Applied Linguistics and professional practice: Mapping a future agenda

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The relaunch of the Journal of Applied Linguistics (JAL) with the extended and more targeted title Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice (JALPP) marks a critical juncture, while reflecting a continuation, expansion and respecification of the field of Applied Linguistics as originally conceived when JAL was launched six years ago in 2004. In terms of continuity, we firmly endorse our commitment to the slogan ‘Applied Linguistics matters’ as outlined in our inaugural editorial of JAL (Candlin and Sarangi 2004) and the two subsequent editorials in the same journal (Sarangi and Candlin 2004a, 2004b). Central to this commitment is the principle and practice of what we have called inter-relationality, seen in terms of resourcing inter-disciplinary and inter-professional collaboration, integrating methodological diversity, and a commitment to exploring connectivities among the values, procedures and knowledge bases of those with whom we seek to collaborate in achieving purposeful action.

We may say that such inter-relationality matters in applied linguistics for three principal reasons. First, that the sheer complexity of seeking to describe, interpret and explain the institutional and interactional orders of ‘what it is that is going on’ in crucial communicative sites and at critical moments in

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those sites, makes necessary the inter-relational harnessing of a range of perspectives beyond those traditionally associated with linguistic or semiotic analysis. In a sense, the focus on practice as is the case with JALPP takes us beyond language and semiotic matters. Second, and now driven by the exigencies imposed by the social and contextual complexity of those sites, is the need to draw inter-relationally upon the interdisciplinary research resources and expert gaze of cognate disciplines in the humanities and social sciences more widely in this process. Third, this interweaving of inter-disciplinary research trajectories makes indispensable, yet at times for applied linguists like ourselves, an uncomfortable acknowledgement of the challenges posed by that interpersonal and mediated inter-relationality, requiring an accommodation among diverse ‘motivational relevancies’ (Sarangi and Candlin 2001) which impel our research, both in terms of ourselves and those with whom we collaborate.

Indeed, this mutuality of research and practice (what we may call praxis) can be said to be the core inter-relationality of applied linguistics. Not that this inter-relationality comes without a cost. It imposes its own price, challenging us as applied linguists to display the social, personal and institutional relevance of what it is that we do in this collaborative endeavour, in terms of the interests of our research partners – whether drawn from cognate disciplines or from professional domains – and, most especially, of those communities with whom we seek consultative and action-oriented engagement. In the end, after all, it is they who decide what matters and what is applicable (Roberts and Sarangi 1999, 2003; Sarangi 2005).

The first reading associated with the new title for the journal and signalled by the conjunction ‘and’ is suggestive of a new adventure. Moving away from a primary focus of research into language teaching/learning and second language acquisition, the Education profession will still remain a key site for the journal but now one among many, as we promote an active engagement in sites from a variety of other professional domains such as Law, Healthcare, Counselling, Journalism and Media, Business and Management, and alliances with cognate disciplines such as Interpreting/Translating, where applied linguists have major contributions to make.

This broadening of the study of language and communication to a range of professional contexts is not in itself novel; it has a long history, rich with descriptive accounts, but ones not always accompanied by an applied mentality (see Sarangi and Candlin 2003a, 2003b; see Sarangi and Candlin 2011 for an overview). This resonates firmly with Sarangi’s (2005) call for an ‘Applied Linguistics of Professions’ along the lines of cognate social scientific approaches to professions, for example the Sociology of Professions, the Anthropology of Professions, the History of Professions, the Psychology of Professions, the Psychology of Professions inter...
alia, with the aim of ‘expanding the boundaries of applied linguistic themes and sites as a way of recognizing the emerging interest in language-focused activities in professions’ (Sarangi 2005: 380).

As for a second reading, the journal under its new title will reflexively foreground Applied Linguistics as a profession with its own research and intervention practices coming under reflexive scrutiny. The debate concerning what Applied Linguistics is and what applied linguists do may well continue and we do not wish to provide any maps, trajectories or closures in this brief editorial. What we want to achieve under the new title is not only a broadening of sites and a furthering of inter-professional collaboration in research but the encouragement of a closer engagement with our ethical practices both in terms of our research methodology and our interventionist agenda. One way in which this ethical reflexivity might be achieved is to realign our research towards the exploration of particular cases, accommodating our own applied linguistic practice to what is quite general in those domains and sites where we work and which we adumbrate above: Healthcare, Law, Social Work, Management, being only some relevant examples. Cases serve a number of relevant purposes: to transmit and apply relevant knowledge, to serve as the basis for professional judgement, to offer opportunities for contrastive accounts; but they also embody principles and practices that we might draw inspiration from in applied linguistic research more generally: preserving the sanctity of the individual, guarding against unwarranted generalization, ensuring the evidential warranting of claims, displaying accountability to our communities. In sum, such cases might become a classic mode of both research and representation in applied linguistics, making available, as it were, an archive both of themes and of mappings informing our disciplinary/professional action. The journal would welcome such case-focused submissions.

The second part of the new title, professional practice, needs spelling out further. For us, professional practice is routinely embedded in institutional and organizational rules and procedures. In Schön’s (1987: 227) terms, this amounts to ‘the proceduralisation of the profession’, defined as ‘attempts to reduce professional practice to a set of absolutely clear, precise, implementable procedures, coupled with controls designed to enforce them and eliminate surprise’. All professions carry attributes ranging from formal certification to authority to codes of ethics to a sense of altruism (Greenwood 1962). The tensions inherent in such a profiling of attributes – potential as well as real – can be captured in how professional practice is characterized both as science and as art. With regard to the former, professional practice is rule- and evidence-governed – which amounts to the application of established theories and principles learnt via prolonged years of education and training. With regard to art, one must recognize that professional practice is constitutive of creativity and
dynamism in context- and case-specific ways. Schön's (1983: viii) ‘inquiry into the epistemology of practice’ poses the following questions that are relevant for us:

What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowledge presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers and learned journals?

In language-specific terms, consider, for instance, how a teacher in a classroom might choose to repair a student’s error explicitly; how a prosecution lawyer in a courtroom trial may develop a particular line of questioning aimed at drawing inferences of a specific nature; how a doctor in a clinic may offer reassurance while delivering bad news; how a social worker or counsellor or mediator may actively incorporate the voice of a third-party, co-present or not, in order to arrive at an informed decision; or how a manager mentoring a colleague moving into more supervisory roles takes account in his/her discourse not only of issues of personality but also of performance criteria in the context of accountability. The contingencies surrounding professional practice defy a logical, patterned, indiscriminate application of what is learnt as part of professional education and training. It goes beyond the dogma of ‘communication skills’ as currently ingrained in many professional curricula, especially in healthcare, which runs the risk of creating an over-proceduralized order through which ‘we drive out wisdom, artistry and the feel for the phenomena’ all of which depend on ‘judgement’ and ‘discretionary freedom’ (Schön 1987).

As already indicated, professional practice goes beyond language and discourse as narrowly conceived. For example, language may not play any part in the following activities: a nurse dressing a wound, a doctor undertaking physical examination, a midwife or sonographer using the probe for taking an ultrasound scan, a priest offering prayer, an archaeologist examining the ruins, or a lab scientist looking into some specimens through the microscope. Goodwin’s (1994) seminal paper titled ‘professional vision’ attests the significance of micro-level, embodied ways of seeing, marking and documenting as constitutive of professional practice that holds professional communities together or apart. This suggests that ethnographic insights become central to our understanding of professional practice and that we pay equal attention to both frontstage and backstage professional activities in our sense-making. Returning to our earlier discussion of professional practice as artistry, we quote Fish (1998: 87):

Professional artistry is about practical know-how, skilful performance or knowing-as-doing and is not easy to express in verbal form – not simply because it is tacit knowledge which practitioners have failed to make explicit even for themselves, but because it is by its very nature non-verbal.
The allusion to the difficulty/impossibility of verbalizing tacit knowledge echoes Polanyi’s (1958: 49) observation:

[T]he aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them. For example, the decisive factor by which the swimmer keeps himself afloat in the manner by which he regulates his respiration; he keeps his buoyancy at an increased level by refraining from emptying his lungs when breathing out and by inflating them more than usual when breathing in: yet this is not generally known to swimmers.

But what cannot be explicitly verbalized is open to reflection. According to Schön (1983: viii):

Competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit. Nevertheless, starting with protocols of actual performance, it is possible to construct and test models of knowing. Indeed, practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice.

In acknowledging the challenges that face applied linguists who are engaged in the study of professional practice which in itself might be tacit in nature, we believe our increasingly sophisticated and cumulative methodological and analytic know-how affords us the opportunity to offer useful insights and interventions.

We thus need a definition of what constitutes practice, inclusive of the nuances, and one which crosses the science and art divide. Against this backdrop, it is worth drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977: 97) formulation:

Practice always implies a cognitive operation, a practical operation of construction which sets to work, by reference to practical functions, systems of classification (taxonomies) which organise perception and structure practice. Produced by the practice of successive generations, in conditions of existence of a determinate type, these schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, which are acquired through practice and applied in their practical state without acceding to explicit representation, function as practical operations through which the objective structures of which they are a product tend to reproduce themselves in practices.

Central to Bourdieu’s formulation is that practice is socially and discursively constructed, that it is always culturally relative (both in terms of ethno-linguistic cultures and, in particular for our applied linguistic purposes, institutional ones), and that whatever the manifestations of practice, or to use Bourdieu’s key notion of ‘habitus’, these are always historically determined and durable, although allowing for flexibility, contingency and improvisation. More recently, Kemmis (2010) sets out a useful tabulation for the definition of practice in
which he opposes objective and subjective perspectives, in terms of which he refers to the ‘individual’ and ‘social’ parameters of practice: objectively, as individual behaviour and as social interaction; and, subjectively, as intentional and as socially structured action. Both these perspectives and both these parameters, as he acknowledges, are underpinned by the overarching construct of ‘practice’ the exploration of which offers opportunities for mixed methods research and analysis. Such an interrelationship of the qualitative and quantitative approaches to research is now, of course, characteristic of applied linguistics research quite generally, and provides both a philosophical and methodological steer for our journal in its respecified form.

This interplay of perspectives is also a key characteristic of how we see the relationships of the participants in the applied linguistic research process. We refer above to the engagement with ‘motivational relevancies’ as a guiding principle in applied linguistic exploration of participants’ practices. Central to this principle is that a mutuality of understanding needs to be developed whereby all participants in the research project can come to share understandings of each other’s practices, be they applied linguists or professionals. It is, after all, practices which underpin discursive actions, and, following Cicourel (1992, 2007), the institutional order of practice(s) and the interactional order of engagement(s) in action are ineluctably interconnected. Further, for any understanding of practices to be achieved, we need more than a description of actions, or an accounting of patterns of behaviour. What will be required is a critical and institutionally and historically grounded appreciation of participants’ meanings forged in and through action, while remaining aware of the three paradoxes that characterize our (partial) understanding of professional practice: observer’s paradox, participant’s paradox and analyst’s paradox (Sarangi 2007). It is only through such appreciation that we will be able to chart and explain those changes in how practices are understood, in particular, how changes in practices involve mutualities of action and discourse.

Such an attention to mutuality will make necessary an applied linguistics which addresses not only the realized forms of language and discourse but the structure and texture of the practices themselves – how these are framed and organized, and how such framings are diversified across the participants in distinctive sites of engagement. It is this diversity which gives rise to the complex marketplace of actions and meanings highlighted by Bourdieu. This in turn directs a clear research imperative to applied linguists: to engage with the contextualized nature of practice, its sites and rituals, and above all, with the privileged understandings of its actors and participants.

What then are the consequences for an applied linguistic methodology of practice, one which may guide the direction of our newly specified journal?
Centrally, to forge an inter-methodological connection between local ethnographies, historically-grounded engagements with the practices themselves, why and how they are as they are, and discourse-based studies of the ways in which such practices are realized in action. Time, space and discourse-mediated and historically grounded action would be the principal leitmotifs of such applied linguistic research, and can act as guidance for the practices of JALPP. This is so because applied linguistics is characteristically both focused reflexively on its own practices and on the relevant practices of those professional participants with whom it is engaged. A practice-focused applied linguistics, then, offers very considerable opportunities for collaborative, and other- and self-focused exploration of key themes. In pursuing such exploration, however, we should not resist applied linguistics adopting an interventionist stance, constrained, as we indicate earlier, by ethical and interpersonal acknowledgement of the importance of honouring accountability and building trust. The line between being active in research, and if, when, and how to take on an activist role grounded in such research, remains a challenge to the professional practice of applied linguists, one which we hope will stimulate contributions to the journal.

The new journal title is matched by an extended and reconstituted advisory board. Also, the journal will benefit from the launch of an international conference on Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice (ALAPP) hosted by Cardiff University (23‒24 June 2011). Our hope is that ALAPP will become a regular event, feeding into the journal’s contributions and readership. Our aim is to fill one issue of the journal annually drawing from presentations at the ALAPP conferences, subject to routine peer review protocol.

Returning to the theme of continuity, each annual volume will contain a selection of special features such as editorials; specialist conversations; debates/dialogues on specific methodological themes; review articles; research notes; and targeted special issues.

The metaphor of ‘journey’ is overused in the academy, but we feel it is the apt metaphor to describe our present endeavour with its futuristic aspirations.

References


