

On the Nature of Applied Linguistics: Theory and Practice Relationships from a Critical Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the relationships between Applied Linguistics and other related disciplines concerning language use and language teaching issues. It seeks to trace the changes in the view of the relationship between theory and practice in Applied Linguistics, to explain the reason for those changes, and to discuss the implications for language teaching. Some general assumptions that serve as a context for this are presented. It also shows possible forms of interaction between basic and applied science (linguistics in this case) and practical activities, and presents some implications to teacher education and the way these visions have permeated language education and foreign language teaching practices.

Resumen

En este artículo se exploran las relaciones que se dan entre la lingüística aplicada y otras disciplinas relacionadas en cuanto el uso y enseñanza de la lengua se refiere. En éste, se busca identificar los cambios de perspectiva de la relación entre la teoría y la práctica en la lingüística aplicada, explicar las razones de dichos cambios y discutir las implicaciones en la enseñanza de lenguas. Para esto, se presentan unas premisas generales que sirven de punto de referencia y le dan un contexto a la discusión. El artículo también muestra algunas posibles formas de interacción entre las ciencias básicas y aplicadas (en este caso la lingüística) y las actividades prácticas. También presenta algunas implicaciones

en la formación de docentes y la forma cómo estos enfoques han permeado la formación en lenguas y las prácticas docentes en lenguas extranjeras.

Key words: Applied Linguistics, language teaching and learning, theory, practice, critical perspective.

Palabras clave: Lingüística aplicada, enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas, teoría, práctica, perspectiva crítica.

Introduction

No matter how theorists have differed regarding the scope and coverage of Applied Linguistics, it has been seen as a way of relating basic disciplines with practical language use concerns. Foreign Language teaching is considered one of its typical domains. McCarthy (2001), in the foreword of his book, defined applied linguistics as the “relationship between knowledge, theory and practice in the field of language”. But a question that arises is “what kind of relationships we are dealing with?”. For a long time, teachers, as well as others professionals, have turned to language science, psychology, sociology and education theories to seek insight for possible solutions to some language teaching and learning problems. Among other tendencies in education, in general, and in language pedagogy in particular, critical approaches have been attempting to bridge the gap between theory and practice. One of the great new challenges for teachers, researchers and theorists in the language field is not only to discover other ways of creating interaction between knowledge and practice, but most important, how they can transform each other. In this essay, from a critical approach, I wish to trace the changes in the view of the relationship between theory and practice in Applied Linguistics, to explain the reason for those changes, and to discuss the implications for language teaching.

My interest in this subject derives from my direct contact with these three areas in Colombian higher education, as a teacher and also as a student, and my great affinity with critical approaches.

To achieve this general aim, I will first present a set of general assumptions that will serve as a context and reference point for the dialogue for which I want to establish a critical approach. Second, I will show four forms of interaction between basic, applied and practice. Third, I will present some implications to teacher education and the way these visions have permeated language education and foreign language teaching practices.

1. Toward A Critical Approach: Some Assumptions

This is not the place, for reasons of space, and especially for the criteria of pertinence, to explain what critical approaches are, where they come from, the way they have evolved, their tendencies and strands, and how exactly they differ from traditional approaches. It is important, however, to state a set of basic ontological and epistemological assumptions¹ because this set constitutes at the same time an essential requirement and a framework for my own reflection.

According to Pennycook (2001:5) there are different ways of being critical. From his perspective, being critical implies a set of characteristics: praxis, as a way of continuous reflexive integration of thought and action; a problematic stance, drawing connections between macro and micro relations, seeing them as a problematic matter, understanding their historic evolution; looking for a possible change; self reflexivity (“raising a host of new and difficult questions about knowledge, politics and ethics” (2001: 8) offering a vision of “what is preferable (2001:8), and “heterosis” or new and different ways of doing politics.

In my opinion, whatever the meaning of “critical” could be, it would not be reduced to academic traditions and schools of thought. “Critical” does not mean a simple theoretical stance or, even less so, a simple intellectual posture. Critical would mean true commitments and personal involvement with transformations. I would add that besides true commitments, personal involvements, wisdom, understanding, action and reflection are requisites *sine qua non* for a real transformation. As in the 19th century, Karl Marx stated that the aim of philosophers must be the transformation of the world and not a simple understanding of it². Wisdom is a mix of human

¹ There does not seem to be agreement about the meaning of the word critical as a set of general principles or guidelines to be followed. Hence, the need arises to state, at least in general terms, the way I understand some terms and concepts, and especially a particular way of viewing some relationships. Even though I honestly can say that they are my “own” visions, i.e. my ideals, in the sense of a set of principles that I have incorporated in my life, my action and my discourse for a long time. In each case, when appropriate, I will mention the source of some terms and concepts.

² But what kind of transformation did Marx refer to? Today, almost a century and a half later, after very few erratic attempts, and no less false and over promoted disappointments, all of us, committed with one possibility of change, have failed to achieve that goal. This is true, especially if we compare the scientific and technological developments with the real transformation, not only of the social, economic and political realities, but over all with the real improvements of the material and spiritual condition of most humans. Inequality and discrimination are not only the consequences of so-called development and modernization. They are the result of capitalist society.

instinct, intuition, common sense, inquisitive thought, knowledge and imagination. Knowledge and reality (natural and social and human) do not map each other, in a one-to-one correspondence. Social and human phenomena, as well as natural ones, are systems or complex structures³. Given their complex nature, social, natural and human realities can, and should, be seen from different and complementary perspectives. No one perspective, discipline, model, theory or approach is able to account for social reality as a whole⁴. Social and human realities cannot be reduced to either general or particular principles. This does not mean that the former (social and human systems) lack the latter (principles). The uniqueness of social systems and human beings would consist of a perfect combination, a synthesis, of general and particular characteristics. Hence, we human beings could understand part of our difficulties, as social actors, to grasp them. Descriptions, explanations, comprehension, and understanding of phenomena are attempts to approximate to reality. They all are partial and incomplete products of human knowledge seen from our experiences in our context and our position in the world. Human knowledge is a dialectical process that involves a certain level of abstraction, much intuition, creativity and imagination, as well as logical inference (induction, deduction) and a permanent contrast with reality⁵. It is neither a mechanical reflection of the natural, social and human world, nor is it a linear process. A holistic view⁶ of social and human reality is a process in permanent construction, a double way spiral. Each process and its corresponding product are a means and not an end in itself. They complement each other in heuristically: analysis and synthesis processes; bottom-up, top-down, micro and macro, general and particular perspectives; simple and complex; inner and outer; patent and latent realities. Therefore, a holistic view is a permanent task and

³ “Complex” is understood here in the sense given by the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2000: 247) “of made of different things or parts that are connected”. Oxford University Press (2000), sixth edition. Cohen et al

⁴ Zuleta (1990) points out that, even against our wishes, absolute theories to account for reality do not exist. See Zuleta Estanislao (1990) *Sobre la idealización en la vida personal y colectiva*. Bogota, Tercer Mundo Editores

⁵ The dialectic character of knowledge and a model for language production is presented in Pardo and Ramirez (1980) “Lecciones de lingüística general y lingüística española” in *Revista Colombiana de Lingüística*, Vol. 1 Num.1.

⁶ Capra (1996) invites us to reflect on holistic approaches following the example given by what he calls the new Physics. Capra Fritjot (1996) *El punto Crucial: ciencia sociedad y cultura naciente*. Buenos Aires, Estaciones. In Selliger and Shohamy’s book, *Second language research Methods* (1989) an opposition between holistic and analytic approaches to research is established.

a challenge for all involved in research, theory and practice. And a very definite characteristic of human knowledge is that it is socially constructed⁷ and that all people involved can contribute to it with their viewpoint from their own experience. It means that everybody has a role and a differentiated responsibility in the construction of a holistic view of the world. And all knowledge, even the most sophisticated, is subject to questioning and critics⁸. It is in this frame that I believe a fruitful dialogue could be established between theorists, practitioners and applied linguists in language education.

2. Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching: Kinds of Relationships

Different terms have been used to refer to the idea of being “applied” as well as different perspectives regarding its relationship to theory and practice. Stern (1992: 8 and 9) uses the terms “buffer,” “intermediary,” and “interlevel” to refer to the role of applied linguistics. McDonough (2002: 17) uses the terms “middle ground” and “mediating position” and “mediator.” On one hand, I question whether it is just a semantic distinction, or whether it reflects any kind of ontological or epistemological assumption or stance. On the other hand, I wonder about the meaning of each of these words and their connotations. Does the meaning of the terms have any incidence in the way of seeing theory and research interaction and the role given to each other in the interaction? McCarthy (2001:4) wonders about the kind of relationships between linguistics and applied linguistics. He establishes a dichotomy between hierarchy and partnership. McDonough (2002:23) explores the relationship between theory and practice and points out that such relationships have “worried many workers in all areas of research, scholarship, teaching, and testing”. This author, (2002:103-105) sees four kinds of relationships between applied linguistics and the teaching profession: co-existence, complementariness, compatibility and collaboration.

In order to trace the way in which the relationships between theory and practice have been considered in applied linguistics, I have composed

⁷ According to Grundy (1987) Habermas invites us to discuss based on the logic of the best argument and recognizing the validity of our interlocutor.

⁸ Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) claim for a differentiation between accepting the existence of different points of view (epistemic relativism), and their corresponding discourses does not entail recognising the same level of validity or value for all of them (judgmental relativism). (page 8).

Table 1. It is based on the general model that Stern (1983:44) presents as a conceptual framework for second language teaching. There, it is possible to identify three aspects (theory, application and practice), social actors and their 'roles', i.e. theorists (theoreticians), applied linguists (mediators) and teachers (practitioners). Also, I have separated the right column to show a set of possible relationships, represented by arrows. (B), (A), and (P) stand for basic, applied and practice, respectively. According to my guiding framework, the use of the 'basic' instead of 'theory' will allow us to think of the possibility that theory, as one way of knowledge, can be generated in each level and to question some assumptions, which would be an exclusive responsibility of theoreticians.

Aspects	Stern's model	Campbell's model 1	Social Actors/ Roles	Relationships
Practice Practical activities (P) Level 3	Methodology Objectives Content Procedures Materials Evaluation Organization Planning and administration....	Pedagogy	Teachers Students Research teachers Practitioner	
Interlevel Applied sciences (A) Level 2	Context Language Teaching Learning Educational linguistics theory and research	Applied Linguistics	Applied linguists And Researchers Mediator	
Foundations Basic sciences (B) Level 1	History of language teaching Linguistics Sociology ...	Linguistics And (???) Theoretician		

Table 1. Aspects, models, actors/roles, relationships in applied linguistics to language teaching

Reading Stern (1992:8), various stages can be traced in the history of language teaching and the different factors that have influenced its development. A first stage in the relationship between theory and practice can be subdivided into three different periods. In the first period, language teaching was directly influenced by phonetics (from 1880 until World War I). A second period (1928 –1940) relates with the growth of educational psychology and research in education (Stern, 1992:8). A third period, (1940-1965) according to Stern, is "characterized by the increasing influence of linguistics on language teaching." What do these three moments have in common from my perspective of analysis? They are characterized by a unidirectional and hierarchical relationship and a lack of mediation. We can represent this relationship as (B) à (P). The

problems arise on the practice level. But it is on the basic level where the questions are posed, and the solutions given in terms of techniques and methods to be followed by practitioners. I support the lack of an interlevel in the following quote by Stern (1992):

“Just as there was a constant shift from one teaching method to another, the language- related sciences seemed to necessitate periodic changes from one underlying discipline to another or from one theory to a newer and better theory. It was in response to this concern that educational or applied linguistics evolved in the early 1960s as a buffer between linguistics and language teaching” (Page 8) (my italics)

A second phase is characterized by a monodisciplinary, unidirectional and hierarchical relationship, which has its starting point on the basic disciplinary or fundamental level; there, theorists developed theoretical knowledge. This knowledge constitutes the basis on the intermediate level where applied scientists mediate it in designing methods, techniques and materials. These materials, along with directions, are given for implementation on the practice level. It could be considered as a way of preventing problems when theoretical principles go straight from the basic level to the practitioners without any filter, and with disappointing results. Practitioners are trained and they put models and approaches into practice. It seems to have been the mainstream vision in the case of applied linguistics for a long time. The first model proposed by the U.S. linguist Campbell in 1980, by Stern (1983:36) is a sample of that stage. The view of Campbell (1980), according to Stern (1983: 36), is that the mediator between the practitioner and the theorist is applied linguistics. Summing up we can represent it as follows:

(B) → (A) → (P).

This unidirectional and hierarchical vision between applied linguists, linguists and language teachers could be traced in Corder’s thought (1973). According to Byram (2000:33), Corder’s view is explicitly set out in his book, *Introducing Applied Linguistics*, a classic text. In this school of thought, a division of work is made and even the applied linguist is considered a consumer or user, and not a producer of theory.

Corder believed that there was a clear hierarchy of responsibility between three groups of people. Linguists produced descriptions of languages. The immediate consumer of these descriptions was the applied linguist, whose job was to mediate the work of the linguist, by producing pedagogical grammars. These pedagogical

grammars were turned into textbooks and teaching materials, and eventually reached the teachers, whose job it was to actually teach the language.

A third phase is represented by the model of Stern (1983: 44). In this conception three important differences can be recognized. One, a multi disciplinary fundamental level, where other disciplines serve along linguistics as basic sciences: history of language teaching, sociology, sociolinguistics and anthropology, psychology and psycholinguistics, and educational theory. Two, a two-way relationship exists between each of the levels, i.e. a basic level and an applied one, as well as between an applied level and a practical one. Both, theoreticians and applied linguists can produce theory, although this work is differentiated according to the nature of the two levels. Practitioners, on the most concrete level, continue to be users. This model is theory driven, and above all, the interlevel's role is to mediate (act as a buffer) between theory and practice, but not prescriptively, as in the previous stages. Summing up, we can represent it as follows:

$(B+C+D+E+F) \leftarrow \rightarrow (A) \leftarrow \rightarrow (P).$

The hierarchical relationship in this model is only partly broken. First, in Stern's view (1992), a kind of knowledge about language pedagogy derived from an objective, systematic, general and comprehensive vision of reality would be the fundamental element to define the parameters for teaching choices and practices, and to guide teachers to success. Second, it involves the way teaching practitioners and their questions are represented.

The book is addressed to second or foreign language teachers in general [languages and contexts and levels of education] (page 1)

(a) Teachers must be able to analyze and interpret the situation in which they teach and (b) they must be able to plan, develop a policy, and make decisions in the interest of their students and their program, so that the new language is learned as effectively as possible. (page 1).

...our purpose is to provide the necessary background knowledge to analyze particular language teaching situations, and to help readers develop the skills needed to ensure that their conceptualisation of language teaching is systematic, coherent and relevant.

With these goals in mind, we will examine language pedagogy as objectively, comprehensively as systematically as possible. (page 2)

This book analyzes current issues in language teaching practice; defines the parameters within the practitioners have to make choices. (my emphasis)

One of the most interesting aspects in Stern's discourse (1992) is the way in which the practitioner is represented. In the introduction of his book, in Stern's view teachers need 'parameters' to act. They 'don't fancy themselves as great theoreticians.' They 'tend to believe in intuitive and practical approaches.' They ask for 'recipes.' They are 'quite negative about anything described as theoretical' and 'often look askance at ivory tower research.' Also, they don't seem to be aware that 'being practical does not mean being thoughtless.'

I wonder if such an image of teachers would explain the need for training them, and if such interlocutors would be considered able to develop their own knowledge and to participate in a real dialogue with theorists and applied linguists. Knowledge would be the instrument of power. Would teachers be, in this image, empty recipients while those able to produce it in the more abstract levels deliver knowledge? I will return to this point in the analysis and the interpretation of the changes.

A fourth stage, in my perspective, would be represented by a triangular relationship between theory, application and practice. It is borrowed from Selliger and Shohamy (1989). They define these three types of research to carry out in the second language area. Diagram 1 is based on their proposal.

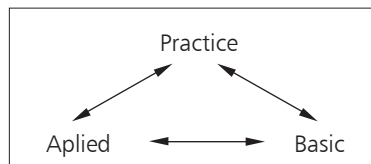


Diagram 1. Triangle relationships

In my opinion, the hierarchical relationship could be completely broken, as well as the dependence relationships. Each actor would have a high level of autonomy. Here, differing radically from the previous stage, everyone involved, theorists, applied linguists and mainly teachers, research-teachers and teacher-researchers would have the opportunity to test theories and principles, to question them and to discover new factors and relationships, and to formulate their own hypotheses.

The mediation process remains, but it is not the exclusive role of any of the participants. Practitioners, applied linguists and theorists can pose their own questions, decide where to ask or answer them: in the basic sciences, in the applied linguistics or even the possibility of developing knowledge based on reflection and action processes.

Up to now, in the field of language studies the autonomy of basic disciplines has been guaranteed. McDonough (2002:11) defines applied linguistics as an autonomous problem-solving discipline, with a similar status to linguistics and the other basic disciplines. But what can be said about the status of language teaching and the practitioners?

Everybody seems to agree that the problems applied linguistics is concerned with are real problems, of the real world, arising in practice. However, so far, it would seem to be that the questions posed and the answers given have been those ones of the theorists and the mediators and not those of the practitioners. This can be reflected in the claim of McDonough (2002:12) that only until relatively recently, challenging questions (what to teach, how to introduce vocabulary, why students make such type of errors etc.) have had the chance to be posed and answered by teachers. In his view, bottom-up and grassroots questions posed by teachers have found expression in the activities of teachers doing research themselves." Besides, this author points out that despite the fact that these questions have been features of applied linguistics, they have been, to a certain degree, "underrated" (2002:12).

This last stage could be characterized as a reaction against the theory-driven model. As well it would seem to be originating a reaction in two different strands in applied linguistics in terms of the relationship of theory and practice.

One of these strands, represented by McCarthy (2001:4), maintains that applied linguistics is "essentially a problem-driven discipline rather than a theory-driven one." McCarthy broadens his stance in the following terms:

Applied Linguistics can (and should) not only test the applicability and replicability of linguistic theory and description, but also question and challenge them where they are found wanting. In other words, if the relationship between linguistics and its applications is to be a fruitful partnership and neither a top-down imposition by theorists on practitioners [...] nor a bottom-up cynicism levelled by practitioners against theoreticians, then both sides of the linguistics/applied linguistics relationship ought to be accountable to and in regular dialogue with each other with regard to theories as well as practices [...]. (page 4). (my emphasis)

But, what does McCarthy refer to with the phrase 'bottom-up cynicism levelled by practitioners against theoreticians'? In my opinion it relates with an epistemological aspect of the discipline, the forms of constructing knowledge, the nature of inquiry, and the aims and the alternative methodological strategies. Applied linguistics, as an autonomous discipline, is concerned with different research methodologies in order to solve the problems and the questions posed. According to McDonough (2002), despite the existence of many traditions in applied linguistics, two approaches can be distinguished, and these approaches complement, and balance each other.

The first, and perhaps the older one, is the pursuit of the interpretation and explanation, bringing to bear the theory, methods and research results of other disciplines on the problems that present themselves; and the other is the collection of the results of direct research on the problems and the subsequent construction of theories around them. (p. 13)

In section three of this paper I will return to the research matters. I think that by tracing them, it is possible to explain, in part, the changes given in the conception of the relationships in the four phases described herein.

The other strand is reflected in the critical stance assumed by critical applied linguistics. Pennycook (2001:3), in the introduction of his book, referring to the critical applied linguistic concerns, and specifically the need to address the distinction between theory and practice, points out that he prefers to see theory and practice "as more complexly interwoven" and "to avoid the theory- into- practice direction." This vision could be represented with this spiral form or a permanent cyclical process.

3. Some possible reasons for explaining the changes and their implications for language teaching

The term 'explanation' is very hard to use in social sciences. Concerning human beings and social realities, the act itself of explaining becomes more difficult. Even more complicated is the case of human changes. We human beings seem to perceive and interpret the external factors of the objective world as well as ourselves through a complex system in which our schemes of thought and subjective condition interact. So the diversity and complexity of ways we human beings perceive, act, think, feel, behave and express ourselves. Oversimplifying the set of assumptions established in section one of this paper, I will attempt to offer some reasons for those changes viewing the relationships described in the previous section.

One way to explore the changes in viewing the relationships between theory, application and practice in the field of applied linguistics could be by tracing the way forms of thinking have evolved within the discipline itself. This would be called an immanent change. Another possibility is trying to relate it with external pressures that have modified certain traditions in the disciplines. A third possibility, related with the second one, is to see the changes that have occurred in a related field. I choose this last alternative.

The reason to choose this alternative might sound simplistic. Knowledge, as stated previously in this paper, is a product of human beings. So we are not alone. We are part of social structures, and we participate in social events and interact with others in diverse forms. McDonough (2002:7) states that the expansion of applied linguistics is due to four main reasons: "the rise of the language teaching industry"; "the explosion of research in second language learning and acquisition motivated by some of the same factors and by theoretical interest"; "the incorporation of more and different areas of research with relevance to language over the years; and the ever-changing array of language problems in our societies." I believe, in part, that in those reasons for the change is the way of seeing the relationships between theorists, practitioners and applied linguists.

Basically, I aim to explain these changes and the implications for language teaching based on the theory of three cognitive interests proposed by Habermas for the human sciences. Grundy (1987) mapped Habermas's theory in her study of curriculum, in the general context of education. Education, linguistics and applied linguistics are framed within the social sciences area. I frame language teaching in the general context of education. Micro and macro relationships can be seen here.

Grundy’s work (1987) about curriculum is based on Habermas about knowledge and interest relationships in social sciences. Schematically speaking, Habermas (1972), in Cohen et al (2002: 29), conceptualises that knowledge serves different interests, and those interests are socially constructed. Habermas identifies three kinds of interest: technical, practical and emancipatory. Depending on our cognitive interest, our aims and our forms of constructing knowledge vary.

Cognitive interest	Aims	Epistemology	Curriculum	Applied Linguistics Language Teaching
Technical	Prediction and control Success	Positivism and scientific style Laws Rules Prediction Control Passive research objects Instrumental knowledge Quantitative Approaches	Controlled and controllable Uniform and Pre-determined purposes Predictable purpose-oriented experiences Ordered Experiences effectively organized Outcome evaluation	First, second and third phase Theory driven
Practical And	Understanding Interpretive method interpretation	Hermeneutic Styles Methodologies Qualitative approaches Acting subjects Interacting and language Meanings and intentions	Opening process Diverse Multidimensional Fluid Less monolithic power Problematic Relational	Fourth phase Problem-driven strand
Emancipatory	Emancipation and freedom	Ideology Critical Style Praxis (action informed by reflection)	Social emancipation Equity Democracy Freedom Individual and collective empowerment	Four phase Critical Applied linguistics Interwoven

Table 2. Cognitive interests, epistemology, LT curriculum and AL

Based on the terminology used in the table, it is difficult to understand why the first second and third moment of applied linguistics and education could be associated with technical interest. However, it is important to remember that the most influential discipline in applied linguistics has been linguistics. Linguistic structuralism, both empiricism and cognitive strands, claims for scientific objective description of language realities. Generative grammar tries to discover the rules and principles that determine the properties of languages.

Tollefson (1995:1) claims that until recently, the socio-political and economic contexts had not been included in the preparation of most language education and ESL teacher programs. As a result teachers and applied linguists could not establish links between educational practices and socio-political factors. In the preface of his book (p. ix) the author attributes a great responsibility in widening the gap between teachers, who are interested in pedagogy of language teaching and learning, and the researchers, who are interested in theories of language and society, to the development of applied linguistics as a distinct academic discipline.

In teaching practices we can associate with curriculum planned, organized and structured in advance, in general in a bureaucratic way and imposed in an institutional hierarchy (some design and make decisions and others implement). Curriculum planning is unidirectional: beginning on a foundation level (where the philosophical and theoretical concepts are developed: conceptions about language, society, learning and teaching are stated); followed by the policy level (where all decisions are made in advance: objectives, content, experiences, strategies, timing, levels, resources, as well as the criteria, ways, mechanisms and moments of evaluating); ending in the implementation level. Just at this point the process of evaluation starts. Quasi-experimental validation is used and quantitative methods applied to validate curriculum proposals.⁹

Teachers in general participate only on the implementation level. Their participation is reduced and the criteria of effectiveness and efficacy are imposed. The evaluation is standardized and is carried out in general by an external agent. Training is on the basis of their education and the updating process. Technical rationality is imposed. Innovation is reduced to implementation of techniques and strategies and the introduction of new resources. Theory precedes action.

Practical rationality opposes instrumental rationality. Practical interest is reflected here. An emergent model arises with the development of alternative forms to knowledge and research. We could associate this with the fourth stage in the relationship between theory and practice in applied linguistics to language teaching. Hermeneutical procedures and a subjective logic substitute the objectivist one. Small-scale projects are developed with personal involvement of the research teachers along with the people involved in the specific situation. The purpose is the understanding of the actions. Based on the definitions of the situation, teachers and students attempt to interpret the specific context and assign meanings to their learning and teaching actions.¹⁰

Research processes in the classroom could promote reflection of all participants. Teachers' actions are re-dimensioned, giving origin to new processes of awareness. Action research projects promote

⁹ Following this model, I have participated in the design of two curriculum proposals for two foreign language teacher-training programs.

¹⁰ I have participated in two projects of this nature. One about evaluation in the primary schools and another in higher education, related to the pedagogy of research with undergraduate students.

student participation. The climate and the relationships between the participants improve motivation. Action research projects permit teachers to carry out contextualized processes of observation, reflection, action and evaluation in a different number of cycles. Any phase of the cycle could be the starting point. Theory is taken here just as point of reference and can succeed or precede the practice in any stages of the cycle. Inductive processes could be taking place and new interpretations and meanings can arise. If possible, the participation of an external observer is important. The triangulation of information could contribute to a better interpretation of the experiences.

The emancipatory interest is associated with freedom and critical styles and approaches. The concept of ideology as well as action and reflection are central here. Teachers, students and those involved in the process concerning equality and democracy. Understanding and interpreting are considered previous phases to transformation of the reality. Individual and collective empowerment and emancipation are promoted.

Many conflicts can arise in these kinds of projects. The opening of the process, the lack of outcomes defined in advance, the diversity of interests as well as the multidimensionality of aims can have negative effects on the participants: many of them feel they are wasting time because the process has more value than the results. Some teachers miss their capacities and possibilities of power and control over others. The general tendency is an attempt to go backward, retake control and power. Tradition exerts great pressure on the participants, especially in those contexts that reject the possibility of change. It is not a linear process: one step forward could be accompanied with two steps back.

4. Conclusion

I traced four stages in the way of viewing the relationships between theory and practice in applied linguistics. The predominant vision can be associated with the technical interest. One new vision is emerging with two strands. This vision can be related with the practical and emancipatory interests. The most important consequence of this change of vision is that practice achieves its autonomy. This permits new relationships between the three levels.

Disciplines evolve. Paradigmatic changes bring with them a shift in ontological and epistemological assumptions. Changes in one discipline could be mapped on others. Changes dealing with a specific aspect (conceptual, methodological, philosophical) go hand-in-hand

with a set of implications and consequences with different aspects. Changes are reflected in the discourse and can be traced through it. Explanation on the conceptual or theoretical level demands a theory on a higher level, meta conceptual and meta theoretical. Sciences, their products and practices are social in nature. So, they must be socially contextualized.

Given the influence on language teaching today, it would be interesting to analyze the ways of seeing the relationship between theory and practice in the case of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

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