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# Applied Linguistic Theory and Second/ Foreign Language Education

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## Abstract

As a multidisciplinary field of research, applied linguistics has drawn on a variety of linguistic, psychological, and sociological theories to explain the processes by which foreign/second languages are acquired, learned, and studied and the principles that have guided foreign language education in institutional settings. With globalization, the links between language, culture, communication, and identity have become more problematic, and it is less clear what foreign language educators should prepare learners to do with the language in the real world of language use. Researchers agree, however, that it is not enough to teach how to say things grammatically accurately and idiomatically. Language educators need to teach the symbolic value of words and their historical resonances and help

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S/FL learners learn how to respect each other's values without betraying their own.

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**Keywords**

Applied linguistics • Second language learning • Foreign language education • Communicative language teaching • Ecological perspectives

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## Introduction

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the field of applied linguistics, there is no one applied linguistic theory but various approaches to studying language learning and language use in everyday life based on various cognitive and social theories of language development. This entry passes in review the most prevalent approaches in the last 45 years to studying second language acquisition: the psycholinguistic approach of the 1970s and 1980s, the sociolinguistic and sociocultural approach of the 1990s, the ecological and the complexity approach of the first decade of the 2000s, and the bi- and multilingual approach in the 2010s. Each of these approaches corresponds to a different view of language and of second/foreign language (S/FL) teaching or education.

If language was viewed at first as a rule-governed system that had to be taught through audiolingual drills and structural exercises, it came to be seen in the 1980s as a communicative process of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning that led to communicative language teaching. In the 1990s, the success of sociocultural and sociocognitive views of language and language learning brought about collaborative, interaction-based, and task-based pedagogies. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, more decentered views of language such as those espoused by language ecologists or complexity theorists mostly found their usefulness in S/FL education in natural settings. They yet have to be applied to language learning in instructional environments, which have strict requirements of assessment and accountability. However, greater access to the Internet and social networks have made context-based approaches to S/FL education more relevant than ever. Today, S/FL education increasingly has to deal with the growth of English as a Lingua Franca, the neoliberal orientation of language education, and the growing multilingual character of modern societies.

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## Early Developments

The emergence of Applied Linguistics at the end of the 1950s was brought about by the need to develop principled methods to solve practical problems in language teaching after the Second World War, particularly the teaching of English as a second/foreign language. It was keen on moving away from a concern for designing the best language teaching methodology, i.e., how languages should be

*taught* (e.g., Berlitz, audiolingual, direct method) to a concern for understanding how languages are *learned* and how learners use language in authentic settings for solving problems in the real world.

It is worth reflecting on the revolution that the field of Applied Linguistics was thereby ushering into S/FL education. Foreign languages, including English, had been taught before the war according to a grammar-translation approach that valued reading, writing, and the memorization of grammatical rules and lists of vocabulary because it was modeled on the learning of such dead languages as Greek and Latin and were meant mainly to give learners access to written texts in the original. Speaking was not the primary goal in classrooms; to speak the language, one went to the country where the language was spoken. The spread of English after WWII for business and transactional purposes and the need to train teachers of English as a second language around the world required quite a different understanding of what it meant to learn a language as an adult, an immigrant or a professional. Oral proficiency, fluency, idiomaticity, and authenticity became major goals for acquiring what the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) called “usable level of skill” (Liskin-Gasparro 1984, p. 13). This instrumentalization or functionalization of language education slowly got adopted by all the other second/foreign language teachers, particularly after the publication of the Threshold Level (van Ek 1975) that was translated into various European languages and formed the basis for the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach of subsequent decades.

Early second language (L2) acquisition theories were thus mostly of the psycholinguistic kind; they drew heavily on research methods from cognitive and social psychology. For example, they explained L2 acquisition through a contrastive analysis of the L2 and the L1 or drew attention to the psycholinguistic significance of learners’ errors, and how these errors served to build the learner’s *interlanguage* or rule-governed transitional system of linguistic development toward native speaker performance. Early theories explained a learner’s sequences of acquisition, the individual differences between learners, and the role of cognitive/social factors in the success or failure of S/FL learning (see also: “► [Conditions for Second Language \(L2\) Learning](#)” by Oxford, this volume).

These early developments, however, sought to explain second/foreign language *learning*, not language *education*. Already in the late 1970s, the distinction that Krashen made between acquisition and learning (Krashen 1976) drew a wedge between language taught in institutional settings under the monitoring of an instructor who taught rules of grammar and vocabulary (e.g., learning) and language acquired in natural environments as a result of communicating with native speakers in the real world (e.g., acquisition). Krashen insisted that learning did not lead to acquisition, thus putting second/foreign language instructors, who were in charge of language education, in somewhat of a quandary. Their contribution, in Krashen’s Monitor Theory, was reduced to checking the grammatical and lexical correctness of students’ output, but communicative competence itself was to be ensured not by learning the rules, but through the comprehensible input provided by native or near native speakers in noninstructional or in communicatively rich instructional environments.

Thus, the distinction was made in those early years between language acquisition and learning, language study, and language education. The first two can be learned in natural or in instructional environments, whereas the last two can only take place in institutional environments. While *acquisition and learning* evoke the development of communicative abilities, the term *study* implies the development of linguistic and cultural awareness, social, historical, and political consciousness and aesthetic sensibility. The term *education* indexes mostly elementary or secondary schooling and its general educational objectives, but it encompasses also “higher education” at colleges and universities. While L2 acquisition occurred through language use in authentic contexts of communication both within and outside of institutional settings and was the focus of SLA research, SL/FL education was an institutional process of socialization into an educated L2 habitus that included L2 linguistic and cultural literacy, and was the focus of spoken and written literacy research. By contrast, L2 study fell into the domain of the human sciences and focused on translation, stylistics, and literary and cultural studies. All three strands of research were within the remit of Applied Linguistic Theory, but SLA research remained the primary scientific source of knowledge in subsequent decades, owing to English learners’ overwhelming need of oral communication skills for business, work, and entertainment purposes in an economy that was becoming more and more global. SLA research also claimed to offer a scientifically attested way of predicting learners’ success, whereas SL/FL education research only offered a way of assessing learners’ performance. Interestingly, the two major assessment instruments for measuring SL/FL learners’ communicative competence, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines in the USA (Liskin-Gasparro 1984) and the Common European Framework of Reference in Europe (Council of Europe 2000; see also Leung 2014), are based less on SLA research insights than on general educational principles and functional needs analysis. Both assessment scales remain to this day the guiding frameworks for evaluating and measuring language learners’ communicative competence in instructional and noninstructional settings.

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## Major Contributions

### Applied Linguistic Theory and Language Learning

Because it emerged in the second half of the twentieth century when the demand for English was growing around the globe for employment and business purposes, much of the research on language learning has focused on the learning of English as a second/foreign language. Its main research focus has been the acquisition of spoken language, pragmatic skills, conversational strategies, and the learning of the conventional written genres – for example, the academic essay, the research report, the job application, the statement of purpose. Many aspects of ESL pedagogy have been an inspiration for developing the pedagogy of other second languages, for example, Spanish as a second language in Spain, German as a second language in Germany, and foreign language education in general.

The construction of an applied linguistic theory of second language learning has grown out of the empirical research findings of applied linguists studying, for example, the acquisition of French by Anglophone children in immersion programs in Canada, the acquisition of English by immigrant children in American schools, of German by Turkish immigrants to Germany, the speech act realizations in nonnative speakers' speech or interlanguage pragmatics, sociolinguistic phenomena in situations of language hybridity and linguistic crossing in British schools, and the cognitive strategies used by school learners in group activities mediated by language. These empirical studies have given rise to various theories of language learning, for example, psycholinguistic theory (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991), sociolinguistic theory (Rampton 1995; see also “► [Sociolinguistics and Language Education](#)” by Sandra McKay, this volume, sociocognitive theory (Atkinson 2011), pragmatic and conversational analytic theory (Kasper 2001), sociocultural theory (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006), and their concomitant recommendations for pedagogic practice, for example, task-based, activity-based, or participation/collaboration-based pedagogies.

The changes brought about in the last 35 years by the rise of a multinational business class and the explosion of information-processing technologies have transformed English from just another foreign language into *the* world language of trade and industry. The case of English, more than any other foreign language, is emblematic of the close link between language teaching and the clash of national interests and international power struggles taking place at the present time in the technological, economic, and cultural spheres. These changes have created conditions favorable to the emergence of what has been called a communicative approach to language pedagogy or communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT and its variations (task-based language learning, content-based instruction) have imposed themselves on the teaching of all foreign languages around the world. It is slowly causing some backlash on the part of some language educators who question the appropriateness of applying to non-Western contexts a pedagogy that was designed within a Western context (Lin 1999).

Unlike language teaching based on philology, CLT has been based on social scientific applied linguistic research. Applied linguistic theory posits that:

- Language is not primarily a mode of representation of some textual truth, but interpersonal communication; not historical knowledge, but information to be exchanged. The target model is not primarily the truth and accuracy of the written text, but the authenticity and trustworthiness of the native speaker. The purpose of language learning is to communicate with native and other nonnative speakers of the language in a grammatically accurate, pragmatically appropriate, and discursively coherent way (Canale and Swain 1980).
- The emphasis is on spoken language and the focus is on lexical knowledge and lexicalized grammar, on idiomatic phrases, prefabricated chunks, procedural know how, fluency in production, and the skillful management of conversation.
- Language learning emerges from comprehensible input, interaction, participation, and collaboration in authentic contexts of use in which meanings are expressed,

interpreted, and negotiated (see “► [Conditions for Second Language \(L2\) Learning](#)” by Rebecca Oxford, this volume).

- It is a cognitive process of structuring and restructuring knowledge that can be facilitated by a task-based pedagogy (see “► [Task-Based Teaching and Learning: Pedagogical Implications](#)” by Martin East, this volume)
- The learning and communication strategies of good language learners can and should be taught explicitly.
- Pair and group work in a student-centered classroom aimed at collaboratively solving real-world tasks greatly facilitate language learning.

With regard to second language acquisition, applied linguistic theory has been keen on describing the necessary conditions for the successful acquisition of a language at various stages of development and at predicting success or failure based on those conditions. It has thus enjoyed scientific recognition and scholarly validity. Applied linguistics has enormously enriched the learning of second/foreign languages through its careful empirical investigation of the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social processes at work in an individual’s acquisition of a foreign symbolic system and through its painstaking observations of the way actual speakers and writers, listeners, and readers use language for communicative purposes. It has spawned pedagogic methodologies that endure to this day.

The globalization of information, communication, and the media and the mobility of people, goods, and capital have changed the nature of the real-world problems studied by applied linguists, among which SL/FL education. The growing multiplicity of languages in use in international encounters has turned the attention of applied linguists away from mainly psycholinguistic aspects to sociolinguistic (Block 2003) and sociocognitive aspects of SL/FL learning (Atkinson 2011), issues of bilingualism (Ortega 2013), English as a Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer 2011), and multilingual practices in global environments (Pennycook 2010; Cenoz and Gorter 2011; Canagarajah 2013; May 2014). But in so doing they have turned to theories that are less able to predict success in SLA, in part because it has become more and more difficult to define “success” now that the native speaker target has been put into question (Rampton 1995). With English as a Lingua Franca native like proficiency is no longer absolutely necessary for communication purposes nor does it guarantee social acceptability and economic success. The question has become: what is the relation of applied linguistic theory and SL/FL education or teaching?

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## Work in Progress

### Applied Linguistic Theory and SL/FL Education

CLT has had a considerable impact on SL/FL education, especially English, in countries around the world through institutional, national, and international guidelines. In the USA, this impact has been informed less by applied linguistic theory, but by a proficiency-oriented methodology that is used in US government language schools

(American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages 1986) or by an ESL methodology that has been extended to the teaching of other languages. This methodology has generally assumed a rather harmonious and symmetrical relationship between native and nonnative speakers and a willingness to cooperate in the negotiation of meanings. It has not taken into consideration what language education also has to deal with, namely: cultural and moral conflicts, historical incompatibilities, identity politics, and the struggle for symbolic recognition. To explain these social and cultural aspects of language education, researchers have had to draw on social and cultural theories like those of Bhaskar and Habermas (Corson 1997), Marx and Foucault (e.g., Canagarajah 1999), Bourdieu (e.g., Lin 1999); see also: “► [Identity, Language Learning and Critical Pedagogies in Digital Times](#)” by Bonny Norton, and Butler (Ibrahim 1999), and on the educational theories of Bakhtin and Vygotsky (e.g., Lantolf 2000), thus creating a strand of socioculturally aware applied linguistics (Pennycook 2001). It has also drawn on Halliday’s functional systemic linguistics and its applications to language education (Byrnes and Maxim 2003). Indeed, critical applied linguistic theory has had a substantial impact on second language literacy education in secondary schools in Australia and is slowly beginning to have an impact on foreign language education at the postsecondary level in the USA (Kern 2000).

The impact of applied linguistic theory has been felt in secondary and collegiate FL education at the beginning levels of instruction. At colleges and universities, much of language education has been indirectly inspired by methodologies and pedagogic practices derived from SLA research, not from research in L2 literacy nor from literary and cultural scholarship. This in turn has exacerbated the split between language studies and literary/cultural studies in foreign languages and literature departments (Byrnes and Maxim 2003). But at the more advanced levels, the potential benefits of a socioculturally aware applied linguistics are becoming more apparent both for the undergraduates who are increasingly interested in issues of language rather than literature and for the graduate student instructors in search of educational, rather than merely communicative, goals for their teaching (see also: “► [Second Language Literacy Research and Curriculum Transformation in US Postsecondary Foreign Language Education](#)” by Per Urlaub, this volume).

This is where applied linguistic theory can be of use by offering theoretically validated tools of inquiry. These can enable learners to:

- Critically approach texts and understand their textuality and the intertextualities they afford (e.g., Widdowson 2004; Bazerman and Prior 2004)
- Understand the link between culture, ideology and identity, language, and power (e.g., Norton and Toohey 2004; Pennycook 2001; Schieffelin et al. 1998)
- Understand the link between grammatical choice and authorial style (e.g., Ivanic 1998)
- Make connections between various symbolic systems (across languages, across modalities) and their meaning potential (e.g., Kress 2003)
- Appreciate the importance of genre in all its forms, including the literary
- Become critically aware of the relation between socialization and acquisition in SL/FL education (Kramsch 2002).

## Problems and Difficulties

### Research Issues

In the wake of geopolitical changes without precedent – the explosion of information technologies, a global market causing global migrations and increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural societies – researchers in applied linguistics are confronted with a series of issues that they did not have to confront in the early days of the discipline. The first is: What is the link between language and culture? And what is culture: a way of life, an ideology, a discourse, a national history? To what extent does the learning of a language entail an acculturation into in a specific way of life and specific ideological values? Even though an international language like English is not seen to belong to any particular culture, it is still linked historically to British or American dominance, or at least to economic globalization and its neoliberal ideology. The question of culture in language education is particularly urgent for teachers of English (Pennycook 2001), but also for FL educators (Kramersch 1993). The difficulty in researching the issue of language and culture in a positively inclined field like applied linguistics is that there is no culture-neutral place from where to examine it and that it intersects with moral, religious, and political interests. This makes objective research with universally recognized research findings a difficult enterprise.

A second research issue is: What is the link between language and social/cultural identity? What is the ultimate goal of language learning and language education: Socialization? Understanding of self? General education.? Job opportunities? In the case of immigrants learning the language of the host country, it can no longer be assumed that all learners want to blend into the host society and relinquish their ethnic, social, and cultural identity (see also: “► [Identity, Language Learning and Critical Pedagogies in Digital Times](#)” by Bonny Norton. In the case of FL education, issues of identity have not been as salient as in SL learning, because learners have been assumed to be well established in their national and social identity, but recently questions of learner identity have been posed at the institutional level. What are educational institutions preparing language learners to be: regional community members? national citizens? global citizens? Even in countries that have national education systems, there is a great deal of debate about what kinds of citizens nation-states want to educate through their educational institutions. For example, while the Chinese and the French national educational systems see it as their primary mission to form future citizens who can play a political role on the national and international scene (Kramersch and Yin [in press](#)), the more economically oriented American educational system strives to form future consumers who can play a productive role on the local and global market (Donato, pers.comm.).

Other difficult issues in applied linguistics include: How should foreign language education be framed within plurilingual/pluricultural environments, for example, the



European Union? How should language learning technologies be theorized, beyond their attractive use to teach languages in authentic contexts? (see also: “► [Computer-Assisted Language Assessment](#)” by Paula Winke). Notions like authenticity, historicity, and communication become problematic in electronic environments where the axes of time and space have been redefined. Finally, how should the outcomes of SL/FL learning and education be defined, measured, and evaluated fairly and in a valid and reliable manner? Applied linguistic theory nowadays is less focused on predicting outcomes of successful L2 acquisition than on describing the psycho- and sociolinguistic processes of L2 development in all their unpredictable complexity. To find answers to all these questions, applied linguists are increasingly turning to poststructuralist and ecological theories of language, culture, and learning (Kramsch 2002; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). See also: “► [Ecological Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition and Socialization](#)” by Claire Kramsch and Sune Vork Steffensen.

## **The Limits of Applied Linguistics in SL/FL Education**

The field of applied linguistics has traditionally had more to do with language learning than with language education, in part because it has been based on psycholinguistic research that has studied universals of second language acquisition rather than culture-specific modes of learning. As a respected branch of the social sciences, it has developed an authority in the field of language education because of its scientifically attested findings. But what is pedagogically valid for the teaching of English in Japan might not be appropriate for the teaching of Chinese or Arabic in the USA, for example.

Furthermore, language education includes more than just the acquisition of communicative competence. Education in FL literacy, as well as in the appreciation of social, literary, and cultural traditions, requires educators to draw on other fields than applied linguistics in its original sense. Applied linguistic theory must be supplemented by educational theory, aesthetic theory, literary theory, and even political theory to deal with all facets of FL education. The difficulty for the researcher is that FL education straddles the social and the human sciences that have quite different research paradigms and methods of inquiry.

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## **Future Directions**

Today, globalization is presenting a challenge of unprecedented scope for SL/FL educators. What should they prepare youngsters for in a world that is increasingly diverse, changing, plurilingual, and pluricultural, and where language is increasingly misused, even abused by politicians, pundits, and marketing strategists alike? The notion of “textual competence” was well suited to the *national* need for law

and order in the public sphere. “Communicative competence” was appropriate for the *international* demand for smoother economic transactions and exchanges of information. But neither seems to be sufficient in a *global* world where symbolic, historical, cultural, and ideological values are taking on ever greater importance. What can applied linguistic theory offer SL/FL education in global times?

Applied Linguistics can serve as the theoretical basis for a socially and culturally aware language education. Today, miscommunication might occur not because two interlocutors make imperfect use of the English language, but because one considers himself to be superior to the other while the other sees him as his equal (i.e., they do not share the same symbolic reality); one comes from a country that used to be a colony of the other or was at war with the other (i.e., they have different views of history); one might say something that evokes bad stereotypes in the mind of the other, for example, he might be heard as being condescending when he intended to be friendly, she might sound deceitful when she wanted to be tactful, he might come across as aggressive when he was trying hard to be truthful (i.e., they have different cultural values); and they might mean different things even as they use the same words (i.e., their words conceal different ideologies). It is said that the more a language is used in a variety of contexts by native and nonnative speakers who have nothing in common (no common history, no common point of reference, no common worldview), the more they have to restrict themselves to the immediate task at hand. Such a view is predicated on the assumption of a common purpose for the task, but in a global world interlocutors must be ready to negotiate not only how to complete the task, but how to define the very nature and purpose of the task itself.

Nowadays, rather than communicative strategies, language learners might need much more subtle semiotic tactics that draw on a multiplicity of perceptual clues to make and convey meaning. These tactics are especially necessary in situations where power, status, and speaking rights are unequally distributed and where ideology superimposes itself on referential meanings. Second/foreign language learners need to understand the different historical experiences evoked by the words spoken and the different subjective resonances that the memory of these experiences elicits in the participants in cross-cultural encounters. A socially and culturally aware applied linguistic theory can show nonnative speakers not only how to make themselves understood linguistically, but how to position themselves in the world, i.e., find a place for themselves historically and subjectively on the global market of symbolic exchanges.

The recent attack (January 2015) by two terrorists on the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris raises urgent questions on the limits of free speech in a global world and the distinction between satire, opinion and hate speech. As we teach second/foreign languages for communicative purposes, such events make us acutely aware that it is not enough to teach how to say things grammatically accurately and idiomatically. As educators, we need to teach the symbolic value of words and their historical resonances and help S/FL learners learn how to respect each other’s values without betraying their own (Kramersch 2011).

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition](#)
- ▶ [Conditions for Second Language \(L2\) Learning](#)
- ▶ [Second Language Literacy Research and Curriculum Transformation in US Postsecondary Foreign Language Education](#)
- ▶ [Sociolinguistics and Language Education](#)
- ▶ [Task-Based Teaching and Learning: Pedagogical Implications](#)

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## Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- Paula Winke: [Computer-Assisted Language Assessment](#). In Volume: Language, Education and Technology
- Sune Vork Steffensen: [Ecological Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition and Socialization](#). In Volume: Language Socialization
- Bonny Norton: [Identity, Language Learning and Critical Pedagogies in Digital Times](#). In Volume: Language Awareness and Multilingualism

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