

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

ALR2023 Symposium: Innovation in applied linguistics, emerging methods and technologies

Dina Abdel Salam El-Dakhs¹, Suhad Sonbul² and Anna Siyanova-Chanturia³

¹Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, ²Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia and ³Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

Corresponding author: Dina Abdel Salam El-Dakhs. Email: ddakhs@psu.edu.sa

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1. Introduction

The International Symposium on Applied Linguistics Research (ALR) is organized and hosted by the Applied Linguistics Research Lab (ALLAB, see <https://www.psu.edu.sa/en/CHS/ALLAB>) at the College of Humanities and Sciences, Prince Sultan University (PSU, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). The event started in 2020 as a yearly online international symposium, and is in its fourth year (ALR2023). Given its unique location – Saudi Arabia – the ALR serves as a hub for researchers in this particular geographical area; however, it also attracts participants from other areas. It aims at promoting applied linguistics research in the Middle East through bringing together major international names and high-quality research in various applied linguistics disciplines.

There were over 500 registered participants from 32 countries for the two days of the symposium (4–5 November 2023). The symposium included several invited events, including six keynote talks, four workshops, and a colloquium. The symposium featured an additional 18 paper presentations and five poster presentations that had been selected after a rigorous review process by a team of 53 reviewers from ten countries. Due to space limitation, the present report will focus only on the plenary sessions, workshops, and the colloquium. Full details of the event can be found at: <https://info.psu.edu.sa/VirtualEventsPlatform/ALR2023/>.

2. ALR2023 Day 1

The opening plenary talk was given by Professor Andy Gao (University of New South Wales, Australia). In a talk entitled ‘Agency in Language Education: What is it, Why Does it Matter and How Does it Work?’, Gao discussed ‘agency’ as an important concept that has emerged in language education in recent years. He outlined major approaches to conceptualizing agency, including socio-cognitive, sociocultural, poststructuralist, and ecological perspectives. He also discussed how the notion of agency relates to other related but distinct concepts such as autonomy. In the talk, Gao drew on sample studies to demonstrate how ‘agency’ can help us appreciate ways in which teachers interact with language policies in implementing pedagogical reforms. The talk concluded with a discussion of ways to create enabling conditions for language teachers’ collective agency growth and practical recommendations to foster learner agency in language classrooms.

The second plenary speaker on Day 1 was Professor Fakhieh AlRabai (King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia). In a talk entitled ‘Emotions in Language Learning’, AlRabai examined foreign language learning as a deeply multifaceted process associated with an interplay of negative and positive emotions, each with specified functions. While negative emotions identify, isolate, and combat external irritation, positive emotions broaden language learners’ thinking and vision, help them undo the enduring effects of negative emotional arousal, and spur productive reactions to stressful experiences. The talk highlighted a variety of issues pertaining to the conceptualizations of learner emotions, in general,

and in second language (L2) learning, in particular. AlRabai depicted the dynamic and fluid nature of learner emotions and the dichotomy (positive vs. negative) of learner emotions, highlighting theories concerned with the role of emotions in language learning.

The third plenary was given by Professor Jeanine Treffers-Daller (University of Reading, UK), entitled 'Code-switching and Translanguaging: Same or Different? A Critical Appraisal'. In this talk, Treffers-Daller tackled the concept of 'translanguaging', one of the most significant concepts in the recent history of multilingualism research. The talk discussed the claims of proponents of the unitary translanguaging theory whereby there is one undifferentiated mental system supporting multilingual processing. Treffers-Daller showed that these claims may not be true according to recent evidence exhibiting how multilinguals can (and often do) keep their languages separate whenever the situation requires it, even though they can freely mix languages in other circumstances. Treffers-Daller reviewed recent psycholinguistic and neuro-scientific work showing the ways in which code-switching can affect language processing in multilinguals, concluding with future directions for research.

Day 1 of the symposium proceeded with an invited colloquium on 'Innovative Methods in Corpus Linguistics Research', which was moderated by Dr. Paweł Szudarski (University of Nottingham, UK). The colloquium showcased examples of innovative research and best practices in the area of corpus linguistics, as well as work at the interface between corpus analysis and other linguistic subdisciplines. The colloquium included three presentations. The first one was delivered by Dr. Robbie Love (Aston University, UK), who discussed the applications of corpus methods for the analysis of casual conversations drawing on recent examples from research into variation and change in the Spoken British National Corpus (BNC). Next was a talk by Dr. Emma McClaughlin (University of Nottingham, UK), where insights from a study of UK Coronavirus messaging were discussed, underlining the value of responsible research approaches to practitioners communicating health threats to the public. Finally, Dr. Niall Curry (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) presented his team's project on how English language teaching stakeholders use corpus-linguistics research to inform materials and assessment development. He discussed how findings from this under-researched area can inform various areas of linguistics.

Day 1 concluded with two concurrent workshops delivered by two partners of ALR2023: Saudi TESOL Association, which is an academic association supporting the teaching of English language in Saudi Arabia, and TRAAJIM (an Arabic word that means 'translation'), which is an association promoting and supporting the work of translators and interpreters in Saudi Arabia. Dr. Mansoor S. Almalki (Saudi TESOL) explored the extensive capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) in the domain of language testing and assessment. The workshops provided an in-depth analysis of the cutting-edge methodologies, tools, and applications that are establishing novel benchmarks within this discipline, with an eye on the obstacles involved. In an interactive session, Almalki utilized practical demonstrations and real-life case studies to equip attendees with the necessary knowledge and abilities to effectively use AI in their language assessment pursuits. The other workshop was conducted by Dr. Maha Alharthi (TRAAJIM), who examined the 'corpus revolution' as a concept that marked a transformative shift in applied linguistics in the last few decades. The workshop aimed to provide an overview of the impact of the corpus revolution on the field through showcasing its role in reshaping the various disciplines, enhancing our understanding of language, and influencing language education and pedagogy. Throughout the workshop, Alharthi highlighted the concept that the corpus revolution is not merely a methodological advancement, but rather signifies a profound transformation in how we approach language research and its applications in real-world contexts.

3. ALR2023 Day 2

Day 2 of the program commenced with the fourth plenary talk entitled 'Researching in New Directions: Lessons from the Field', presented by Professor Averil Coxhead (Victoria University of

Wellington, New Zealand). Coxhead focused on how two projects in vocabulary studies that addressed real-life problems changed her own research approaches. The first project, the Language in Trades Education (LATTE) Project, sought to describe and support the learning of trades language. The second project, an extension of the LATTE project, was designed to translate a list of English technical terms into the Tongan language spoken in Tonga (an island nation in the Pacific Ocean). Coxhead explained how her involvement in these two projects made her reflect on her research practices and come to the realization that her research approaches were heavily Westernized. Coxhead also reconsidered the importance of time and relationships in research and recognized that research could result in both measurable and immeasurable outcomes.

Day 2 proceeded with two workshops by ALR2023 partners. The first workshop was delivered by Dr. Marwa Abdel Mohsen, representing the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (AASTMT), which is a university affiliated to the Arab League. The workshop focused on how to design objective language test items. The interactive workshop highlighted the main characteristics of test items and their different types, and covered the best practices to follow in designing tests. The final part of the workshop was dedicated to hands-on practice writing test items while the audience were provided with constructive feedback. The second workshop was delivered by Professor Antonella Sorace (University of Edinburgh) on behalf of Bilingualism Matters, which is an international association specialized in supporting communities to make informed decisions on multilingualism, language learning, and language diversity. In the workshop, Sorace highlighted that world views towards bilingualism, which used to be dominated by largely negative views, have become increasingly positive in the past decades. She refuted several common myths about bilingualism, including the idea that it causes confusion and leads to schooling problems, and highlighted tangible benefits associated with bilingualism, such as providing children with a head start in early literacy and a better ability to learn new languages. Finally, Sorace presented implications for the community and promoted the work by Bilingualism Matters in this regard.

The fifth plenary talk, entitled ‘Towards a Multilingual Ethos for Error Correction’, was given by Professor Lourdes Ortega (Georgetown University, USA). In her talk, Ortega raised the concern that error correction, which is widely viewed as a central part of every language teacher’s job, could lead to demotivating learners and increasing their sense of insecurity. Ortega argued that error-correction practices need to be reconsidered in light of the recognition of multicompetence (i.e., not native-like competence) as the goal of language teaching. Ortega thus argued that professional knowledge of error correction must be based on a critical examination of the relevant social, educational, and affective dimensions in the classroom context, and that language instructors must consider these factors before judging their learners’ language as representing instances of linguistic incompetence or multilingual flexibility.

The closing plenary of the symposium entitled ‘Researching Academic Discourse Socialization: Methods, Insights, and Innovations’ was delivered by Professor Patricia Duff (University of British Columbia, Canada). Academic discourse socialization (ADS) was defined as a process of socially mediated learning of relevant communication practices in academia via linguistic and social interaction, instruction/modelling, observation, experience, and other affordances. These practices include being able to give academic presentations, participate in class/online discussions, collaborate inside and outside the class, read and write academic texts, and compose emails. Duff explained that ADS research originally focused on these discursive activities, among others, and how people (particularly L2 learners) are scaffolded or mediated by others and by means of using various tools. However, recently the focus has become more multimodal, considering how various factors interact in ADS, including multiple semiotic systems, the role of identity and ideology, the power dynamics, and the availability of digital technologies to support learners’ socialization into new practices, cultures, and discourses. Duff also shared sample research projects that were conducted in this domain and discussed the theoretical foundations underlying these projects as well as the employed methodologies. The talk shared a range of insights and innovations in this still relatively young yet fast-growing field.

4. Outcomes and implications for applied linguistics

One of the key outcomes of the ALR2023 Symposium was a shared understanding of the ever-changing and evolving nature of applied linguistics research and the recognition of the field's heavy reliance on novel methods and the integration of state-of-the-art technologies. The symposium made it evident that research in applied linguistics with its distinct lines of enquiry is rapidly progressing towards addressing real-world problems in relation to the use of language and is increasingly becoming more accountable to the society.

The aim of the symposium was to promote applied linguistics research in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East through bringing together world-leading authorities in the field. This allowed symposium participants to reflect on their current research practices, consider integrating innovative methods and technologies in their work, and strive for research with a notable societal impact.

5. Resources

You can watch the invited talks and colloquium at PSU's YouTube Channel:

Day 1: <https://youtu.be/NEBoiJ6Zi8s>

Day 2: <https://youtu.be/GJbbkAEKskM>