despite a considerable overlap, there is an important difference between the two fields. SLAR investigates classroom

processes in addition to language learning in the field. From the point of view of SLA researchers, teaching is a form of intervention into what is called “naturalistic” acquisition; classroom teaching provides only some of the language learning opportunities, but not all of them. In the case of foreign language teaching, the classroom is the only language learning environment and this environment, to echo Newmark and Reibel (1968), must provide all the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful foreign language learning. Therefore, the perspective and understanding of language learning for the purposes of foreign language teaching must be convertible into teaching guidelines as opposed to being an intervention into an ongoing process; that is, it must be sufficiently specific as to enable us to make foreign language learning happen solely in the educational environment. The process has nowhere else to develop.

Moreover, SLAR’s clearly expressed goals, namely, to develop explanatory theories of non-primary language acquisition, do not necessarily include obligations to deliver applications, that is, knowledge useful to the language teacher. As Long (2004, p. 4) comments:

Most SLA theories, and most SLA theorists, are not primarily interested in language teaching, and in some cases not at all interested. So, while SLA theories may be evaluated in absolute terms and comparatively in a variety of ways – parsimony, empirical adequacy, problem-solving ability and so on – it makes no sense to judge them solely, as some have suggested, or in some cases at all, on the basis of how useful they are for the classroom or how meaningful they are for the classroom teachers.

Although Long himself makes claims to contribute not only to second but also to foreign language teaching with his task-based language teaching (Long, 2016), this statement is a fairly accurate portrayal of the situation in SLAR.

6 Emancipation of Foreign Language Teaching

As each of the disciplines produced increasingly advanced ideas and theories, the field of foreign language teaching also grew and matured to judge these source findings more rationally, that is, from the point of view of its own aims and priorities. By way of analogy with human development, the first stage of this stormy relationship can be regarded as the time of compliance on the part of language teaching, marked by identifying itself with the source disciplines. The second, much more demanding stage of defiance, was characterized by the strong rejection of their influence. Finally, the natural third stage of the field’s maturation is its movement away from subordination toward academic autonomy.

An autonomous field defines its subject matter as an empirical phenomenon of foreign language learning, namely, a spatiotemporal system (Wójcicki, 1977). This system is derived from its elementary event or episode (Kotarbińska, 1977), that is, language use, which is central to my present investigation. Such a representation is not a sum of conceptions accepted from other authoritative fields, no matter how

carefully or skillfully integrated. Instead, it is constructed “from scratch”, as a representation of the empirical phenomenon of interest, an occurrence in space and time, in line with the constraints relevant to foreign language didactics. Cognitive subordination, on the other hand, admits conceptions and perspectives of the source disciplines as components, which, even when integrated, cannot provide a uniform representation of an empirical (human social) phenomenon with its vital energy flows, that is, communicative interactions among people, but clusters of factors chosen as relevant by the source disciplines and stitched together.

6.1 *Focus on the Specific Phenomenon in Question*

In contrast to its natural counterpart, namely, second language acquisition, foreign language learning takes place when we recreate the relevant conditions in the educational system and try to make it happen by teaching. In most neutral terms, foreign language teaching can be understood as the construction of the learner’s educational environment and experience, that is, input, interaction and feedback, conducive to language learning. In this broad sense, although the process taps our natural human propensities to some extent, it is always sensitive to various socio-cultural and political factors, not to mention material and intellectual resources, as well as social values and expectations regarding foreign language proficiency (for a recent account, see Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). In other words, it is a cultivated phenomenon *par excellence*. As in the case of any other cultivated phenomenon, people in charge of foreign language education are designers who make choices, that is, follow strategies based on their understanding and resources. Second languages are usually acquired both naturally, via social interaction in the field, and in the classroom environment, while being taught.

Both language acquisition and foreign language learning are treated as equally real and available for investigation in the empirical reality, that is, as empirical phenomena. For analytical purposes, however, we should keep in mind that foreign language learning and teaching are shaped by someone’s implicit or explicit understanding of the whole process, reflected in the construction of learning environment and resources, as well as in teaching behaviors. The extent to which these ideas result from, are congruent with, or interfere with the mechanism and processes of language learning is open to investigation. In an attempt to understand the mechanism and the processes of language learning, its natural instances certainly provide a more solid point of reference and evidence than the cultivated ones because the latter are, of necessity, stained by our partial or approximate understanding.

However, the difference between second and foreign languages is considerable: second language learning takes place in the educational setting where the language is taught, as well as outside, in the broader social environment where it is used for communication; the learner has extensive input and interaction opportunities outside the classroom. The ultimate attainment is attributed to both sources, that is,

language use “in the field” and in the educational setting. A foreign language, on the other hand, is not used for communication by the speech community at large; it is learned principally while being taught, within the confines of the educational system (on the distinction between naturalistic and instructed learners, see Ortega, 2009). This has important consequences for constructing the process: the classroom must provide sufficient conditions in the form of input, interaction and feedback opportunities to evoke foreign language learning. Mitchell and Myles (1998, p. 1) use the collective term “non-primary languages”, within which they distinguish second from foreign languages. I use my terms in the same way:

(...) ‘second languages’ are any languages other than the learner’s ‘native language’ or ‘mother tongue’. They encompass both languages of wider communication encountered within the local region or community (e.g., at the workplace, or in the media), and truly foreign languages, which have no immediate local uses or speakers.

Cook (2010) rightly points out that the notions of “native language”, “second language” and “foreign language” refer to dynamic phenomena and require much finer distinctions than has been the case so far. Nevertheless, the level of specificity he suggests is not absolutely necessary for our purposes at this point. Foreign language teaching is the domain of deliberate human activities aimed at reconstructing the phenomenon of language learning in the educational environment, in other words, instituting it from scratch, in the absence of this language being used by the community at large. This reconstruction takes the form of language experience, materials and resources, based on our conception of the respective phenomenon. Its reconstruction, cultivation and melioration in the educational context, however, can be effective only to the extent to which it is understood as a real occurrence, a phenomenon in time and space.

FLLT, therefore, has quite a different focus of investigation from language pedagogy. “Pedagogy” is used in various accounts of the relationship between SLAR and the practice of second language teaching (Crookes, 1997; Eckman, Highland, Lee, Mileham, & Weber, 1995; Ellis, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2010; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Gass, 1993; Gass & Mackey, 2012; Nassaji, 2012; van Compernelle & Williams, 2013), but from the point of view of FLLT, this label is not precise in that it deemphasizes the unique specificity of language. Technically, the term “pedagogy” classifies the field as a study of upbringing, whereas the primary concern in FLLT is not upbringing in general, but the unique dispersal of language data in language use and learning along the life-span. FLLT stands out among other disciplines, such as pedagogy or didactics of various content subjects as well as other language sciences, because its focus on (non-primary) language learning as a human phenomenon is specific enough to provide guidelines on foreign language teaching. The study of upbringing in general does not and cannot provide such guidelines. For the purpose of converting insights on language learning into expertise of foreign language teaching in the educational system, the most fundamental and elementary concept of language learning is language use. I strongly endorse the view that language learning is language use (Wolff, 2002), most importantly, language use as verbal communication in speech and writing

anchored in our cognitive system along the life-span. This perspective provides a unique dispersal of language data reflecting the incremental time-and-space, attentional and procedural nature of non-primary language learning.

The term “pedagogy” does not even begin to do justice to this unique specificity emphasizing the general area of upbringing instead. It is significant that leading SLA researchers do not target language use as their focus of investigations, but deliberately choose acquisition (for a collection of reprinted articles on the lively acquisition/use controversy in SLA, see Seidlehofer, 2003; Sect. 4). Gass (2003, p. 221) is explicit about this issue: “the emphasis in input and interaction studies is on *language* used and not on the act of communication”.

7 Applications in Their Technical Meaning

The ultimate justification for any discipline is its ability to provide explanations whereas feasibility to generate applications is the ultimate testing ground of an empirical as opposed to formal scientific discipline. As Pitt (1988, p. 7) points out, explanations:

are supposed to tell us how things work, and knowing how things work gives us the power to manipulate our environment to achieve our own ends, (...) science is supposed to be our best means of generating explanations which satisfy the criterion of providing the means to accomplish our goals. All the research in the world counts as nothing if it fails to generate explanations of the domain under investigation (...). Whatever knowledge may be, its hallmark is the ability to do something with it. In the case of scientific knowledge this means offering an explanation for some phenomenon or other. If it can't successfully be used in some such fashion then it doesn't qualify as knowledge.

This conviction is significant for one important reason: the program of a “normal” academic discipline is called upon here (for the sake of posing and solving the problems of foreign language teaching) because it offers the most promising route to understanding non-primary language learning as an empirical phenomenon, that is, as episodes or events involving human operations and interactions in space and time. An understanding of non-primary language learning as an empirical phenomenon can be the source of inferences about the conditions and events promoting non-primary, namely, foreign language learning in the educational (cultured) setting. Essentially, such inferred conditions and interactions are foreign language teaching behaviors. This point of view is completely neutral with regard to knowledge for its own sake in other language disciplines, which may see themselves as formal and/or purely explanatory. What follows from the above is that in contrast to borrowings, transplantations or inspirations, applications are not developed in a top-down manner as by-products in another field. In their technical sense, applications result from the incorporation of a network of relevant constraints on the subject matter within the format of an empirical discipline. These internal,

discipline-specific constraints enable researchers to communicate with the empirical phenomenon, identify significant relationships among the factors and derive applicative inferences, or conclusions, from them. Under no circumstances can applications in “normal” science be regarded as just surplus ideas discharged by related fields, floating around and waiting to be utilized.

Typically, language sciences are divided into *theoretical* and *applied* (Kaplan, 2002). However, I prefer the distinction between *basic* and *applied research* levels within one discipline, keeping in mind that a rigid division cannot be made. “Pure” research provides evidence for a question with a view to theory construction, while “applied” research does all of the above as well as offers findings which can influence, control, regulate, reinstate, cultivate, meliorate or otherwise rationalize the phenomenon in the real world. Applications are legitimately elaborated within the scope of the field’s subject matter (McLaughlin, 1987) and their successful export to another field is an extra benefit. Descriptive linguistics investigating phonology and syntax in the past decades did not provide the field of foreign language learning and teaching with applications, but ideas, conceptions, terms, definitions and taxonomies referring to the linguistic nature of language as a synchronic formal system. Benefits of this relationship should not be underestimated: Linguistics provided external descriptions of the language subsystems which, from the learner’s point of view, must become internalized, that is, acquired functionally. This relationship spurred the field of foreign language learning and teaching toward emancipation, that is, toward identifying its own perspective of language: the phenomenon of language learning in time and space inextricable from the human learner. At the same time, there is no denying that language teachers must be thoroughly educated in linguistics in the broadest and deepest sense of the word (Kaplan, 2002).

All told, the goal of scientific disciplines is to enable us to understand. Therefore, each discipline investigating a given phenomenon must sooner or later provide this understanding in the form of an explanatory theory. Theoretical knowledge is abstract and abstract knowledge is characterized by being relatively independent of concrete situations from which it is derived. Therefore, it can be transferred, that is, applied, to new ones provided they belong to the same category of phenomena. Applications are derived from our understanding of the phenomena under investigation, especially the relationships and interactions among the factors singled out in the subject matter of enquiry. To reiterate, applications are primarily derived from various relationships among the factors of the empirical system rather than developed in a top-down manner across two different disciplines. Understanding a given phenomenon in the empirical reality inevitably produces potentially useful knowledge, that is, knowledge which can be applied in reconstructing and cultivating the phenomenon which has been the source of understanding in the same discipline to begin with.

8 Conclusions

In light of the above, how can applications become feasible? In foreign language learning and teaching, applications in their technical sense are not to be seen as directives based on the abstract notion of language as a formal system, or language learning as the acquisition of grammar, transformed into teaching guidelines by way of adjustments or concretizations, but as logical inferences drawn from our understanding of the functioning of language use, learning and teaching as a phenomenon. It would be realistic to see applications as guidelines for constructing relevant conditions for language learning and removing any hurdles therein. The top-down flow of reasoning by way of concretization is a dubious path for developing applications because: (a) it is, of necessity, limited by the source ideas which are too abstract as representations of the empirical phenomenon at hand (this is why they have to be concretized to begin with), and (b) such “applications” are elaborated unsystematically, by intuitively restoring some, but not all of the relevant elements to reconstruct the empirical phenomenon. However, representing an empirical phenomenon by way of idealization, a bottom-up process, gives us a chance of capturing the relevant factors in a coherent system, factors which are at play in reconstructing and stimulating the phenomenon under investigation.

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