



## **EDITORIAL**

Dear *JALDA* reader,

Our Journal's tendency towards the real world in language and literature studies should have significant epistemological and methodological consequences in researching the fields. The interest in the real world makes the problems we may have in our everyday life our 'points of departure' in research. This tendency of ours is in fact a reminder of what Donrvei (2011, p. 17) introduces under features of a good researcher.

[One of the most] important features of a good researcher is common sense. When we become intimately involved in pursuing an activity, it is all too easy to lose touch with reality and abandon one's clarity of purpose, to become biased and go gradually astray. Lots of elaborate, costly, and highly 'scientific' investigations have been conducted on trivial and frankly boring topics. Applied linguists are by definition engaged with the real world and I have found that the best researchers in the field tend to be very normal people. They have a high level of common sense that helps to keep their feet firmly on the ground.

To me, 'to keep one's feet firmly on the ground' in doing research sounds contrary to 'standing on the shoulders of giants', a concept we used to cling to in academic contexts in Iran a few years ago when I was a student (and it is still the motto of some researchers), and by means of which we meant 'discovering truth by building on previous discoveries'. Previous discoveries are as real as the shoulders of giants. Giants are prolific scholarly figures in academic disciplines whose works and discoveries we usually use both as materials taught to students and as sources of inspiration to undertake research in our field of study. But all this seems to be changing because our views of truth and research are changing. A dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant may have a much farther view of the scenery of the field, which sounds good at the first glance! But today's view of issues is different. Today we are suggested by scholars such as Dornyei that we should try to solve the problems we may encounter in the real world that surrounds us rather than stare at faraway lands, standing on giants' shoulders. Donrvei (p. 17) says, "It seems to me that no amount of sophisticated research design or complex analytical technique can be a substitute for creative thinking that is grounded in reality. Many of the best known studies in applied linguistics are not at all complicated in terms of their research methodology but are based on fairly simple but original insights, making us sigh, 'Why didn't I think of this ...!'" Gigantic works should give way to more down-to-earth ones!

Giant scholars are not supernatural creatures coming out of void; they have their bases in the history of the world and they are the emblems of power relationships. A scholar, regardless of the amount of his/her achievements, is the outcome of a historical/cultural background that has its confinements and limits. The scholar has a view of the issues that have emerged within a contextual situation and the findings are specifically related to that context. Even the scholar himself/herself

is a contextual phenomenon. An Edward Said in Lebanon, for instance, would be different from an Edward Said raised in the US. And Edward Said in the US could be different if he did not have affiliations with Lebanon. Edward Said's gigantic work *Orientalism* has had a huge impact on literary and cultural studies, but it is not guaranteed, from a more pragmatic perspective, that his theories would be useful for everyone everywhere because he certainly had his historical/cultural view of the issues, his transcendence beyond which is regarded as impossible. Once this is agreed upon, which seems to have few opponents today, Said's theory or anybody's theory should be applied with caution; they may lack the capacity to answer our questions.

A visit to Persian language and literature departments in Iran, let alone the English departments, however, and a review of their journals, for instance, would reveal how anxious researchers in the field are to learn the imported theories to apply them mostly to the reading of classical Persian literary texts. And in the frenzy of all this anxiety no one is concerned with the lack of any 'theory' that may have affinity with the target culture. Scholars inclined towards the real world would argue against this kind of application of theory which happens disregarding the role of the reader's/researcher's sociocultural background in the reading of literary texts. The confusing aspect of the issue is that, with the attempts to challenge the theory-oriented approaches in the air, most researchers seem rather indifferent towards and/or unaware of them. One reason for this must be the power relationships that dominate the faculties where everybody has been taught to stick to this or that systematic theory, teach it devotedly and approve research only within its framework. But what would happen if we were asked to dare learn to 'unlearn' what we have learned in order to go beyond the limits of the theories we have learned? We are far from the time when theories were our goals. Rather, they are our tools. We shall use them if they are useful in solving our real world problems. Otherwise, we are ready to 'unlearn' them.

The quick changes we experience every day in today's global world are the reason why 'unlearning' has turned into a very serious topic for people working in various areas today. People working in business as well as those in academic context hail the concept 'unlearning'. In Harvard Business Review, Bonchek has interesting comments on 'unlearning', which need to be quoted at length here:

Ever since the publication of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, 25 years ago, companies have sought to become "learning organizations" that continually transform themselves. In our era of digital disruption, this goal is more important than ever. But even the best companies still struggle to make real progress in this area.

One problem is that they've been focused on the wrong thing. The problem isn't learning: it's *unlearning*. In every aspect of business, we are operating with mental models that have grown outdated or obsolete, from strategy to marketing to organization to leadership. To embrace the new logic of value creation, we have to unlearn the old one.

Unlearning is not about forgetting. It's about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm. When we learn, we add new skills or knowledge to what we already know. When we unlearn, we step outside the mental model in order to choose a different one.

As an example, last summer I rented a car to travel around Great Britain. I had never driven this kind of car before, so I had to learn the placement of the various controls. I also had to learn how to drive on the left side of the road. All of that was relatively easy. The hard part was *unlearning* how to drive on the right. I had to keep telling myself to "stay left." It's the reason crosswalks in London have reminders for pedestrians to "look right." It's not easy to unlearn the mental habits that no longer serve us.

The same thing happens in business. Many of the paradigms we learned in school and built our careers on are either incomplete or ineffective.

According to my experience of research in our universities throughout their history, researchers in both applied linguistics and literary studies have attributed great significance to 'learning' theories giant scholars have formulated and their main job has been to put the theories to use in the Iranian context for the purpose of teaching English language and literature. It seems that we are just consumers of the findings we receive with the label 'scientific' on them from scientists. The scientificity of the issue provides the consumers with a certain view that what results from the application of the imported formulations is right and that what lies beyond the limits of scientific endeavour is nonsense. According to this view, there is only one way to truth and that way is the one that passes through science. Orientalism as an institutionalized Western view of the East had a similar function and destiny until Said's critical view and approach to the topic showed the constructed nature of the phenomenon and that how knowledge with a claim for scientificity could provide a distorted view of reality.

The question of scientificity in applied linguistics has had its problematic consequences, too. According to Rajagopalan (2004, p. 400, quoting Allen and Corder, 1975), the claim for scientificity in applied linguistics led its pioneer scholars to turn to theoretical linguistics:

Our aim in AL [Applied Linguistics] is to make use of the knowledge and insight gained from scientific investigations into the nature of language, in the hope that we may solve some of the problems which arise in the planning and implementation of language teaching programs.

Applied linguistics in this sense has been following the discipline of linguistics step by step from structuralism to generative grammar to systemic-functional linguistic theory; but now, according to Rajagopalan, it has reached the status of being "on the verge of a major paradigm shift in the sense of Kuhn" (Rajagopalan 2004, p.411). The paradigm shift, as I understand it, is firstly a turning away from linguistics as a science, the unlearning of linguistic theories, because no linguistic theory is comprehensive enough to provide us with a real world description of language; new

ways of analysing and understanding language are needed. It is also an unlearning of the traditional/modernist sense of science: the objectivity that is allegedly achieved by quantitative research. For Dornyei (p. 9), a realization of the paradigm shift has been the fierce ‘paradigm war’ between two camps of research methodologists: the constructivists/interpretists, who use qualitative methods, and the positivists/empiricists, who use quantitative methods. For Dornyei, what has resulted from this fierce war has been approving a pragmatic approach to research. “But what is pragmatism?” one may ask. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that includes those who claim that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily, that the meaning of a proposition is to be found in the practical consequences of accepting it, and that unpractical ideas are to be rejected. As a movement in philosophy, it has significantly influenced non-philosophers—notably in the fields of law, education, politics, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism .... A pragmatic approach to research in the fields of Applied Linguistics and Literary Studies is what seems to be more practical in the Iranian context. The researcher’s biased devotion/enslavement to a specific theory, especially of a quantitative nature, according to my experience, is a characteristic of research in this context, which requires serious attention. The illusion that the only way to truth passes through quantitative research is dominant among applied linguists in Iran; a view that is a reminder of Dornyei’s experience of his PhD research in the mid-1980s, when there was only one instrument for his research carrying the approval of positivist thinking, without which the instrument would be useless.

The assumption that researchers should confine themselves to theories, frameworks, methodologies and the use of instruments that are of positivistic nature is a dominant characteristic in the Iran context; it seems hard for researchers to believe that the traditional boundaries can be violated, that the outdated learnings can be unlearned if authentic answers are sought for life-world problems. What Corson (quoted by Rajagopalan 2004, p. 415) states about applied linguistics is an exact reflection of what we have been involved with in “language teaching” in Iran, which seems to me to be mostly detached from life-world:

AL [Applied Linguistics] began to flourish well before any hermeneutic, critical, or postmodern epistemology had become influential in setting the course for inquiry in the human sciences . . . Although many applied linguists are deeply involved with issues of human emancipation, these interests have been rather muted and have had little abiding impact on AL generally. This is especially true of its central language teaching functions . . . Indeed, just this perception that “language teaching” is its central function, may have distorted the epistemological foundations of AL in general.

According to this view, applied linguistics should not be confined to ‘language teaching.’ Its function should be ‘language teaching in the context of the real world,’ although, according to Rajagopalan (2004, p. 415), “There is still a long way to go and many stubborn resistances . . . to be overcome.”

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## Author Biography

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