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Empowering Teachers with the Tools of Linguistics: A Review of Razfar and Rumenapp's *Applying Linguistics in the Classroom: A Sociocultural Approach*

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Cover Page Footnote
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Book Review

Applying Linguistics in the Classroom: A Sociocultural Approach, A. Razfar & J.C. Rumenapp.
Routledge: New York (2014).

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Applying Linguistics in the Classroom: A Sociocultural Approach

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Elementary, middle, and high schools in the U.S. are educating increasingly linguistically diverse populations of students (NCES, 2016). As a result, all teachers must simultaneously teach both content and language to students attending their classes, including English language learners (ELLs). Knowledge of linguistics can augment classroom teachers' understanding of student language-use and their ability to teach language in addition to content in their classrooms.

Intended for practicing and pre-service teachers, *Applying Linguistics in the Classroom: A Sociocultural Approach* by Aria Razfar and Joseph C. Rumenapp introduces readers to the core areas of linguistics and the tools of discourse analysis. In alignment with their sociocultural approach to language and learning, the authors invite readers to observe the language-use of the adults and children around them. They then encourage readers to use the linguistics tool of discourse analysis to analyze distinctions among the uses of language in various environments including classrooms, homes, and neighborhoods. By inviting teachers to systematically observe

how language is used distinctly in various settings and by members of different cultural and linguistic groups, the authors endeavor to broaden and deepen teachers' general understanding of language and the manner in which it shapes human interaction and learning. With a deeper understanding of linguistics and a broader appreciation of language-use, the authors assert that teachers can better engage with and teach culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms.

To help teachers come to a better understanding of both their students' language use and the field of linguistics, *Applying Linguistics in the Classroom* is divided into fourteen chapters, with each chapter focusing on one area of linguistics. Organized from smaller to larger units of linguistic analysis, early chapters address phonology and morphology while chapters in the middle of the book discuss syntax and semantics. The chapters at the end of the book cover other linguistic topics including language learning, language as related to identity, and language ideology. Each chapter is organized in a similar manner, beginning with chapter learning goals and key terms, then presenting content information concerning the chapter's area of linguistic focus. This content information is followed by several case studies describing examples of ways in which practicing content-area teachers have applied the chapter's area of linguistics to enhance their understanding of their own language use and that of the ELLs in their classrooms. Additionally, each chapter includes a section with discussion questions, linguistics exercises, and linguistic analysis activities that encourage teachers to carefully observe their students' language-use in the classroom. Finally, a list of print and online resources about the chapter topic is provided at the end of each chapter.

One of the book's main strengths is its informal tone. Throughout the text, the authors use the pronoun "we", which gives the writing an intimate tone and highlights the fact that the

authors are practicing educators who understand teachers' daily classroom challenges. Another of the book's strengths is the presentation of dozens of teacher case studies that provide practical illustrations of ways in which each chapter's area of linguistics has been used by mainstream classroom teachers to understand their ELLs' language-use. Through these case studies, the text remains focused on the ways in which ideas from the field of linguistics can be easily observed in classrooms. The expression of solidarity with teachers' daily experiences and focus on classroom observation of student language-use reinforce the authors' premise that an understanding of linguistics can help mainstream teachers to observe and make sense of their students' use of language.

Although the book's content is generally presented clearly, the authors describe some linguistic concepts in a list-like manner. This gives some sections of a few chapters, in particular the chapters on phonology and syntax, an encyclopedic feel as important linguistic concepts are discussed quickly and with little context. For example, in the chapter covering phonology, the authors spend only a few pages presenting complex topics such as the International Phonetic Alphabet and the pronunciation of English vowels and consonants while also using linguistic terms for place and manner of articulation that are likely unfamiliar to readers. In such sections, the generally familiar and accessible tone that is the book's highlight falls away.

The authors could improve future editions of the book by providing more depth and less breadth in their descriptions of phonology and syntax. Readers of the book's current edition will have to rely on the list of supplemental print and online materials provided at the end of each chapter to clarify any topics rendered vague or confusing by overly superficial coverage in the text. Teachers with the good fortune of reading the book in the context of a professional development or teacher training course might also have access to instructors who may clarify any

confusing sections of the text. However, overly superficial sections are the exception rather than the norm in this generally clearly-written book.

     This book is comparable to but distinct from other books for teachers about linguistics or instructing ELLs. The linguistics text *Essential Linguistics: What Teachers Need to Know to Teach ESL, Reading, Spelling, and Grammar,* by David E. Freeman and Yvonne S. Freeman (2014), first introduces teachers to the core areas of linguistics and then provides specific guidance on ways to teach language in the classroom. By contrast, in Razfar and Rumenapp's book, explanations of the core areas of linguistics are complemented by vivid descriptions of student language-use which illustrate the ways in which all students are already able to use language in sophisticated ways. Texts addressing how to teach ELLs such as *Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners* by Wayne E. Wright (2015) and *Between Two Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition* by David E. Freeman and Yvonne S. Freeman (2011) introduce teachers to first and second language acquisition and provide descriptions of ELLs' experiences in and out of schools. However, these books provide limited discussion of linguistics and student language-use. Thus, when compared to similar publications, the unique aspects of Razfar and Rumenapp's book include an abundance of information about linguistics, clear illustrations of ways in which all students are sophisticated users of language, and exercises that invite readers to observe and analyze their students' language-use.

     As increasing numbers of linguistically diverse students study in mainstream K-12 classrooms, it is essential that all teachers have an understanding of the nature of language and how it is used and learned in classrooms. Establishing an understanding of linguistics can assist mainstream teachers to understand and meet ELLs' linguistic and academic needs. Well-written linguistics texts, such as *Applying Linguistics in the Classroom: A Sociocultural Approach,* play

an important role in enabling teachers to build and eventually apply an understanding of linguistics to their instruction.

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