

What motivates Applied Linguistics research?

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The previous issue of the *AILA Review* examined applications of applied linguistics research in the areas of language planning and policy (Darquennes 2013), the law (Engberg 2013), multilingual and intercultural communication (Li & Zhu 2013), the media (Perrin 2013) and communication disorders (Ravid, Bar-On & Dattner 2013); that is, it examined the *what* of applied linguistics research. This current issue has taken a methodological perspective, providing reviews of the *how* of applied linguistics research in the areas of second language research, language and culture, sociolinguistics and bi- and multilingual studies. What we hear much less of, however, is the *why* of applied linguistics research; that is, why applied linguistics researchers do what that they do, or put another way, what it is that motivates the research that applied linguists carry out. In many cases, it may be that this research has a very personal origin, or motivation, for the researcher. I know in my case my interest in academic writing research stems from the difficulties I had in learning to do academic writing at both high school and in my first years at university. Once I had worked this out, however, I wondered why someone hadn't told me this or, put simply, in the words of Angelova and Riazantseva (1999: 491) 'If you don't tell me, how can I know?' The matter of what it is that writers need to know to order to achieve success in the academy, thus, has become something that has driven my teaching and research interests, ever since (see e.g. Paltridge 2001, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; Paltridge & Starfield 2007; Paltridge, Starfield & Tardy 2015; Paltridge & Woodrow 2012).

In his book *Other Floors, Other Voices* Swales (1998a) shows how people's life histories often have connections with the kind of writing that they do. Swales carried out a *textography* (1998b) of the writing that people who worked on three different floors of his building at the time were engaged in, and the kinds of texts that they wrote. A textography is an approach to genre analysis which combines elements of text analysis with elements of ethnography in order to examine what texts are like, and why. It is, thus, something more than a traditional piece of discourse analysis, while at the same time less than a full-blown ethnography (Swales

1998a, 1998b; Swales & Luebs 1995). In his study, Swales looked at the writers' texts as well as gathered other data to help build up a picture of the site he was examining. He put together a collection of slides which aimed to give a pictorial sense of the building, the ambience on each floor, the layout of the offices and typical group activities on each of the floors. University documents were examined as were old newsletters held in the university library. Swales and his research team talked to past and present employees about the history of the building. They also used observations, document and correspondence analysis, and carried out text-based interviews with a selected group of employees on each floor of the building. From this material, textual life histories were put together of seven of the people who worked in the building, four from the University Herbarium (the section that looks after the University's collection of dried plants) and three from the English Language Institute, including Swales himself. Swales found that people on each floor of his building wrote quite different texts, even though they were all working at the same institution. He also found that the writers' professional and academic histories, and their life commitments had an important influence on what they wrote and how they wrote it. The textual life histories were crucial, in particular, for gaining an understanding of this. For example, one of the people whose writing he examined had published very few data-driven research papers and had concentrated, instead, on textbooks and review articles. When asked about this, she said "you really have to make your peace with what you're good at". Another reason, Swales suggests, may be that she disliked professional antagonisms and criticisms, as revealed in a number of her comments where she said "it isn't worth my time to trash something" and "the thing I'm *not* is a criticizer" (p. 148). She had, however, very high standing in her professional field and had gained this standing through her teaching, and publishing materials from her teaching, rather than the more traditional route of publishing technical papers in her field. She, in fact, had become her university press's best selling author (and was ultimately promoted to full professor) as a result of her commitment to this side of her work. So what Swales's study revealed is not just what the texts were like that people wrote in their part of the university, but also why they wrote these texts. The study, thus, gives us not just descriptions of people's texts, but also an explanation for differences in the texts and, in turn, an understanding of the reasons for these differences.

Insider stories, then, can provide us with valuable insights into why applied linguistics researchers undertake the work that they do. These stories, of course, need not be as extensive methodologically as the study carried out by Swales. There are a number of other methodologies also, I would argue, that can provide us with these kinds of insights, specifically, *narrative inquiry* and *autoethnography*.

Narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen 2013; Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik 2014; Riley & Hawe 2005) is increasingly being employed in applied linguistics research but

not often for the purpose of examining the motivations that underlie applied linguists' research. Narrative inquiry involves the collection of stories to enable us "to see the world through the eyes of others" (Riley & Hawe 2005:226). The stories might be in the form of journals, letters, autobiographies, memoirs, interviews and orally told stories. These stories are then interpreted with reference to the research literature in the field, leading to implications for pedagogy, further research or theory building (Murray 2009). Narrative inquiry is more than just the re-telling of stories, however, but rather an exploration of the underlying insights and assumptions that are illustrated by the stories (Bell 2002). One key feature of narrative inquiry, then, is that it is able to provide insights into people's beliefs and experiences. As Bell (2002) points out, people construct stories that support their interpretation of themselves, leaving out events and experiences that do not fit with the view they have of themselves. This can allow the researcher to uncover views, values and assumptions that the story-teller themselves is often not consciously aware of. Narrative inquiry, thus, is a research approach that focuses on the lived experiences and personal knowledge of people. Study participants tell (and re-tell) stories to the researcher who then constructs their own story of the participant's stories on which they are working (Casanave 2005).

Autoethnography (Anderson 2006; Canagarajah 2012; Denzin 2013; Ellis 2004), with its focus on personal experience, also has potential for the study of applied linguistics researchers' motivations. As a method, autoethnography draws together features of autobiography and ethnography. Autoethnographers 'use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:3). Canagarajah and Lee (2014) provide an autoethnography of their experiences of being a journal editor (Canagarajah) and author (Lee) during the submission and review process of a beginning author's (Lee's) attempts to get published in the journal *TESOL Quarterly*. Using narratives written by each of them and surrounding commentary they describe how Lee struggled to engage with the dominant discourses and views of the journal, as represented by the editor and its reviewers, and how the editor aimed to facilitate this process. Their study shows both the challenges of meeting these kinds of expectations and the risks involved in not doing this.

We are still in need, however, of more accounts of the challenges, frustrations (and of course joys) of applied linguistics researchers' experiences in the development and engagement in the work that they do. This proposal follows the call for increased reflexivity in applied linguistics research (Canagarajah 2005; Starfield 2013) which shows us researchers' positions and positioning (Macbeth 2001) in relation to what they are doing in a way that can give greater insights into what has motivated them to undertake their research. One publication that does this

is Vandrick's (2009) *Interrogating Privilege* in which she reflects on how her upbringing, life and work history, and personal politics have impacted on her work, bringing theorized accounts of pedagogy, identity, social class and gender into her discussion. As Vandrick (2009: 20) notes 'our teaching and scholarly work cannot and should not be isolated from our backgrounds, our various identities, or living conditions, or our beliefs', something that we very clearly see in her book.

Swales' (2009) *Incidents in a Educational Life* also gives us insights into his development as a researcher and connections this has had with moments in his life. He talks about these events as being somewhat serendipitous, of having been 'in the right place and the right time' (p. 203) suggesting that 'many things might have been different if just one thing had been other than it was' (p. 204). Pennycook's (2012) *Language and Mobility* contains narrative accounts of his family's and his own histories that have strong connections with his interests in language, identity and many other matters, arguing that there is 'a good case for the use of such material as part of the applied linguistic enterprise' (p. 32). Leech's (2009) autobiography also provides interesting insights into his development as a researcher and the events and people that influenced him. A recently established series of applied linguists' previously published works edited by Rod Ellis contains, in each volume, an autobiographical account in which the author outlines issues that have been important in their work and how their work has evolved over time (see e.g. Alderson 2011; Dörnyei 2012; Ellis 2010; Ferris 2013; Hyland 2014; Skehan 2011). These books, however, are available only in China but would no doubt be of interest to a much wider audience.

What the field would benefit from, I would suggest, is many more stories of this kind, either as independent narrative accounts or as part of edited collections — stories which explore what motivated researchers' interest in the research they are engaged in, how their approach to research has changed over the years and if it has, why this has happened. Stories such as these provide us with valuable insights into the research histories of applied linguistics researchers, giving us an understanding of where they have come from, how this has impacted on what they do, as well as, importantly, provide inspiration (Kramsch 2010) for others moving into the field.

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