Theory in an Applied Field

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Abstract: The place of theory in TESOL is uncertain—in the association, in the field as a whole, and in the present journal. To set a context for discussion of key issues, and to initiate principled deliberation about them, I have created, for the Forum section of TESOL Quarterly, the following fictitious situation: a university task force, a memorandum in response to a report that might have been—but never was—written, and a character who could be a well-intentioned vice-president of a university anywhere (but who certainly is not the vice-president at my university, which has never had a department called TESOL). I invite responses from a variety of perspectives. What is, and should be, the place of theories in TESOL? How might that place figure in respect to other scholarly and professional fields?

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Memorandum

To: Faculty, staff, and students, TESOL Department
From: Dr. Drew Diligence, Vice-President and Provost
Re.: Your submission to the Task Force, Theory in Academic Fields

Thank you for your thoughtful submission to the task force on Theory in Academic Fields. As you know, the task force aims to describe the role of theories across academic fields at the university, in professional practices, and in society. Your
statement helps me understand better the place of theories in the field of TESOL. As you appreciate, the roles of theory could never be fixed in an absolute way, either in TESOL or any other field, because they remain open to conflicting interpretations and divergent interests as well as historical changes and cultural differences, both within and across disciplines. This point is evident in all submissions to our task force to date, and it is generally accepted in the history and philosophy of science (Hacking, 1983). For this reason your submission helps greatly in our present mission of documenting how theories are currently perceived and acted upon in particular academic fields. I hope you find my comments, as a relative outsider to your field, are useful in reflecting on some of your ideas.

Your major premise is clear: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is an “applied field” concerned primarily and pragmatically with practical activities related to the education of people learning English internationally. In this sense, TESOL is akin to such fields as Health Care, Social Work, Engineering, or Criminology that are concerned with a specialized set of services in society. In turn, the concerns of TESOL differ from those of traditional academic disciplines in the sciences or humanities. Our colleagues in Biology, for example, have argued that their status as a science is defined by an integral set of theories (e.g., theory of evolution) and descriptive frameworks (e.g., Linnaean system of classification) about specific phenomena (i.e., plant and animal kingdoms)—knowledge of which may serve practical applications such as ecology or genetics. Or, as our colleagues in Literary Studies have argued, their field is distinguished within the humanities by students acquiring knowledge and literate modes of reasoning about a set of genres and media (e.g., novels, poetry, drama) that constitute a canon of culturally distinctive works associated with particular societies and historical periods, interpreted through diverse theoretical frameworks.

From this perspective, identifying the role of theories in TESOL amounts to defining the scope and nature of the field itself—a point I return to below. I appreciate that is not a simple matter. Many complex elements and issues are involved. Your referring me to past efforts to demarcate these matters was helpful. Stern’s (1983) argument is compelling, for instance: All acts of teaching languages necessarily make assumptions about language, learning, society, and education. Such conceptualizations
can range from naïve to erudite. They may be informed by differing kinds of theories. The professional responsibility, Stern neatly articulates, is for practitioners to be informed about these matters, basing their actions and reasoning on a range of available knowledge appropriate to the pedagogical situations at hand.

**Theory-Practice Dilemma**

This is where things become complex. Which of many theories should be applied to the practical matters of language teaching? Diverse, competing theories about the nature and functions of language abound in the field of Linguistics, as our colleagues there have happily attested, pointing me, for example, to an encyclopedia with over 50 established theories just about syntax (Brown & Miller, 1996). In addition to studies of language, English teachers also need knowledge about how students learn, so must appeal to theories in Psychology, about social and cultural contexts, so must appeal to the Sociology and Anthropology, and about the organization and functions of Education generally. So, I agree, the knowledge informing TESOL connects with these foundational fields, focusing on language, learning, society, or education, respectively. But saying that is easier than knowing how best to do it. There are deep schisms among the theories within each of these fields, some of which, you have observed, appear in your field of TESOL too, for example, as conflicts between psycholinguistic or sociocultural conceptualizations of learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

A seemingly simple matter like describing the grammar of the English language can, from a theoretically informed viewpoint, become intractably complicated. Educators need guidance from theories and research on these matters. To avoid their complications would imply an attitude of ignorance. In addressing this dilemma, I was struck by your quotation from the linguist, Noam Chomsky (1988, p. 180):

People who are involved in some practical activity such as teaching languages, translation, or building bridges should probably keep an eye on what’s happening in the sciences. But they probably shouldn’t take it too seriously because the capacity to carry out practical activities without much conscious awareness of what you’re doing is usually far more advanced than scientific knowledge.
This remark is telling. As you argue, the practices of teaching English constitute their own kinds of knowledge. Your observations are intriguing about the long-standing debate over the term “Applied Linguistics”—moving from (a) an argument in the 1960s that theories from Linguistics lead directly to “scientific” methods of teaching languages (e.g., Fries, 1945; Lado, 1964) to (b) recent constructivist views that language teachers develop—through ongoing experiences of teaching, problem-solving, and collegial interactions—unique, personally situated theories of practice (e.g., Johnson, 1999). This current view of professional learning is central to other applied fields reporting to our task force, linked to Schön’s (1983) theories about reflective practice.

**Complexity of the Field**

I marvel at the variety of situations, issues, and stakeholders for whom theories must relate in the field of TESOL. The situations in which English is taught and learned vary enormously around the world. Moreover, there are multiple dimensions to teaching or learning English—involving reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary, just to name the obvious. There are also multiple dimensions to the organization of English education in any institution or jurisdiction—including curriculum policies and materials, pedagogical methods, assessment, and teachers’ professional development. Diverse types of institutions provide English language services, ranging from public and private schools to businesses and community service agencies. Theories also need to relate to the interests of various groups interested in English teaching and learning, including novice as well as experienced teachers, learners young and old (with varying degrees of contact with English and abilities or knowledge at differing points in their lives), educational administrators and policy makers, university researchers and scholars, and even parents and family members. The value of theories must vary greatly for each of these groups and situations, as must the extent, qualities, and sophistication of theories they might desire or be able to use.

Your conclusion, therefore, seems well founded: There are too many competing interests and varied situations in TESOL to permit one theory to encompass, dominate, or even satisfy them all. In this light, I found your anecdote revealing about the widespread
criticisms that followed Krashen’s (e.g., 1982) efforts in the 1980s to propose a single, simple theory of second language acquisition to guide curricula and teaching. In contrast, a useful role of theory in TESOL seems to be to define, and help people appreciate, the many complex dimensions on which English learning varies. You point out several descriptive frameworks that achieve this purpose, such as Hornberger’s (2003) continua of biliteracy or Spolsky’s (1989) conditions for language learning. The recent growth in activities, information, and research about English language teaching and bilingualism is astonishing. So I was pleased to see publications advocating principled syntheses of this knowledge (e.g., Cummins & Davison, 2007; Doughty & Long, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2007). The proliferation of this knowledge and the complexity of your field invite, perhaps even demand, a wide range of theoretical perspectives (Lantolf, 1996; Luke, 2005). Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that even a single theory can be interpreted in diverging ways, as Johns (2003) has documented for differing versions of genre theory in English writing instruction—which emphasize either the textual organization of discourse (Swales, 1990), the semiotics of sociolinguistic practices (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Mohan, 2007), or cultural-psychological dimensions of power in specialized communities (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

**Purposes of Theory in TESOL**

The central issue in your report is intriguing and crucial. You ask (following Grabe, 2001), What might people in TESOL want theories for? The simple answer may well be to inform and improve educational practices and learning opportunities. But fulfilling this purpose universally, you rightly observe, is constrained by the complexity of the field. So it makes sense to ascertain the value of theories in TESOL practices. I found compelling the proposal that language teaching and research should ultimately serve emancipatory purposes, as demonstrated in Corson’s (1997) applications of critical realism or Johnston’s (2003) reflections on incidents in his own English teaching. These moral stances relate to the theories of Freire (e.g., 1970), highlighted by our colleagues in the field of Education, that the aim of literacy education should be to empower disadvantaged groups. Likewise, I appreciated your example of English language tests. I
was pleased to see that, above and beyond conventional theories and methods for determining the validity of English language tests, criteria exist to evaluate the usefulness (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and fairness (Kunnan, 2000) of such tests in practice, and even to challenge their authority (Shohamy, 2001).

I found the functional value of theories captured broadly in Cumming’s (in press) distinction between the different roles in TESOL of theories, descriptive frameworks, and heuristics. A full theory aims to explain phenomena across a range of contexts. For instance, conceptualizing how people learn English is fundamental to TESOL. Among the many theories aspiring to explain second language acquisition, you cite current theories of emergentism (e.g., Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006), to explain progressions in learners’ acquisition of English grammar, and socio-cultural theory (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) to explain how teaching influences students’ learning English. Theories also function in TESOL through principled frameworks that describe the range of variables associated with certain phenomena. To the examples of descriptive frameworks already cited above by Hornberger (2003) and Spolsky (1989), I venture to add a personal favorite from a Linguistics course I took many years back: the International Phonetic Alphabet’s standard method for transcribing sounds across different languages and speech varieties (Albright, 1958). I can see how educators, researchers, or curriculum developers find such frameworks helpful in knowing they are considering phenomena systematically and comprehensively.

You assume that heuristics are the most common way that TESOL practitioners utilize theories. Your definition of heuristics is clear: theoretically-informed techniques for solving problems. Examples of this abound, such as teachers focusing classroom communication tasks on language forms to promote students’ awareness and language acquisition (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Spada, 1997) or techniques to model, scaffold, or plan for reading or writing tasks (Carrell, Pharis & Liberto, 1989; Ellis, 2003; Yeh, 1998). I agree that research techniques such as think-aloud, stimulated recall, or interview protocols also serve heuristic purposes in providing information about students’ or teachers’ thinking or reasoning while performing activities (Mackey & Gass, 2003; Smagorinsky, 1994). I liked your example of reading comprehension to distinguish theories from descriptive frameworks and heuristics: Nassaji (2002)
recommended that a *theory*—Kintsch’s (1998) Construction-Integration Model—be applied to TESOL inquiry. To do so systematically requires a *descriptive framework*, such as Koda’s (2007) taxonomy of crosslinguistic constraints on second-language reading development. To do so pedagogically requires *heuristics* such as Parikahkt and Wesche’s (1997) activities for vocabulary learning while reading.

**Scope of the Field**

I have to conclude by stating that your report left me in a quandary about the scope of the field of TESOL. This problem muddied my sense of whether theories figure uniquely in your field. Put simply, isn’t the place of theories similar for the field of TESOL as it is for the teaching and learning of all languages or even for English education generally? There may be special concerns that practitioners of TESOL share in common that lead to and shape a particular community of practice distinct from these related fields. But I was hard-pressed to see what the boundaries of these distinctions might fundamentally be. On the one hand, I appreciate that analyses from culturally-diverse settings contribute useful lessons to conceptualize English education inclusively (Duff, 2002; Silva, Leki & Carson, 1997) and that studies of bilingualism offer data that enrich theories in the fields of Psychology (Bialystok, 1998), Neuroscience (Gullberg & Indefry, 2006), or Sociology (Bourdieu, 1991). On the other hand, such situations appear in all other languages and educational settings around the world, so why should the case for English be different?

Your report properly highlights the increasing spread of English globally and its dominant roles in international communication, business, scholarship, and immigrant settlement. I was intrigued that there are theories arguing that TESOL therefore is a vehicle for neo-colonialism (Phillipson, 1992), descriptive frameworks of the modes of discourse involved in these processes (Pennycook, 1998), as well as heuristics to address such situations pedagogically (Canagarajah, 1999). I follow the logic of these perspectives. But what perplexes me is why the issues should differ for English internationally compared to other major, commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, or Spanish (McGroarty, 2006). Systematic,
comparative analyses need to be undertaken on these policy matters, as I see Dickson and Cumming (1996) or Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) have begun to do. Also, historical analyses need to go beyond the one full-length history cited in your report (Howatt, 1984), which focused uncritically on the teaching of various European languages (and little elsewhere in the world). Language and literacy teaching have lengthy, unexamined histories and vast geopolitical dimensions, of which TESOL occupies one important aspect (Magnan, 2007; Stern, 1983; Triebel, 2006). But it seems to me that, unless future analyses can demonstrate otherwise, the role of theory in TESOL is essentially similar to that reported to our task force for the fields of foreign language teaching or English education.

References


