Echoing our inaugural editorial – *Making Applied Linguistics Matter* – we take this opportunity to prioritise the methodological practices and their underlying principles associated with the broad field of applied linguistics. In the context of the journal, we adopt a broader view of methodology as the philosophical, pragmatic and theoretic-analytical practices of engaging with data.

In their attempt for making sense of complex phenomena, disciplines such as history, archaeology, philosophy and linguistics are distinguishable from one another – both in terms of their treatment of content and in their methodological orientation to content. In very crude terms, for example, while history privileges a temporal, spatial orientation in drawing attention to interdiscursive continuities and discontinuities in social practices, linguistics focuses on system and structure as key to meaning-making activities. Other disciplines then borrow the methodological lens of a neighbouring field of inquiry, as is the case with disciplines of anthropology, sociology and psychology drawing upon linguistic methodology. Following the tradition of de Saussure and Firth, the view of language as a system, with structural and relational regularities, has been the basis for social anthropological descriptions of kinship systems in syntactic and semantic terms. For Lévi-Strauss (1972), the fundamental structuralist principle emphasises how the relationship between phenomena determines their nature of meaning: ‘like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning: like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems’ (1972: 34).

Many disciplines in the human and social sciences have dedicated journals to debate methodological puzzles. In the field of discourse studies (to include
language, communication and interaction), it is not always easy to disentangle methodology from theoretical/conceptual content. This is mainly because discourse and communication analysis – as much as applied linguistics – is in itself a methodological act. This in turn occasions a shift towards being manifestly reflexive about one’s methodological tropes. This reflexivity has to include a commitment to transparency – a sort of ‘coming out’, metaphorically speaking. The papers in this issue, we feel, in varying degrees, undertake this difficult task.

Mercer outlines the basic components of what he terms sociocultural discourse analysis, emphasising with this label the confluence of the description of language and discourse with explorations into modes of thinking collectively and into collaborative ways of constructing knowledge in interaction. Although this paper situates itself firmly in the context of language learning and teaching, its potential as a mode of inquiry and a methodology extends far beyond those educational sites to, for example, those involving professional, organisational and institutional discourse. It has thus quite general relevance as an applied linguistic methodology. At the same time, it does provide a link to other relevant methodologies, (though it differs from them in its intellectual base and its purposes) for example, those of applied conversational analysis and of activity theory. Less obviously, perhaps, it offers a way in which two interpretations of context can be allied in applied linguistic research: the one, more sociological and ethnographic, in terms of context as situated action; the other, more social psychological, in terms of the context of experience, of learning and of acquisition. Further, the emphasis in the paper on the ways personal and institutional histories constrain these modes of communicative action, together with influences of culture, suggest linkages to critical discourse analysis and to interactional sociolinguistics. The analytical framework provides more than description and interpretation, however. It indicates an evaluative methodology which can be directed at the appraisal of the outcomes of discursive processes in relation to issues of, say, language acquisition, or in relation to individual successes and failures at dialogically mediated tasks. Finally, it displays how one can usefully combine frequently opposed methodologies in applied linguistic research, broadly the quantitative and the qualitative, into an integrated scheme. Here Mercer’s innovative remarks about ways of combining the focused and qualitative eye of the researcher on the particular incident while setting that incident against a backdrop of the quantified statement of overall occurrence of criterial features, are especially illuminating and useful.

Cameron’s paper engages with the methodological focus on identifying the particular incident or feature under scrutiny and setting it against its overall relevance within a body of data. In doing so she highlights two problematic issues in any research methodology: how one selects units of analysis and how
one estimates their overall significance. In the case of her paper, she draws on the concept of metaphor as a site to illustrate her case and offers an alternative unit of analysis to the turns, utterance pairs, clauses and clause complexes we are familiar with from interaction and communication studies. While some researchers (for example Brazil, Halliday, Chafe) have identified intonation units as candidates, they have not, as does Cameron in this paper, applied such criteria in the study of metaphor, nor have they combined quantitative analysis with technological display systems (here using VisDis software). Her point is that the importance of drawing on frequency in relation to particular moments within a discourse allows scholars not only to assess occurrence of features but also to place their significant occurrence within an overall body of data, thus enabling useful comparison of occurrences over time. Cameron sees such analytic activity of mapping as multilayered, helpfully assisted by technologically-mediated display. Methodologically, however, the pattern of decision-making by the researcher remains constant: the identification and definition of the construct (here ‘metaphor’ or, better the ‘metaphor cluster’); the determination of the unit within which the occurrence (and co-occurrence) of the construct occurs (say, the turn or the sentence, or as here, the intonation unit); the display of the quantified (co)occurrences of the construct in relation to these intonation units, involving both the reliable identification of the unit of analysis using inter-rater reliability measures; and the variable effectiveness of different displays of such findings. What makes this paper especially valuable in terms of applied linguistic research is the way that this descriptive methodology is then linked by an innovative marriage of quantifiably arrived at statements of significance with qualitatively determined points of critical pressure in the interaction under analysis. In this way, we are able to configure what features are discursively and ethnographically relevant with a statistically powerful indicator of their relative incidence. In short, one can first look at the occurrence of metaphors in a quantitative way, before embarking on in-depth analysis of the potentially significant ‘critical’ moments where they cluster, using a qualitative lens.

Saferstein raises the issue of how to evaluate particular interactional features within a complex body of data by utilising the technological means readily available to the analyst. In acknowledging the widespread dissatisfaction of discourse analysts with reliance only on transcribed text, his paper offers a compelling argument, together with an accompanying detailed methodology, for using video-based analysis as a means of capturing significant features otherwise unavailable to the researcher. He illustrates this by targeting significant markers of gestural deixis in the context of a science classroom. His paper is much more, however, than a grounded and well-referenced plea for an extension to our analytical and methodological tools using readily available technology. Saferstein’s argument is also that video-centered analysis offers a
means of corroborating (or disconfirming) inferences that we might make about relevant discourse structures on the basis only of textual data. For example, one conclusion of quite general relevance he draws is that gesture and other paralinguistic practices are not necessarily subservient to talk-in-interaction. This is of course an argument well rehearsed in the work of gesture analysts such as Kendon, as Saferstein acknowledges, but one understandably less taken up by researchers dependent on text-based methodologies. Rather than dividing up communication analysis into text analysis and gesture/visual analysis, the challenge is to integrate them in unbiased ways. Further and in the context of this issue, one can readily see how such an additional set of features might profitably be used in collaboration with Mercer’s methodology to enhance the evidence required for the latter’s study of collaborative discursive work. Indeed, Saferstein makes this explicit in his reference to the ways pointing had become integral to his student task group’s computer-oriented learning. The general methodological point being that not only might interaction analysts make other modalities a unit of analysis in their own right, but also that they might begin to enable us to see how Saferstein’s pointing practices could help in understanding turn-taking mechanism in the context of some purposeful (here educational) activity. Once more the topic/resource tension characteristic of ethnomethodology holds true here.

Myles and Mitchell take further the theme of drawing on available technological tools in applied linguistic research, specifically in their case in the utilisation of information technology in the study of second language acquisition (SLA). Researchers in lexicography, forensic linguistics, translation studies and grammatical analysis have increasingly incorporated extensive electronically available corpora of naturally occurring data into their research practices, drawing on a range of available analytical tools to interrogate such data. Indeed, recourse to large data sets has now become axiomatic in the methodology of such research. SLA researchers, as the authors point out, have been less active than other applied linguistic fields in making use of such data sets and such tools. Given the ready availability now of such technological means, it is interesting to gauge the reasons for such reluctance. One argument might be that such access is not unconnected to often intense debates within the SLA literature on the relative status to be accorded to theorisation on limited and constrained data as opposed to that extended to hypotheses supported by large-scale empirical analysis. In part, as the authors point out, this reluctance can also be traced to the absence of large-scale spoken language corpora of relevant acquisitional data (although such corpora of written learner language do exist) and in addition a lack of access to appropriate tools to interrogate the data once collected. Given the clear need for SLA to provide more substantive, robust and differentiated evidence to underpin its theoretical claims, it is obvi-
ously timely that Myles and Mitchell’s paper provides a well-documented and usable methodology for research action, especially targeted at the collection and technologically supported analysis of spoken learner language. In addressing this need, however, there are other continuing issues in applied linguistics to which the paper draws attention. The first, naturally enough in the light of the foregoing, is the relative status accorded to learner written language as opposed to spoken as an index of acquisition. The second addresses the sources for such spoken data and their accessibility, in particular the debate concerning ‘naturally occurring’ data drawn sociolinguistically from a range of contexts, as opposed to ‘forced’ data obtained from particularly designed and constructed elicitation tasks. The third, more easy to accommodate, is the importance for applied linguistics to look beyond narrow sectarian boundaries in adopting and adapting usable and productive methodologies. This is very clearly and convincingly argued for in this paper with the adoption of the well-established CHILDES tools from first language acquisition studies to SLA. Finally and perhaps most importantly for the place of applied linguistics in relation to neighbouring disciplines, is the convincing demonstration in the paper how work on SLA data can contribute significantly to the computer-mediated analysis of language more generally.

We may here point to two identifiable positions that run through applied linguistic research in general: first, the call for mixed methodologies (e.g. the combining of corpus linguistics and text linguistics; textual analysis and visual/gestural modalities, discourse/document analysis and ethnography, or, more generally, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods) and, second, the call for purism. Both camps have brought to bear a persuasive rhetoric and one goal for a journal like *JAL* will be to facilitate a sustained dialogue between these (and other) different methodological and analytical orientations. A related tension concerns the mediation between analysts transforming data and analysts/participants mutually sharing motivational relevancies (Sarangi and Candlin, 2001). Further, as Layder (1993) indicates, critical reflexivity must always take into consideration the historical in its appraisal of situated activity – in particular local settings – and in doing so, also must incorporate the personal identities and social experiences of the participants.

It has not been easy to determine where and how a submission to the journal becomes characteristically *methodological*. How does one draw boundaries around theoretical, methodological and content-oriented papers? From the inaugural issue of *JAL*, one could argue that the papers there by Adolph et al. and by Brouwer and Wagner might easily have fitted into a special issue on methodology in the applied linguistics field. While continuing to emphasise strongly the need for methodological matters to be explicitly articulated in the journal, we now have moved to the view that rather than designating one of the
regular issues as especially methodology-focused, we would welcome, in future issues, greater integration between theory and method in published papers. Any segregation between theory and method is not fruitful, in our view, rather in the same way that we argued in the inaugural issue that an applied linguist as a mediator cannot be most effective by retaining a peripheral participation status. Our vision, then, is to open up more space in regular issues for papers which attempt integration of theory, content and method, while encouraging particular methodological domains to be pursued extensively in the form of a special issue of the journal. A specific future direction will be to offer the space for doctoral scholars and scholars working on funded research projects to engage in methodological debates via Research Notes.

References


