A Review of Applied Linguistics and its Importance in the Context of English Studies in Nigeria Higher Institution

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Abstract

Applied Linguistics is a field of interest to scholars because it depends on insights in other fields such as philosophy and psychology in the teaching of language. Hence, this paper considers a review of Applied Linguistics as an important course of study for English students in Nigeria Tertiary Institutions by considering the context of English as a Second Language(ESL) as an important factor that should guide Applied Linguistics as a course for the students. In addition, questionnaires were administered to students studying English to further shed light on the subject matter. Furthermore, it provides added contribution to academic debate that borders on Applied Linguistics by recommending practical demonstration of theories of language and communication for the training of English as Second Language(ESL)students in Nigeria

Keywords: English, Applied Linguistics, Language, Teaching, Tertiary Institution

1. Introduction

Applied linguistics is concerned with solving or ameliorating social problems involving language. There are various theories in linguistics. A linguistic theory according to Obi-Okoye[1] is a language plan or scheme existing in the mind only which is a speculative or conjectural view of languages, which include imitation, innateness, cognition, input hypothesis, etc. In Applied Linguistics, there is an attempt to use the linguistic theories to solve problems associated with the language. Not only this, but also insights from linguistics as rightly noted by Obi Okoye[1]. Meanwhile, Hrehoveík[2] opines that:

It seems that there is an uncertain boundary between applied linguistics and various interdisciplinary branches of linguistics, particularly those which deal with the practical application of "purely" theoretical sciences. More recently, applied linguistics has been utilized in the study of spoken and written discourse, gender issues in language use, the social stratification of language and language varieties, neurological factors and language dysfunctions, learning strategies, and special learning needs of specific populations. Some applied linguists are concerned with helping planners and policy-makers develop and implement a language policy, or

develop programs for immigrants coming to the United States or other countries.

Applied Linguistics therefore refers to language teaching, speech therapy, translation, planning, and language for specific purposes, etc. It is language in relation to human domains. In this paper, there is an attempt to review various topics in Applied Linguistics as it relates to English language as a course.

There are three basic models in language acquisition. The first one is nurture or empirical mode, this is also known as behavioral or information processing model. The model is society based such that the learner has no input, the approach is teacher centered. The argument is that the mind of a child is an empty concept; that is, a child is born with a perfect blank mind and the society gives him the experience needed to acquire language therefore language becomes environmentally bound (Adegbite[3]).

Another model of language acquisition is the mentalist or nature model, which concerns the role of the mind in language learning. In Chomsky [4], there is the claim that the environment and the child's innate endowment are crucial for language learning. This innate predisposition is what Chomsky calls Language Acquisition Device (LAD). In the mentalist model, errors are indicative of the learning process and emphasis is on fluency rather than accuracy the role of the teacher is greatly deemphasized.

The social constructive model is the third model, there is the belief that the society is crucial in language teaching and learning; that is, the society makes provision of a role model and determines who and what teacher teaches. Language acquisition is perceived as a social activity that is inherent in the community. It is obvious that the environment plays a significant role in language acquisition since it cuts across the three models.

2. A Review of Some Concepts in Applied Linguistics

2.1.Environment in Language Learning

The role of language environment can never be overemphasized in language learning. Fabian [5] emphasizes this by conducting a study on impacts of monolingual and bilingual environments on receptive skills and learning strategies of school children. It is imperative that learning has to take place in language environment; an empiricist will teach and learn in the classroom, the mentalist in a language environment while the social constructivist will learn in the community. The environment can be classified into two types; namely: macro and microenvironment. The macro environments include learner's role in communication, naturalness of the environment, target models and concrete reference materials, while the micro factors are specific structures that a learner hears or reads such as feedback, expansion, salience and frequency. It is noteworthy that the micro factors have no evidence to show that they help in the learning process.

2.2.Errors

The concept of errors is important in Applied Linguistics. Indeed, errors are deviations from the norm and they can easily be detected in the course of performance, which allows judgment of learner's attainment. Hence, it serves as scaffold for learning. Errors can be analysed from three perspectives: Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA) and Miscue Analysis (MA). In Contrastive Analysis, there is the comparison or contrast between two languages in order to show the similarity and differences. Error Analysis is an improvement on Contrastive Analysis because it can account for errors without comparing two languages. Miscue analysis is different from CA and EA because it basically deals with errors that occur in reading. According to Onukaogu[6], miscues are related to cues. Cues are basically strategies employed by a reader while reading; it was further explained that a miscue is a point in reading where the expected response and observed response are not the same. In ESL situation like Nigeria, studies in Error analysis and Miscue analysis deserve attention rather than Contrastive analysis.

2.3.Computer Assisted Language Learning

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is a form of computer based learning, which carries two important features: bi-directional learning and individualized learning. This is not a method of learning. The launching of World Wide Web in 1992 opened up new possibility in CALL according to Graham [7], whereby learner can interact with a network computer or other people via the computer. It is noteworthy that different acronyms have been used for different shades of computer mediated language learning such as ICALL (Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning); CAL (Computer Assisted Learning); WELL (Web-Enhanced Language Learning), etc.

Gruba[8] observes that as with the broader field of applied linguistics, CALL can be located at the cross roads of a number of disciplines such as psychology, artificial intelligence, computational linguistics, etc. Also, Chapelle[9] gives an extensive review in which he places CALL within six computer related sub disciplines; educational technology, computer-supported collaborative learning, artificial intelligence computational linguistics, corpus linguistics, and computer-assisted assessment.

CALL is seen as a linguistic insight that has the following advantages:

(i)   It motivates the students when they see product of their interaction.

(ii)   Students can control pace of learning.

(iii)   Students have the opportunity to interact in one or more of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking).

(iv)   Improves self-concept and mastery of basic skills.

Despite these, the use of computer in language learning has the following disadvantages:

(i)   Technology is limited in ability and availability.

(ii)   Teachers may resist CALL because of lack of understanding or fear of technology.

(iii)   There is a lack of unified theoretical framework for designing and evaluating CALL systems.

2.4. Language Testing

Language testing could be described as one of the sub-categories of Applied Linguistics which has mirrored its development more broadly. Attention on language testing is closely associated with the development of English for specific purposes. Clapham[10] sees language testing and language assessment as synonymous, there is also the use of language evaluation for same term but it is broader in coverage as rightly noted by Corder[11].

There are different types of language tests, which were discussed in the course. They are: Diagnostic test, Placement test, Proficiency test, Aptitude test, Achievement test and Progress tests. Scholars have considered validity and reliability as two important characteristics of a good language test. Brown[12] defines validity as the degree to which a test measures what it claims, purports to be measuring while reliability means the consistency of a test to measure proficiency of test-takers if administered twice; that is, to check whether the test will give same result in different testing situation. Pertinent to say that the computer can also be used in language testing, this is known as Computer-Adaptive Testing (CAT) or Computer-based Language Testing (CBT) which has various advantages such as accuracy, immediate feedback, etc. It can also be used to control the influx of people into countries.

2.5. Language Teacher Education

Language Teacher Education (LTE) centers on the process and ideology of language teaching including teachers' knowledge, learning and beliefs. LTE accounts for teaching and learning through the proper planning of the education level of language teachers. LTE enables personal development of language teachers just as it provides opportunities for workable, socially constructed, language teaching activities. LTE also enables localized and environment specific teaching. Though, Ozkan[13] insists that Applied Linguistics does not seem to offer much in the name of pedagogy, yet the concept of LTE remains an issue in field.

There are certain factors that challenge LTE, which are social, political, economic as well as attitudinal in Nigeria; they are:

Low income for teachers.

Parent's attitude to language minority children.

The challenges of language preparation.

Inadequate supply of language teachers.

Cost of teacher training.

Moreover, Csernicsko[14] posits that teaching a language is unbalanced if there are lack of qualified teachers, lack of appropriate course books, and lack of appropriate perspectives and methods. LTE deals with basic theoretical issues concerning the nature of language and the proper domain of linguistic description. In fact, it mediates between linguistic and language teaching. It is therefore integral to the development of language teaching strategies.

2.6.National Language Policy on Education(NLPE)

The National Language Policy in Nigeria is two sided. There is the provision for the use of indigenous language and that of the English language in schools. According to the provision, the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment should serve as the medium of instruction in pre-primary and the first three years of primary school while the English language should serve as the medium of instruction as from the late primary school to tertiary level. There has been the argument that this provision will enhance firm foundation in mother tongue since a child learns better in his or her mother tongue (Odumuh[15]).

The English language has been serving as the only language that cuts across linguistic boundaries in Nigeria. By this, it has been serving as the language of unity as well as the official language but the fact remains that, the English language is not an indigenous language. Also,Elugbe[16] notices that none of the three major indigenous languages has an official status at Federal Level. Therefore, there are certain challenges that underlie the National Language Policy on Education in Nigeria.

The choice of language of instruction according to Bianco[17] is motivated by humanistic rationales, economic interest calculation, assessments about national security or geo-political interest or by responses to needs, opportunities, and rights of linguistics. In a multilingual nation like Nigeria, one of the linguistic problems is the choice of a medium of instruction in schools.

Jiboku[18] defines language planning, as the process of choosing a language and developing it to standard at which it can serve both national and international needs of the country. The choice of a medium of instruction in schools is part of the task before language planners. Language policy refers to the statement of the government decision about language(s) for national use, i.e., provisions in the constitution.

The provision for language of instruction in the NLPE could be termed a paper policy since what operates in many schools is totally different. So also, the continuous entrenchment of English language as the language of instruction will be viewed as a mark of post-colonial imperialism.

Another challenge is that there is no clear-cut distinction between what is meant by mother tongue and language of immediate environment. Also, most minor indigenous languages are not yet represented orthographically. No wonder, Akinkurolere [19] recommends as follows:

The choice of one indigenous language as a medium of instruction in school will bring more complexity into language policy. So also, the choice of English Language at the expense of all indigenous languages will have negative effect on the indigenous languages. Therefore, the use of a bilingual medium of instruction from the pre-primary level will be a better alternative against the present situation whereby English is expected to be introduced as a medium of instruction at a later stage in primary school.

2.7.Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics

There is no doubt; the concept of native speaker is rich in ambiguity. It is seen as the resource in linguistic and also as a standard setter from social view. Even though various opinions spring from various scholars with different perspectives since interests differ, the fact remains that these opinions are interrelated and interwoven if critically examined. The emphasis in applied linguistics should be on effective use of the English language in the teaching of English Language in Nigeria towards achieving various purposes, which the language should serve and not necessarily on the native competence of teachers that teach the language.Moreover, if learners are rightly motivated as opined Akinkurolere[20], there will be the triumph of Non-Native English in the teaching of ESL in Nigeria which strengthen the cultural identity and heritage of students.

3. Statement of the Research Problem

It has been observed that students in English Department of any tertiary institutionin Nigeria study Applied Linguistics as a course. Despite the fact that the course covers various topics which are significant for the teaching of English Language in Nigeria, its teaching has not received much attention from the perspective of Second Language(L2) context. Hence, this study intends to review the course in order to assess its importance and relevance in L2 context such as Nigeria.

4. Objectives

The study aims at reviewing 'Applied Linguistics' as a course for students studying English Language in Nigeria. Thus, the main thrust of this research is to achieve the following objectives:

Review of Applied Linguistics and its major concepts;

Elicitation of information from students studying English Language in selected tertiary institutions; and

Recommendations based on responses from students.

5. Research Methodology

This research was conducted by reviewing 'Applied Linguistics' appropriate literature in line with course contents and data elicited from the students. Fifty students selected from Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba, Nigeria, were given questionnaires and statistical analysis was done on the data elicited from the students. The research subjects comprised twenty five male and twenty five female students. Questionnaires were administered and collected.The data drawn from the questionnaires were analysed using tables to show percentages and this formedbasis for the discussion and recommendations.

6. Findings and Discussion

It is imperative that the study considered gender equality by eliciting information from equal number of males and females but there was no distinction of gender in respect of responses. The questionnaires indicate (see Table 1) that Applied Linguistics is an interesting course as opined by 96% of the research subjects. Hence, it becomes clear that Applied Linguistics could be regarded as one of the interesting courses in English studies.

Table 1. Interest in Applied Linguistics.

Questions	Responses(Percentages)	
	Yes	No
Applied Linguistics as an interesting course	96	4

Table 2. Lecturer's background and students'scores.

Questions	Responses(Percentages)	
	Yes	No
Lecturer's educational background	60	40
Results of students ≥50%	86	14

The findings on Table 2 implied that 60% of the students were thought by lecturers that had

background in Education. This could be a Certificate, Diploma, Degree or Postgraduate Diploma and such lecturers are likely to teach Applied Linguistics more effectively based on their background. It is also important to state that all the students indicated that their lecturers had background in Education also perceived the course as interesting.

Moreover, 86% of the students scored 50% or above in Applied Linguistics. This revealed that students perform well in the course which was the resultant effect of their interest and lecturers' quality of teaching and grading. It was noted that students who had lecturers with background in Education scored 50% or above.

Table 3. Applied Linguistics and teaching.

Questions	Responses(Percentages)	
	Yes	No
Adequacy of knowledge to become a teacher	18	72
Application of theories in classroom	36	64
knowledge important to teachers of language	100	-

According to Table 3, 72%of the students did not believe they have got enough knowledge to work as teachers. Only 18% accepted that they have been adequately equipped to function in the classroom. Despite this, 36% felt they could apply knowledge gained from Applied Linguistics in the classroom. Here, the issue of interest matters as the additional 18% that believed they were not qualified to teach but could apply the theories in classroom might be suffering from lack of confidence and interest in teaching since they have the idea of practical application. Also, it is quite interesting that all the research subjects acknowledged that Applied Linguistics is important to teachers of language.

On Table 4, the students rated the importance of concepts reviewed in this research based on their judgments. On Environment, 86% of the student rated the importance as high, 14% rated it average, while no student rated it low. This showed that environment is very important.Errors were rated as highly important by 60%, averagely important by 32% and less important by 8%.Equally, 66% of the students believed CALL is highly important, 30% agreed it is averagely important, while 4% regarded it as less important. Also, the result for Language Testing showed that 86% rated the importance as high, 12% as averagely important and 2% as less important.

Table 4. Importance of concepts of Applied Linguistics.

Questions	Responses(Percentages)		
	High	Average	Low
Environment	86	14	-
Errors	60	32	8
Computer Assisted Language Learning(CALL)	66	30	4
Language Testing	86	12	2
Language Teacher	100	-	-
National Language Policy on Education(NLPE)	98	2	-
Native Speaker(NS)	40	54	6

On Language Teacher, all the students agreed that the issue is highly important with 100%. The students also accepted the high importance of NLPE with 98%, while only 40% agreed that the concept of NS is highly important. As such, majority of the students believed that NS is averagely important in Applied Linguistics. The might not be far from the fact that the students are non- natives.

Table 5. Improvement on Applied Linguistics in L2 context.

Questions	Responses(Percentages)	
	Yes	No
Expansion of scope in Nigeria	100	-

It is also interesting that all the students (100%) agreed that there is need to expand the modules of Applied Linguistics in L2 context like Nigeria (see Table 5). This will definitely increase the

knowledge of the students and prepare them to solve problems as applied linguists.

7. Recommendations

On NLPE, the medium of instruction from the pre-primary level in schools should be English Language and language of immediate environment as this will be a better alternative against the present situation whereby English is expected to be introduced as a medium of instruction at a later stage in primary schools. Also, Native Speakers (NS) should serve as standard providers and adequate focus should be on effective learning and teaching of English Language. Meanwhile, government should focus more attention on Language Teacher Education(LTE).

Even though scholars have proved that the scope of Applied Linguistic is limited. Suffice to say that there is the need to explore the common grounds shared by all spheres of Applied Linguistics. The course does not given room for practical demonstration as students studying English would be better equipped if they apply theories of language to teaching in classroom. For instance Hrehoveík[2] observes that Language Teaching Methodology is one of the core modules for students of Applied Linguistics at University of Sheffield. Even if that is not feasible as a result of time constraint, there should be presentation of seminars in Applied Linguistics rather than assignments.

8. Conclusion

It is also noteworthy recommendations made in this paper are by no means exhaustive since there are other related concepts and insights such as Second Language Learning, Applied Linguistics Research, Social Influences on Language Learning. With the course, opportunities abound for students to become translators, lexicographers, man-machine communicators, specialists in language of business, computer, industry and science and technology.

Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE ASSESSMENT OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AS A COURSE

Instruction: Please, fill the questionnaire completely by ticking the space that you select as your response

Sex: Male: ☐ Female: ☐

Is Applied Linguistics an interesting course as taught by your lecturers? Yes☐ No☐

Did your lecturers have background in Education? Yes☐ No☐

Did you score ≥50 in Applied Linguistics?   Yes☐ No☐

Do you consider your knowledge of Applied Linguistics adequate to be a teacher in a secondary school?Yes☐ No☐

Can you adequately apply theories of linguistics to teaching?Yes☐No☐

Is Applied Linguistics important for teachers of English Language?Yes☐No☐

How would you rate the importance of the following concepts to teachers of English Language?

EnvironmentHigh☐Average☐Low☐

ErrorsHigh☐Average☐Low☐

Computer Assisted Language Learning High☐Average☐Low☐

Language Testing High☐Average☐Low☐

Language Teacher Education High☐Average☐Low☐

National Policy on EducationHigh☐Average☐Low☐

Native SpeakerHigh☐Average☐Low☐

Do you think that there is need to expand the scope of Applied Linguistics in Nigeria? Yes☐ No☐

Acknowledgements

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