

Language Teaching beyond Language Learning:
'Academicizing' Language Programs at
Universities in Taiwan

Herbert Hanreich

Assistant Professor, I-Shou University

義守大學應用英語系專任助理教授

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language departments at universities in Taiwan are considered by a majority of the students as institutions in which language learning is the main priority of the program, with teachers functioning predominantly as language instructors, providing other aspects of the subject as complementary items. The genuine academic aspects of such a study remain rather in the background if compared to foreign language departments in the West (in this case: Europe). The reasons are manifold; they are cultural (abstract thinking is not really practiced in Asian education), historical (English learning is 'in' in Taiwan), and home-grown: There is a growing number of teachers at those departments with an academic background and expertise in English teaching.

Such a situation and its further development are subject to criticism. An academic subject focusing on techniques and strategies regarding how to best learn and teach a foreign language is narrowing down the intellectual scope of what teaching and learning at universities could and should be (the difference between colleges and graduate schools is played down here). Students studying language at universities need intellectual challenges which could only be delivered if they are to explore the vast fields of knowledge surrounding the language they wish to master at a high level. Such fields include old and new subjects of the humanities and liberal arts which should have a more prominent position within the foreign language curricula in Taiwan than they have now. They might also help students to rely less on rote learning and focus more on understanding.

Introduction

In Taiwan there is a misconception of the academic function of English departments at institutions of higher education. In many cases, they are offering predominantly English language learning programs instead of exploring the intellectual world of both, the subject to be taught and the subjects (students) who are taught. The departments where such a trend has become endemic are usually named ‘applied’ or ‘practical’ English departments, indicating already in the title the direction which is pursued there academically. Their rationale is that what they teach is closer to market demands in a ‘real’ labor world than, say, departments that focus rather on literature and other humanities, thus providing their students with a more competitive edge when seeking jobs after graduation.

But the problem is that these schools are neglecting their academic duties: their curricula are confusing, the students are misled, and the teachers are teaching subjects that should not be taught there. This paper, therefore, deals critically with ‘applied’-aspects of the curricula (I). In the second chapter it analyzes the academic benefits the students usually receive when attending such programs (II); then it takes a look at the expertise that teachers (are to) convey to their students at such departments (III). In the last section (IV) it seeks to describe academic practices which are supposed to be offered at any institution of higher education.

I. On the inapplicability of “applied” programs at universities

One could be surprised upon noting the adjective “applied” in the title of university departments in Taiwan offering foreign language programs as an academic discipline; for a language is always applied whenever it is spoken. These acts of applying a language are usually called ‘communication’, and it takes place whenever a language is spoken in order to communicate something with someone for whatever reasons, no matter whether or not this communication happens in the mother tongue or in any other language.

There are situations when communication is hampered. The reasons can be manifold. They could include personal (e.g. different intellectual standards), structural

(e.g. using different semantics) or simply cultural (e.g. using different languages) difficulties among people who wish to communicate with each other. Apparently, applied language programs concentrate on the last point. They offer so-called basic language-skills courses as their core courses such as writing, reading, listening and speaking, flanked by others which are often related to culture, new media or literature. Growing importance is given also to so-called English for Specific Purpose courses (ESP), where those English language skills are applied within specific professional contexts. Such ESP courses for instance could be business, journalism or tourism English; Internet English ("e-learning") and technology English are other options among ESP courses within applied English curricula.

Usually, applied English department courses focus on the acquisition of a foreign language for the sake of communication, with profession-oriented courses as value-added ingredients of departmental menus. In one word, applied English departments are teaching a foreign language by offering students a study environment where they would be able to apply the language they are learning within a professional world.

There are two questions that could come into mind if one looks at the situation from an outside point of view: First: Should academic institutions teach languages at all, thus competing with cram schools, high schools and other language institutions? Second: Should academic institutions prepare their students *directly* for their future professions, thus competing with vocational and other profession-oriented schools? In my view the answers to both questions should be negative.

As for the first, I am not aware that English language learning is taught as an academic discipline at institutions of higher education in European countries. If you study at English departments e.g. in France or in Germany, generally the focus is on English or Anglo-Saxon/American literature, history and culture, with a strong presence of linguistics; language skills courses are also an integrated part of the curricula. However, they are held at a very high level aiming at the refinement of language skills. Linguistics courses are hardly applied linguistics courses with the hidden agenda of teaching English. Instead, they are courses where the development of the English language (syntax, semantics, grammar, etc.) from one historical period to another one is under scrutiny (e.g. from Chaucer to Shakespeare). Linguistic theories with their strong penchant for philosophy of language are likewise included. Usually, these are the

students' most feared courses, for they require a strong feeling for language, a detailed knowledge of copious facts related to *linguistica*, and sufficient patience to seep through texts written in a language that often only faintly resembles modern spoken English.

The proficient command of the English language of the students is simply taken for granted, even despite the fact that the courses are often taught in the native language of the country where the university is located. An average student would have to read most of the classical literature (and relevant commentaries) during the undergraduate study, usually from critical editions. Discussing and evaluating various editions of classical literary works is part of the syllabi of literature courses.

Studying English there has a rather clear structure and goal: to explore *at an academic level* the linguistic and, in a broad sense, cultural dimensions of a specific language and of the people who speak it as their mother tongue. It is about understanding and analyzing contents and contexts related to the discipline.

Graduate students are expected to acquire a profound knowledge about the discipline they study. The problem of applying of what is being studied in class later on in the profession is not directly taken care of in the curricula, for a very good reason: The application is not considered to be a matter of the study but a matter of the student. A department cannot act as if it knew why and for what purpose each individual studies. Nor would it know or anticipate what cannot be possibly known or anticipated: How the individual students could integrate the knowledge they acquire into the profession the individual would eventually have, because this is often simply not even known to the students themselves during their study.

The curriculum of any university department, therefore, should essentially care for the individual's ability to fully understand the complexity of the subject matter as it emerges through relevant methods of research. And such methods, in addition, would also have to be learned and taught, enabling future professionals to use appropriate tools to become experts in their fields of study. Academic teaching should have as its main goal the generation of experts, leaving the *application* of what is being learned to outside factors which are far beyond its control (see Liessmann 2006, 29). Only profound knowledge (or knowledge that is profound enough to be easily 'refreshed', i.e. up-dated concerning latest related developments) internalizes both the quality and ability of being applied by the bearer at any time in ever-changing circumstances.

Application is an intellectual ability coupled with personal skills which solely lie in the hands of the learned individual (see, with respect to learning in general, Spitzer 2009, 356).

In addition, focusing on specific applications would considerably narrow down the academic options which a given study could offer to its students. It would also narrow down the intellectual potential of the students if their interests were guided already at the beginning of their study towards a certain direction which has been prescribed by curricula experts. The field of application of studies such as English is vast, and job opportunities often come up unexpectedly. People are better prepared for the unexpected if they are open-minded with respect to their future profession, especially at times when it is becoming increasingly important to be able to communicate with other experts from other fields on the basis of one's expertise. Future job designs reckon with an increased demand of flexibility regarding the application of one's knowledge, for new areas of knowledge are permanently created as a result of on-going interdisciplinary cooperation among disciplines which, in the past, had no common borders. M. C. Taylor, in an op-ed article in the New York Times on April 27, 2009 (*End the University as We Know It*) was right on target when writing that through the "intersection of multiple perspectives and approaches, new theoretical insights will develop and unexpected practical solutions will emerge." Indeed, we don't know what modern job profiles would look like five years from now!

It goes without saying that individuals with an education that focuses solely on the subject matter are better prepared for such new tasks than those whose education has been oriented along guidelines of applicability for jobs of yesterday's generation. Creativity, one would have to admit, is not an academic virtue in a study program where its contents are already prefixed by practical considerations regarding contemporary labor demands. One could even say that an academic education that *marginalizes* the circumstances of application of the subject to be studied prepares its students best for future jobs.

II. What do students learn at 'applied' language departments?

Any student at any academic department studies in order to become an expert in a field that would become his or her professional environment. Law students study the

law in order to become experts in interpreting the law; medical students become experts in treating sick people or preventing them from falling sick; students of philosophy study thought systems which have evolved over thousands of years in the minds of people, thus acquiring an expertise in translating previous human intellectual endeavor into contemporary intellectual constellations and so on.

But what is the expertise the students of applied English programs have received during their study? That is a question for which there is no easy answer. What could help to better understand the situation is to look at the curricula of applied English departments, and to briefly analyze - based on the curricula - the specific education which the students receive there.

As mentioned above, the main courses at such departments include basic language skills and courses where these skills are taught to be applied within specific professional contexts. As for language skills, it is already discussed in the previous chapter that the practical mastering of any given language is not an academic qualification. Admittedly, there are some exceptions if exotic languages are involved. Naturally, 'exotic' is a relative concept, depending on the own cultural context in which one finds him/herself. For instance, the study of the Arabic language in Taiwan or of the Chinese language in Italy fits with the term 'exotic' despite the fact that both are world languages. There is simply no cultural environment in the countries of the study where one could become familiar with such 'exotic' languages.

But English, the modern *lingua franca*, is hardly exotic at any place of the planet, and definitely not in Taiwan, where since decades students have to learn this language as a compulsory subject in secondary education for at least six years. If the learning or studying of English as a foreign language is offered at English departments in Taiwan it would mean that universities continue to do the job of high-schools; students would not get an academic education by learning English as a foreign language. They are just doing what they should have done when they were younger; or what they could do now by themselves: learning English. Likewise, professors would be doing the job that should have been done and apparently hasn't been done well by high-school teachers. Learning English is just for the sake of speaking English.

Since 'English learning' is not a candidate for a university student's education, the afore-mentioned 'value-added' components of applied-English departments are as it

seems expected to realize this function: job-oriented ESP courses. Indeed, reference to such courses seems to fill in the legitimacy gap that arises for departments when they are asked to justify their existence within the academic family at universities. It is suggested that a closer look be taken into such an argumentation.

Let's take for instance business English, which is as it seems the most prominent – and for many students and parents the most persuasive – course from all ESP options. Many students in Taiwan have experience with business in one way or another (as part-timers; family background; etc.), and it seems to be obvious that any input of information or the training of skills related to any kind of business is of very practical use.

One may ask what kind of expertise students acquire when they attend a course in business English. Do they learn more about business? Not really, because – as just mentioned before – many have minimal business experience anyway. What most of them wish to learn at applied English departments is to communicate in English (thus *applying* it) for business operations which they already know. Selling goods in English to foreigners for instance or communicating and corresponding with business partners if working for, say, an international trade company, is exactly what the term 'applied' would mean for students if 'English learning' at departments is meant to be job-related. Not a great perspective, one would think, but which is often heard from students when asked about the reasons why they study applied English. But would they really learn English this way? This question will be discussed after the next paragraph.

Students taking language-based business courses do not necessarily learn more about business than they already know. And teaching *more* is not the job of business English teachers (who usually have an academic background of teaching English as a foreign language) because they would not be qualified as experts. Business matters are better taken care of by business departments. Secondly, if students at applied English departments received a more sophisticated and more professional business education, then the term 'applied English' would have *no function*, for it can only be applied if the subject, for which English is to be applied, is already there or already known by the students. But, as a rule, students at applied English departments are not knowledgeable about business operations at a more-than-simple level, so there is no content (or expertise) for which any foreign language application could possibly work or make

sense. Students do not have the jobs that would allow them to recognize professional situations for which specific English terms would have to be successfully applied; usually, they do not know the terms they would need in their native language unless they are professionals. In one word: ‘Applied Business English’ cannot be applied by students for any business situation because they have never previously been in such a situation in which ‘applying the English language’ would make sense.

Moreover, business situations can never be anticipated and prepared on a one-to-one scale. If you have to communicate in English, then you simply have to speak English sufficiently, which, by the way, is much better learned if you read, say, Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* than studying textbooks on business English, which are usually compulsory for such courses. In many cases, real business situations also require the ability to conduct small talks, engage in light and witty conversations or telling stories or jokes that are often not directly related to the business operations. But it is an ability which is important for the creation of a pleasant and confidential atmosphere which would make successful business deals more likely than just going along standardized rules as prescribed by textbooks.

Potential business partners usually do not follow the script of business related textbooks. Missing catchwords could confuse a business-English-textbook-trained person in situations when smooth and eloquent conversation is needed. It is easy for English teachers at English departments in Taiwan to gain such an experience of embarrassment: Holding oral exams about a subject that students prepared along textbooks and asking questions which are genuinely related to the subject but not covered by the book usually result in answers that are not the least satisfactory.

Highly professional business people who lack English proficiency would learn key words and phrases on their own when they need conducting business operations in English; or this is what at least could be expected from them. For situations where fluent English is vital but not available (e.g. for negotiations or signing contracts) this task should be left to someone with adequate English proficiency. A successful completion of a business English course does not guarantee a successful business communication.

Coming back to our question – what is the expertise students acquire if studying at applied language programs –, it has become clear that from the perspective presented

here it is difficult to find a positive answer: Speaking better English cannot possibly be an academic goal (hundreds of millions of native speakers can do better), and the assumption that one would be better prepared for future careers if *learning* how to apply English in communication has more to do with marketing strategies of universities craving for more students than with the reality in a real world.

The sober reality is rather that our graduating students' English language abilities are, generally speaking, poor, particularly of those students who study at applied English departments. Only a very few of them are able to participate in a 'normal' conversation held in English. They cannot follow, say, BBC news. Main reasons lie in the fact that first they have hardly ever been exposed to 'real' sources of English language despite (or one should rather say: because of) the 'applied' factor. Second they have been dealing exclusively with textbooks throughout their whole study, thus facilitating easy access to information which is only learned for the sake of being tested but not for the sake of being understood or intellectually absorbed.

Therefore, in Taiwan the main problem to successfully graduate from a language study program is not a matter of providing an 'applied' environment for the students, but more a matter of studying in the right way: Students have to learn how to study properly. How this be achieved? A comprehensive answer (that cannot be given here) would include a critical analysis of cultural misconceptions that are prevailing in higher education in Taiwan: It would have to deal with the wrong perception that studying means that there is a container full of information which has to be transferred by ways of applying certain teaching techniques and teaching materials into the brains of the learners.

Before we pursue this question I wish to discuss the dilemma of applied language departments from the perspective of teachers.

III. What should teachers teach at applied language departments?

Professors are experts. They are to teach and further develop fundamentals and refinements of their specific subject for which they are experts at universities. Research and teaching go hand in hand: Professors teach their research subject because they are experts in exactly this field. Students register at departments where they expect an

education of becoming experts themselves. This is the theory. The practice looks different at applied English departments.

What is the expertise of professors at applied English departments? ‘Applied’ English? Certainly not, because they are usually not experts in the subject for which ‘applied’ makes sense (e.g. tourism or business). Rather, they are by the majority experts on teaching English as a foreign language – from this field they received their PhD degrees. If that is so, then what could they teach as experts within their field of expertise (which is, again, teaching English as a foreign language)? Teaching English? This is not what they should do at English departments at any university; this is, as just discussed, a high-school-and-bushiban job. Is it then teaching how to teach English? This would include expertise in pedagogy, for ‘teaching’, as an academic discipline, is the expertise of pedagogues and of departments of pedagogy. Pedagogy is an academic discipline in itself, which, therefore, is not in the hands of English-language-teaching experts.

When one looks at the professional and educational profiles of such experts of foreign language teaching, one could find that they have been specializing in developing and applying methods, strategies and models (often based on quantitative evaluation) that could be used in order to enhance and improve the teaching of a foreign language. Optimizing the learning of a foreign language by optimizing teaching methods and strategies – this is the expertise of many professors who are employed at applied language departments; and on which they focus their research activities. But what has such an expertise to do with what is perceived to be academically needed at applied English departments?

If it is correct (as we assume it is in chapter I) that the main focus of applied language departments is in fact, first, to facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language, and, second, to provide students with a practical perspective so as to ensure and enhance job-related applicability of what they study, then the academic input of the expertise of the foreign language teaching experts for such purposes is somehow incomprehensible. They cannot possibly apply their expertise within applied language departments.

There are several reasons for this assumption: First, students register at applied English departments not for the sake of *learning how to better learn and teach English* – they simply want to *learn* English. Second, students don’t want to learn how

to improve English teaching methods: The simple reason is that only a few students go into the English teaching business after graduation. And if they do so, they would not need to learn how to develop models on the improvement of English teaching; they would simply need to understand how to apply what others (their professors, for instance) found out in their research on this topic. Finally, such professors are not experts in the application of their research findings because they are investigating very specific models and learning/teaching patterns without taking into account broader perspectives that are vital elements for any teaching situation. Researchers, for methodological reasons, have to narrow the scope of their approach in order to produce results under very specific situations; this is how science globally is conducted. But applied English departments would need teachers with an integrated approach coupled with adequate teaching experience. A research perspective which necessarily minimizes its focus in order to maximize scientific quality is professionally blind for the multi-faceted tasks which underlie good teaching when standing in front of the class.

It seems to be obvious that professors with the professional background of conducting research in view of developing and applying improved language teaching methods have no subject to teach at applied language departments. They are at the wrong place. As professionals practicing their expertise, they should be working at research-oriented institutions specialized in pedagogical strategies with respect to foreign language learning and teaching, but not at academic institutions that focus – as the word 'applied' suggests – on the practice of language teaching. Again, it sounds paradoxical: Based on their expertise, these professionals in applying foreign language teaching methods should not have a place as teachers at applied language departments (although they could be good teachers there).

If language teaching as well as the teaching of teaching models is not the appropriate subject to be represented in the curricula –so what is it then? This is discussed in the following section.

IV. 'Academicizing' at applied language departments

In general, there is a philosophical component in the assessment of what 'teaching' means because it is always about what kind of person a student should come out as at the end of the teaching process. This is particularly true at institutions of higher

education where the formation of the personality of individual students is closely connected with their intellectual abilities (see Liessmann 2006, 54). These ‘academic’ abilities comprise (see Bubner 1993, 98) the abilities to analyze a problem from different perspectives; to give a critical account of what others so far have contributed to understanding and solving problems; to think rationally and systematically; to think in an abstract manner; to judge the subject matter independently from contemporary fads and trends; to integrate others’ ideas into one’s own train of thoughts; to understand the history of a given problem; etc.. In addition, academic thinking also includes the ability to deal (at least indirectly) with fundamental questions intrinsically related to scholarship and scientific attitudes at a more general level, such as: What is knowledge? How to evaluate knowledge and for what purpose? What is ‘truth’ (see Habermas 2003, 103)?

These kinds of questions should accompany the teaching (not only) at English departments which, of course, would only make sense if they could be applied to the contents which are taught. Those content-oriented subjects could come from the vast field of the humanities in which language is involved almost by nature: History, literature, linguistics, arts, (cross-)cultural issues, etc.. Academic input, i.e. the application of academic skills which Stanley Fish calls ‘academicizing’ (Fish 2008, 170) is vital for higher education; it is vital for the transformation of information (facts) into individual knowledge. The systematic acquisition and mastering of such academic skills are values that individuals retain. I would argue that any demanding job requires the application of these individual talents, which could be developed and practiced in higher education, for instance, at English language departments.

There is an essential difference between knowledge and facts/information: Knowledge is an individual state of mind. It is the intellectual ability to transform information into a system of thought and to communicate it to others in the form of, as it has been suggested in the case of teaching science, “a conversation among a community rather than as a simple accumulation of facts” (Readings 1999, 5). Any academic institution must strengthen this ability, which means that facts and data would have to be studied in a way that they could be *presented* or *re-told* by the learner within a coherent network of rational arguments and counterarguments. The *generation* of facts and data is another, a further level of higher education. One of the major goals of

academic education, therefore, is to eliminate irrationality, superstition, naiveté, and ideologies from the minds of the students through means of applied rationality.

Academic learning is the understanding of information as “a difference which makes a difference” (Bateson 1972, 457), i.e. to interpret it within an appropriate, ever-changing context. Essentially, knowledge is more than information; it includes both, the ability to reproduce facts, and to put and re-interpret them into a relevant context, respectively. Knowledge depends on the context, and contexts are often not ‘given’ *a priori*; they change, or they have yet to be ‘created’ or established as relevant contexts by the ‘knowledgeable’ individual. What knowledge ‘is’, is not (or cannot be) decided at the time the individual learns about the information.

The main idea of knowledge, therefore, is not its applicability, but the ‘pursuit of truth’ within varying contexts: To be able to give a rational account of what there is and why at that time. And ‘truths’ often contradict opportune application: The ‘truth’ of the US-led Iraq war is different now in 2009 than what it was in March 2003.

Stanley Fish defines the function of universities as spreading knowledge completely separated from its applicability. In defending such academic values he states: “If colleges and universities are to be ‘accountable’ to anyone or anything, it should be to the academic values – dedicated and responsible teaching, rigorous and honest research – without which higher education would be little different from the bottom-line enterprise its critics would have it become.” (Fish 2008, 159)

Knowledge should be acquired so as to provide its bearer freedom and independence from influences and developments of the *Zeitgeist*, from fashions that come and go. It is also about the development of one’s personality and of professional attitudes. Professionals are only credible as professionals if their whole personality is behind the way they practice their profession: Professional ‘competence’, therefore, is not just a technical skill but it also includes the mastery of the subject with professional dignity; it includes the ability of self-reflection. In order to achieve this task the teachers themselves need to “have a mental life” (Barzun 2002, 389).

There is a ‘moral dimension’ (Hanreich 2007, 270) in the process of learning which is, however, neglected if education is predominantly oriented towards applicability.

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