

Language and culture as dynamic social phenomena: Incentives for teaching and research

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Hall, Joan Kerry (2012). *Teaching and researching language and culture* (2nd ed.)
Harlow: Pearson Education. 264 pages, ISBN 978-1-4082-0506-8

The context

Teaching and researching language and culture is a volume in the *Applied Linguistics in Action* series published by Pearson Education. The overall aim of the series is to offer an insight into past and ongoing research as well as research possibilities in various fields of applied linguistics in order to help teachers and researchers identify and develop their own projects. This particular volume fits the bill perfectly and is an inspiration to researchers and teachers of applied linguistics. This new edition has been updated and revised in an effort to allow the readers to learn about the developments in teaching and researching language and culture in the past decade.

In the area of teaching foreign languages the almost set phrase *language and culture* has recently tended to refer to the integrated teaching of the target language and the target culture with the aim of better preparing language learners for effective communication in the real world once they become independent language users. In this setting *culture* represents a content area to be taught along with the language, comprising knowledge about different cultures, as well as attitudes to different people and behaviours, and skills of (intercultural) communication. In *Teaching and researching language and culture* Joan Kerry Hall looks at a much broader interpretation of *language and culture*. Her focus is mostly on language and language use from the perspective of applied linguistics, meaning that she discusses the background – or “the lineage”, as she calls it – of these, adding a sociocultural context. Apart from demonstrating how current interpretations have come about, she also uses examples to show how these interpretations affect the teaching and research scenes. The second half of the book contains practical considerations on research approaches and methods.

The ingredients

The book contains four main sections: Defining language and culture; Teaching language and culture; Researching language and culture; Resources. The glossary, references, and the author and subject indices complete the volume. The full table of contents and other features of the book are available at: <http://catalogue.pearsoned.co.uk/catalog/product?ISBN=9781408205068> .

In Section I – Defining language and culture – the author sets the scene. Going through major linguistic concepts that are often discussed in connection with language learning, she deals with issues such as language based in its sociocultural context, linguistic relativism, systemic

functional linguistics, language use and identity, language and socialisation, learning how to mean, etc. It is at the end of this section that, based on the texts and approaches discussed so far, a very transparent table (p. 65) illustrates traditional and sociocultural perspectives on language, culture and learning. The author draws up a spectacular system of the differences between the ‘Linguistics Applied’¹ point of view and the socioculturally based views on language, culture, learning, the individual, and the purpose of research on language and culture. Thus we can easily grasp that as opposed to the traditional view, from the sociocultural perspective *language* is not regarded as a collection of “[i]nternally coherent structural systems knowledge of which precedes use” but “[t]ools and resources for social action, structural and functional regularities of which result from use”. In the same comparison culture is not a set of “[l]ogical systems of representational knowledge” but “[s]ocial systems of communicatively realised practices” (p. 65). It emerges clearly that Hall views language and culture as dynamic, i.e. constantly developing social phenomena. This perception then lays the foundations for defining the purpose of research on language and culture learning as examining “the developmental consequences of appropriation [of language and culture learning] into particular communicative activities in terms of an individual’s developing repertoire of means for taking action” (p. 65).

Section II – Teaching language and culture – continues this dynamic view and goes on to discuss the role of language grounded in the wider classroom context. We thus get to read about earlier research conducted in relation to the sociocultural worlds of learners, for instance, to language socialisation practices, connections between the home environment and the school, and language variation. The relationship of language and culture in the teaching and learning process is then examined, and this is followed by considerations regarding the content of the curriculum and teaching processes. An important point made here is that as teachers and learners interact to co-construct knowledge, the scene and event of teaching and learning must be regarded as those of a community. This also sets out an approach to research. The references in the chapters of this section to earlier research illustrate the breadth of inquiry in the field of language and culture.

Section III – Researching language and culture – offers a theoretical and a practical guide to researching language and culture from a sociocultural perspective. In the chapter on theoretical considerations the author first explains the different attitudes to research. She elaborates on the differences between qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research, and discusses issues of research ethics and relationships in research. The section continues with the description of practical approaches to studying language. Interactional sociolinguistics, conversation and discourse analysis and linguistic ethnography are mentioned among others. The next chapter provides guidelines for research: it gives a brief outline of the research cycle and details its elements, from identifying problems and developing research questions, through identifying the research approach and data sources, data collection and analysis to reflecting on and sharing the findings. The final chapter of this section pulls the previously described elements together and shows how research can be conceptualised and how it can be placed in context. The author gives short, well structured descriptions of eight earlier studies to demonstrate the research process.

Section IV – Resources – gives very practical information about journals, professional organisations and web-based resources. All the resources are described and commented, thus this section serves as a handy compass in deciding where to turn for more information.

¹ Hall differentiates applied linguistics from ‘linguistics applied’, which term refers to “a subset of the field of linguistics in which knowledge of the language is used to address language-related concerns such as language teaching and language policy decisions.” (p. 5)

The presentation

The presentation is one of the strong points of the book. It is very clearly structured, the illustrations are impressive, the figures and tables clean-cut and unambiguous. The typography makes the pages pleasant to the eye and also allows for some emphases. For instance, some concepts mentioned in the text are further explained in additional boxes, while interesting and relevant quotations are offered for consideration in the same way. Each chapter ends with a list of suggested further readings annotated by the author.

Overall

The second edition of *Teaching and researching language and culture* is a highly commendable volume offering insight into applied linguistics research from a sociocultural perspective. It presents both theoretical and hands-on knowledge to novice researchers and also serves as a good resource for tutors teaching research methods in applied linguistics in various university programmes. The shortcomings of the book stem from its merits: the author discusses issues related to the content focus and background of language and culture, as well as the teaching of these, while also giving an overview of research methods and approaches; but while this latter part is very comprehensive, it does not provide enough help to enable novice researchers to start their own investigations without consulting further reference books on research methods. However, the volume presents the complexities of the issues discussed in so much detail and clarity that it certainly offers its readers a good overall understanding of and inspiration for teaching and researching language and culture.

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