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## **Applied linguistics: at the crossroads of social sciences**

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### **1. Introduction**

If we look at the evolution of modern sciences, especially social sciences, we find that these sciences were part of what was called the mother of all sciences, i.e., Philosophy. Under the scope of philosophy, different sciences such as History, Sociology and Psychology tended to be used simultaneously by the philosopher to explain purely philosophical issues. However, this situation changed as a result of an awareness that these sciences have to be given a complete and independent status as sciences for and by themselves.

In spite of the fact that all social sciences share the same research methods, they remain separate since each of them has its own subject of study which justifies and supports its autonomy.

Because change is a key feature in the development of human knowledge, the pendulum can move from one extreme to the other, and interdisciplinarity which has always existed within social sciences has come to the fore and is taking more importance than any time before.

But the independence of a social science does not mean the absence of any possible interaction and even coexistence with another. Social phenomena are becoming so complex that researchers need to engage other sciences to better understand this complexity. Because such complexity is not acknowledged by the conventional boundaries between social sciences, interdisciplinarity imposes itself on researchers who try to study all that is social.

Applied Linguistics as a social science discipline is also involved in interdisciplinarity. Applied linguists are constantly confronted to it since language and language learning are so complex that they cannot be understood from a linguistic perspective only. Convinced by this reality, applied linguists typically take insights from other social sciences such as Education, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology to mention but a few , and language learning is a human activity that calls for all these aspects of human behavior, be they internal aspects (relating to learners) or external ones (relating to their environment).

### **2. Interdisciplinarity in Applied Linguistics: What Is Behind the Concept**

Defining interdisciplinarity is not an easy task for the slippery nature of this concept implies a great deal of confusion and no agreed definition. This absence of agreement often results

from the ambiguity that characterizes the prefix “inter” which can be interpreted in different ways: as a relation and interaction or as a separation and a distinction.

The present paper adopts the definition offered by Moran (2002:16) who states:

*“I take interdisciplinarity to mean any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines: the level, type, purpose and effect of this interaction remain to be examined ... .interdisciplinarity is always transformative in some way ,producing new forms of knowledge in its engagement with discrete disciplines”*

The idea of interdisciplinarity is an old one which is rooted in Philosophy. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘Interdisciplinarity’ is rather recent. Frank (1988:91, 95 cited in Moran, 2002:14-15) explains:

*“The term ‘interdisciplinarity’ emerged within the context of these anxieties about the decline of general focus of education ,being first used in the social sciences in the mid-1920’s and becoming common currency across the social sciences and humanities in the period immediately after the Second World War”*

If interdisciplinarity implies an interaction between two or more disciplines, the question that may be asked in this context is why the need for this kind of interaction?

### **3. Searching for a Rationale for Interdisciplinarity in Applied Linguistics**

The rationale for interdisciplinarity in Applied Linguistics is based on three assumptions: the nature of Applied Linguistics, the complexity of language- related problems, and the need to study these problems using a holistic approach as a way to overcome the limitations of Disciplinarity.

First of all, Applied Linguistics is deeply interdisciplinary as a discipline. Hudson (2009:4) emphasizes its interdisciplinary nature as follows:

*“ The main distinguishing characteristic of AL is its concern with professional activities whose aim is to solve ‘real-world’ language related problems, which means that research touches on a particularly wide range of issues-psychological, pedagogical, social, political and economic as well as linguistic. As a consequence, AL research tends to be interdisciplinary. AL has to look beyond linguistics for relevant research and theory, so AL research often involves the synthesis of research from a variety of disciplines, including linguistics”.*

It is clear from the above definition that interdisciplinarity is at the core of AL which makes it an interdisciplinary discipline by excellence. Grabe (Cited in Kaplan2002:11) also

emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of AL when stating the commonalities of AL as follows:

*“Applied linguistics is, of necessity, an interdisciplinary field, since few practical language issues can be addressed through the knowledge resources of any single discipline, including linguistics”.*

Secondly, language-related problems are so complex that they cannot be fully understood from the linguistic perspective only. So, any investigation of these problems adopting a single perspective would result in short-sighted and incomplete findings because the other aspects of the problems in question are not taken into account. Grabe (2002) also remarks:

*“The key point, however, is to recognize that it is the language-based problems in the world that drive applied linguistics. These problems also lead applied linguists to use knowledge from other fields, apart from linguistics, and thereby impose the interdisciplinarity that is a defining aspect of the discipline”.*(ibid:10)

Therefore, both the nature of AL and the complexity of language –related issues make the adoption of a holistic approach an urgent need when investigating these issues. This approach is meant to take all aspects of language-based problems into account. As a result, interdisciplinarity can be seen as a remedy for the several limitations of Disciplinarity which is rather limited since it leads to fragmented knowledge that cannot result in a clear and deep understanding of language-related problems.

Disciplinarity tends to favor separatism between the different disciplines and the isolation and lack of communication between the different disciplines impedes the rapid accumulation and development of knowledge. This separatism can lead to a serious myopia that oversimplifies the language-based issues which are far from being simple. However, Interdisciplinarity does not mean a radical rupture with Disciplinarity but both are complementary.

Being aware of the rationale behind interdisciplinarity in AL is important, but what is even more important is how language teachers can integrate interdisciplinarity into their daily teaching enterprise.

#### **4. Adopting Interdisciplinarity as Part of Daily Teaching Practice**

Adopting interdisciplinarity in language teaching may be a challenging task for teachers. Some might be dealing with such an integration already, but in an unconscious way, as part of their daily work in the language classroom. Nevertheless, it may be beneficial to make this adoption a conscious and systematic process.

However, a word of caution is necessary: it may seem inappropriate and even misleading to propose any kind of prescription to teachers which may not take into account the complex and unpredictable nature of the teaching enterprise. Prescription may also restrict any sense of freedom and initiative on the part of teachers. In addition, teachers may greatly differ in the

way they perceive interdisciplinarity, its importance in language teaching and how it can be used to increase teaching effectiveness. But providing teachers with general guidelines may help them better understand interdisciplinarity, be aware of its importance in the language classroom and consequently develop their own methodology to integrate it into their teaching practice.

One important step toward adopting interdisciplinarity as part of language teaching practice, is to understand the fundamental principles of interdisciplinarity. This may help teachers to take informed decisions as part of this adoption. As the Chinese leader, Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) stated, *“Understanding is difficult; once one understands, action is easy”*.

Following this saying, it is clear that any adoption would not be possible without deeply understanding interdisciplinarity, its rationale and implications. The complexity of both language and language learning leads us to consider language teaching as an interdisciplinary activity just as research on language and language learning is. Stern (2009:516-517) comments:

*“...we cannot rely on linguistics only, or only on psychology or sociolinguistics, or for that matter on educational theory. These different fields jointly perform essential and mutually supporting functions in establishing a scholarly basis for language pedagogy.”*

Therefore, teachers need to develop their own methodologies to deal with interdisciplinarity in the language classroom. This methodology is a process by which they go through different stages which may be perceiving the problem in question, determining its nature (it can be psychological, social, communicative, etc), collecting data, making decisions, obtaining results and finally evaluating the whole process.

These stages are subject to change and modification according to teachers' perceptions, preferences, teaching style, and classroom reality in order to make the adoption process as flexible as possible and to avoid any possible resistance on the part of teachers in case of imposed prescription.

To ensure this adoption, the acquisition of a knowledge base and skills is needed. Content-based knowledge is valuable for teachers, it is even a priority. Teacher educators/trainers and training institutions should pay considerable attention to equipping teachers with knowledge about language and language learning, and professional skills as a springboard for starting their career and develop professionalism.

However, content-based knowledge is not enough because language teaching is not a matter of transmitting notions and information about the language system and how it works, but it is a process by which the teacher creates an appropriate atmosphere for learning to take place. In this case, teachers need to go beyond content-based knowledge to take insights from other disciplines such as Psychology, Sociology, Education and Anthropology, as discussed earlier, and this is another challenge for language teachers!

Therefore, it seems necessary to rethink teacher education within an interdisciplinary framework. Teachers may find difficulties dealing with problems related to language learning which cannot be solved by teacher's language knowledge only. Therefore, taking insights from other disciplines to understand these problems and solve them adequately is badly needed.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach as part of the teaching process is certainly not an easy task, and well thought out strategies to deal with them are needed to deal with questions such as: How to strike a balance between the linguistic aspects of language teaching and other aspects of learning? What are the priorities in language teaching? Should teachers give priority to specific content knowledge or to interdisciplinary knowledge? What agenda is required for adopting interdisciplinarity in language teaching? How to prepare language teachers for such an adoption? How can one make interdisciplinarity part of teacher professional development? How can one help teachers to adapt to change?

Although interdisciplinarity can be problematic for language teachers, its advantages can be quite rewarding: better understanding of language and language learning, increased teaching effectiveness, more possibilities for teacher professional development based on interdisciplinary classroom research, and more informed decision making.

## **5. From Interdisciplinarity to Transdisciplinarity: Examining Perspectives**

The nature of Applied Linguistics as a problem-based discipline and the complexity of its subject matter, mainly language and language learning, can give rise to a shift from Interdisciplinarity to Transdisciplinarity. Nowotny (1997, cited in Weiss and Wodak, 2003:18) defines the latter as follows:

*“Transdisciplinarity manifests itself when research across the disciplinary landscape is based on a common axiomatic theory and the interpretation of disciplinary research methods. Cooperation leads to a bundling or clustering of problem-solving approaches rooted in different disciplines and drawing on a pool of theories.”*

Different social disciplines may not only interact inside the scope of Applied Linguistics but can co-exist too. This co-existence may give birth to the emergence of new disciplines such as Psycho-Applied Linguistics as a result of a co-existence between AL and Psychology, and Socio-Applied Linguistics as a result of the co-existence between AL and Sociology.

In spite of the advantages of Interdisciplinarity in Applied Linguistics, such as opening new avenues for research, rapid accumulation of knowledge as a result of cooperation between AL and other disciplines and a better understanding of language-based problems, the complexity of language and language learning may lead applied linguists to be more ambitious seeking a cooperation with other social disciplines rather than being satisfied with the interaction with these disciplines only.

## 6. Conclusion

The history of Applied Linguistics has witnessed many turning points which characterize the development of the discipline. Because of the complexity of both language and language learning, research in Applied Linguistics may transcend Interdisciplinarity to reach Transdisciplinarity. This possible shift can be another turning point in the ever changing nature of Applied Linguistics. But such lack of stability may be considered as strength not as weakness insofar as applied linguists should always be seeking for a better understanding of language-related problems, be ready to take new routes and open up to all kinds of possibilities and ventures.

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