

Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading: Theory Put into Practice and Practice Refining Theory

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A review of the history of Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading sets off an avalanche of acronyms and a deluge of dates. Institutional changes over the decades, both at university and departmental level, have led to many changes in nomenclature and in direction. Underpinning all the work in Applied Linguistics, however, has been the endeavour to test the theories of linguistics within the practice of language teaching. Theories of the nature of language, of how it may best be described, and of how it can best be taught and learnt can then be refined in the light of actual practice and specific situations.

1. MA in Applied Linguistics

In 1976, the MA programme in Applied Linguistics (MAAL) was established and ran until 2005. This was intended primarily for qualified and experienced language teachers, whether of English or of another language. In practice, most course participants were native-speaker teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), either in Britain or elsewhere in the world, although over the years there were also native-speaker teachers of Japanese as a foreign language, as well as French, German, and others. A few participants worked as translators. The course was for one academic year and, as well as coursework and exams, involved a 15,000-word dissertation.

2. EAP and pre-sessional courses

Meanwhile, the University of Reading, like many other UK universities, was beginning to experience a noticeable increase in applications for admission from students from around the world, such students initially being referred to as ‘overseas students’, and later ‘international students’. Such applicants to Reading typically wanted to study the subjects in which Reading was seen to excel, such as Agriculture, Agricultural Education and Development, Law, and later Finance and Business. Most students were applying for a Master’s course, some for PhD level study, and some for undergraduate courses. The applicants typically had some knowledge of English, but it was quickly realised that most of them would need help in coping with the huge reading demands of their courses, with processing academic lectures, with writing exam answers, essays and dissertations, and with speaking effectively to their tutors, lecturers and fellow students. The term generally used to cover what such students need is English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The term ‘study skills’ (with English) is normally used for students at a lower academic level.

The response to the perceived need was the provision of pre-sessional English language courses, typically full-time and occupying the summer months leading up to the start of the ‘session’ or academic year. Nowadays, in the 21st Century, such pre-sessional courses are seen as essential and as big business, offered by all UK universities. Back in the 1970s they

were new and only offered by Reading and a few other universities. Initially at Reading it was assumed that an outside agency would provide the pre-sessional course – a notion that has periodically had to be challenged in the decades since. Fortunately, however, in 1974 David Wilkins, then a lecturer in the Department of Linguistic Science (DOLS), realised that such a course would be perfect material for exemplifying his ideas about the synergetic relationship between theory and practice. Thus the Centre for Applied Language Studies (CALS) was born, intended initially to design and teach pre-sessional courses.

3. The development of CALS

This was an exciting time in the world of language teaching. David Wilkins himself had been working on the development of the notional (and functional) syllabus, a radical departure from previous ideas of the content and progression of language classes. His hugely influential *Notional Syllabuses* was published in 1976 and inspired one strand of the new courses. Alongside this was research, development and teaching in the emerging area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), with EAP as free-standing sub-division.

David Wilkins was appointed Director of CALS, while still remaining a member of the Department of Linguistic Science. New staff were appointed specifically to CALS. The two earliest academic staff members were ‘the two Keiths’ – Keith Morrow and Keith Johnson – who proved to be prolific writers of textbooks and course materials which explored to the full the potential of the new notional and functional syllabuses and the accompanying communicative approach to methodology. Their books were published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) and were the first in a long line of published textbooks and other materials produced by CALS staff members, initially for in-house use but soon found to be marketable nationally and internationally.

3.1. Teacher-training courses

Throughout, CALS was theoretically a part of DOLS. However, CALS’ activities developed and it also became physically separate from DOLS. In 1977, the publisher Longman asked CALS staff to run short teacher training courses in order to help teachers around the world cope with the new style of textbook – i.e., textbooks at varying levels which used the new syllabus types and the new communicative methodology. The training courses were three or four weeks long and the majority of teachers attending them were from the Middle East. As part of the deal, Longman provided some of the money needed for CALS to get a dedicated building. This was initially and officially known as the Longman Building, but was soon referred to as ‘the CALS building’. A car park separated it from the HumSS offices used by most DOLS staff, so that CALS staff were described as being ‘across the carpark’. The phrase “I’m just going across the carpark” signified that one was making a border crossing. The HumSS building was much larger than the CALS building, but one senior DOLS staff member was heard to comment, perhaps rather sourly, “So you are the Centre, and we are the periphery!”.

In the early years, CALS was also financially independent: in a scenario unimaginable today, the Director of CALS had at his (later her) disposal large sums of money. Fees for the pre-sessional courses and for the short teacher training courses were paid in full to CALS, with only small sums being paid out for central university services. There was always a generous budget for entertaining and many were the welcome parties, end-of-course parties, Christmas parties, and so on.

Although the courses for Longman were successful, the formal link didn’t last for many years. Meanwhile, similar short teacher training courses were offered ‘open-door’ – that is, open for any teacher to attend, from whatever country or education system. At the same time, various ministries of education from around the world commissioned short

courses for their teachers. Thus for many years CALS ran two- or three-week summer courses for French secondary school teachers of English, for teachers' groups from the Spanish region of Galicia, and longer courses for groups of Japanese university lecturers. The Japanese lecturers were variously specialists in Linguistics, English Language Teaching (ELT), or English Literature. Courses for the teachers and lecturers always included a big social programme, with theatre visits, tours of places such as Oxford and Bath, pub-crawls, and parties.

3.2. The CALS MATEFL programme

In 1984 CALS launched an award-bearing programme: the MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). This had been several years in the planning and was seen as a suitable complement to the MAAL; the two programmes thrived alongside each other. The MA TEFL was designed for qualified and practising teachers of EFL and was modular in design. The idea was that teachers could attend for one term and explore various language teaching issues from a theoretical viewpoint, and then return to their classrooms and attempt to put the theoretical insights into practice. Teachers could choose from any one of four terms a year, as teaching was offered in the summer vacation as well as during the regular academic year. This model proved popular for several years, with many teachers coming to Reading every summer in particular, until they had completed the programme (comprising three terms of coursework and a dissertation). Other teachers came at different times of the year and some, of course, preferred to study at Reading on a continuous basis. The programme continues today, having been renamed MA ELT in 2003, and now follows the regular academic year.

3.3. The distance-study programme

In 1997, CALS was again in the vanguard at the University of Reading by offering a distance study version of the MA TEFL (later MA ELT). While the College of Estate Management, an affiliate of the University, was a distance-study institution, the model had hardly been followed in any other department. A core team of CALS staff spent many months studying distance delivery methods (such as those used by the Open University) and further months writing up the taught modules as stand-alone materials. The distance-study programme is still very successful, with students literally operating around the world. In previous years, a few even lived in or near Reading, work or family commitments serving to make off-campus study attractive. Some students 'mixed and matched' with the campus-based programme. A gratifying number still manage to make it to Reading for graduation.

3.4. Other CALS-related developments

Within the CALS building, an outstanding specialist library was built up, comprising books, textbooks, journals, pamphlets and a vast collection of journal articles intended primarily to support the MA TEFL programme. Sadly, a new University policy meant that this library was later disbanded and much of the material dispersed or relocated to the University's Main Library. The huge expansion in online resources meant that the collection of photocopied articles became redundant.

In addition to the MA programmes, CALS also offered a Diploma in ELT, seen as a stepping stone to enrolment on an MA programme, and a PhD programme. Alongside these award-bearing courses, the summer pre-session course continued to grow and a smaller full-time year-round programme in English Language and Study Skills (ELSS) was also offered. In 1997, a part-time and term-time programme was developed, the In-session English Support Programme (IESP), to support students already enrolled on award-bearing courses who needed two to four hours of very specialist language help per week. Meanwhile, CALS staff continued to publish textbooks, conference proceedings and monographs, and to

attend conferences and undertake consultancies worldwide. A further development was that of the Language Testing Unit, which designed and administered English language tests within CALS and the University as a whole and for outside agencies, and ran short courses, workshops and consultancies.

A new development at Reading, initially independent but later joined with CALS, was the formation in 1985 of the Preparatory Course, subsequently known as the International Foundation Programme (IFP). Such a programme, already offered in a number of other UK universities, was aimed at students as young as seventeen who lacked the equivalent of an A-Level and needed help with English language and study skills, plus extensive work in another subject (for example, law, maths, chemistry, or business), preparing them to enrol as undergraduates at Reading. In 2009, this programme joined with CALS to form the new International Study and Language Institute (ISLI).

In all of the above, the focus was on the teaching, learning and testing of the English language. David Wilkins' original idea for CALS, however, had been for the study of any and many languages; it just happened that everyone in CALS was kept fully busy dealing with English. An attempt to rectify this was made in 1993 with the foundation of the Institution-wide Language Programme (IWLP). The remit here was to offer part-time potentially credit-bearing courses (two to three hours per week, typically in lunch-breaks) in any required language to any and every member of the university community. Thus staff and students might mix in a class, studying French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and other languages. This might be primarily for recreational interest, to fulfil credit requirements, because a department had a project or study visit to a foreign country, and so on. The initial idea was also to offer such classes to the business community of Reading, both as a local initiative and to raise money. This idea was never realised, however, and courses quickly multiplied within the university community.

The IWLP was at first part of CALS. From 1995 the programme was run by the Department of Modern Languages, which already provided a number of the teachers. It returned to the umbrella of CALS in 2005.

In the new century, Reading experienced many institutional changes. In 2000, both CALS and DOLS were split in half and the component parts reassembled to form the new School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (SLALS). The name CALS was henceforth reserved for language teaching and teacher training operations. The award-bearing courses developed by CALS formed the new department or section of Applied Linguistics. The new Linguistic Science section was as before; Clinical Linguistics formed a new section of its own. Further changes came in 2005, when Linguistic Science and its programmes were phased out (including the MAAL). Clinical Linguistics moved to join the School of Psychology, which was renamed the School of Psychology and Clinical Linguistics. The departments or sections of CALS and Applied Linguistics joined the new departments of Modern Languages and of European Studies to form the School of Languages and European Studies (SLES). In 2010, Applied Linguistics was incorporated in the School of Literature and Languages, where it still remains.

Meanwhile, in 2009, the ISLI was established, comprising CALS, IESP, IWLP and IFP. In 2013 this became a free-standing school of studies. The ISLI runs language courses and courses for teachers, offers consultancies, and runs a testing service, and staff continue to research and publish. Notably, the CALS tradition of textbook-writing continues. The English for Academic Study (EAS) series of nine titles, based on practitioner experience, informed by theory and research, is published by Garnet Education. It is used by over a hundred institutions in the UK, and increasingly for English-medium instruction overseas. The Transferable Academic Skills Kit (TASK) is also widely-used in the UK and abroad.

4. A case study

To conclude, a personal case-study, that of Dr. Amos Paran, can serve to demonstrate the arc of development in Applied Linguistics at Reading. From 1987 to 1988, he took the MAAL course, then returned to teach in Israel. He later returned to Reading to undertake PhD level study between 1989 and 1994, again in the Department of Linguistic Science. During that time, he taught on the pre-sessional English language course for CALS. He again taught in Israel between 1994 and 1996, but from 1996 to 2000 was a CALS staff member, doing all the many things that this involved: language teaching, lecturing on the MA TEFL programme, researching and publishing, and running short courses for teachers. A course for French teachers, which he initiated, focused on the English literature syllabus in French secondary schools; the course ran each summer for many years, variously in Reading, London and the south of France. Finally, in 2016, the 'book of the course' will be published, deriving from work with the French teachers, but also many other groups from around the world. It is a resource book for teachers, consisting of discussion of theories of language and literature teaching and learning, plus extensive practical exemplification. In this, it very much demonstrates the constant interchange of theory and practice which characterises applied linguistics at Reading.

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