Applied linguists continue to grapple with the decades-old challenge of defining itself as an academic field: what exactly is applied linguistics? What do applied linguists do? Evensen’s work offers a historical account of the seminal literature, critical concepts and tensions that have shaped applied linguistics research. The book simultaneously provokes a discussion of potential ways forward through formulating an alternative integrated research paradigm predicated upon Bakhtinian dialogism with the intention of creating consensus in a fragmented discipline. Integration to Evensen necessitates the development of a third-space (tertium comparationis) in which scholars from different specialist areas (e.g., language for specific purposes, foreign language teaching and learning, L2 assessment) can build on work performed within and across subfields. Given the intradisciplinary conversation Evensen wishes to generate, the volume is directed toward a readership familiar with and participating in applied linguistics research so as to engender intellectual collaboration that may yield integration.

Chapters are dedicated to explaining what an integrated research paradigm for applied linguistics may entail, while concurrently making a case for Bakhtinian dialogic theory as a platform for future applied linguistics research. In doing so, Evensen reviews seminal literature and watershed moments that have contributed to the evolution of applied linguistics research in the areas of epistemology (Part I: Chapters 1, 2, 3), theories of communication (Part II: Chapter 4), theories of learning (Part II: Chapter 5),
methodology (Part II: Chapters 6, 7) and ontology (Part III: Chapter 8). These chapters establish a set of valuable criteria for classifying and characterizing disciplines of science with the goal of substantiating Evensen’s position that applied linguistics is an independent discipline and not a subfield of linguistics.

In Part I, Evensen identifies epistemology as the most critical factor in classifying linguistics and applied linguistics as distinct disciplines. Epistemology refers to how fields of science come to arrive at sound disciplinary knowledge, and according to Evensen’s criteria, epistemology subsumes four subcategories of which this review will pay special attention to two: knowledge interests and object of research. Knowledge interests indicate the motivations that guide the focus of research. These interests may be focused on expanding the extent knowledge base (practical), solving problems through conventional, institutionalized approaches (technical), and working outside institutionalized thinking in order to empower marginalized groups (emancipatory). According to Evensen, practical knowledge interests have largely been the purview of linguistics in which questions that are specific to language systems, and not language users, have been of exclusive research attention. Evensen conversely locates the knowledge interests of applied linguists as technical or emancipatory and partially ascribes current tensions in the field to this division. Technical interests have been critiqued for supporting existing power structures instead of working with marginalized groups to foster agency and transform participant social realities. The author makes the case that an emancipatory interest in applied linguistics research is closely connected to the influence of poststructuralist thinking. As Evensen notes, post-structural skepticism has ‘worked to ironically prevent the establishment of any coherent research paradigm in applied linguistics that could form an alternative to previous structuralism’ (p. 45).

Evensen’s second epistemological subcategory of knowledge relates to the object of research, which may be theory-driven or problem-driven. Theory-driven approaches are the older of the two and assume that general linguistics theories are the basis for addressing issues of applied research. These approaches relegate applied linguistics to a subfield of linguistics rather than an independent discipline, what Widdowson (1980) refers to as ‘linguistics applied’. Contrastive Analysis is an example of a theory-driven approach derived from general linguistics that has been used to design curriculum and offer language instructors a framework to interpret the potential cross-linguistic difficulties among L2 learners. Similarly, behaviorist psychology has addressed language problems through an audiolingual method of L2 instruction, a still influential force on teaching methodology. With respect to problem-driven approaches, Evensen explains that applied linguistics
scholarship is motivated by a shared focus on solving real-world problems related to language-mediated communication, where the language system functions as a resource and not as the exclusive target of research. Part I ends with readers being given the opportunity to understand the differences between theory-driven and problem-driven approaches through empirical research.

One gets a clear sense that Evensen is a firm advocate of problem-driven approaches, where language-specific issues must be understood in relation to the contexts within which interpersonal communication, the teaching and learning of language, and research methodology occur. This position becomes the basis of Part II of the book in which Evensen proposes the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism as a coherent approach to applied linguistics research, a third space or tertium comparationis. Part II begins with a review of dominant conceptualizations of communication and discourse within applied linguistics scholarship. Evensen’s review serves as a basis to critique the separation of microsocial (interactionism) and macrosocial (social constructionism) orientations to studying communication and discourse. From a microsocial perspective, discourse refers to how communication is accomplished with emphasis on the organization and joint construction of interaction (e.g., turn-taking, ongoing negotiation of meaning, joint development of topic). At the macrosocial level, discourse is understood as the meaning-making resources language users employ from ‘community-based conventions for communication’ (p. 82). To address this dualism, Evensen articulates an integrated model of communication that draws from dialogic theory of Bakhtin. The model captures the relational rapport between the microsocial and macrosocial orientations where immediate interaction and social agency (microlevel) are foregrounded and understood against the backdrop of community-based conventional uses of language (macrolevel).

In Part II, a focus on Bakhtinian dialogism is carried forth to Evensen’s treatment of the perennial debates and tensions surrounding the nature of language learning. The author traces the changing perspectives regarding the locus of language development, beginning with a brief but detailed discussion of how the Chomskyan Revolution in linguistics construed the locus as a mental inborn biological capacity to derive generative rules from often meager environmental language input (i.e., poverty of stimulus). Evensen notes that applied linguists turned to the work of Vygotskian psychology to search for an alternative to the computer (input-output) metaphor of mind. He credits L2 Vygotskian scholars for challenging UG-based research by situating the locus of language development within the process of mediation, where language acts as the primary vehicle to provoke psychological functioning through intermental relationships. Although Evensen deems L2 Vygotskian
research as a potential framework to integrate theory-driven and problem-driven approaches, he maintains that the methodological and ontological insights of Bakhtinian dialogism serve as sound principles for a comprehensive framework for applied linguistics research.

The author extends the notion of dialogism to his treatment of research methodology in Part II, noting that methods are closely aligned to a researcher’s knowledge interests and whether research is done on people, with people or for people. Each preposition denotes a different orientation to the subject/participant. Of particular interest to Evensen is research conducted with people, as he deems it representative of the collaborative, interactive, and ethical problem-driven orientation of applied linguistics scholarship. He designates participatory action research (PAR) as a promising methodological approach to working with participants for social transformation. Researchers engaged in PAR function in good faith (what Bakhtin (1990) refers to as answerability) as collaborators or facilitators of participant-led research.

In Part III, Evensen allot textual space to consider the notion of ontology in applied linguistics, with special interest dedicated to the differing perspectives of Marxist dialectics and dialogism. The author duly notes that this ontological distinction has not received systematic inquiry to date, and his treatment of this critical topic is brief and remains in need of further development. Specifically, the author’s characterization of Marxist dialectics is problematic. Evensen states that Marxist dialectics is limited to explaining how humans are ‘socially created’ based on their changing material conditions but falls short of articulating ‘how actual individual social humans may be creators of material reality’ (p. 183; original emphasis). If Evensen’s statement were true, then Marxist dialectics would result in a misnomer, and a bidirectional relationship between individual and society would not exist. In fact, Marx (1978) rejected determinism in general, and materialist determinism in particular, a point he clearly makes in his third thesis of his celebrated work Theses on Feuerbach. Evensen labels dialectical materialist approaches to language teaching and learning, as systems-oriented and monologic. A monologic conceptualization of communication renders language as ‘a system of fixed entities with fixed meanings’ (p. 178). Unfortunately, Evensen’s position is not isolated (e.g., Matusov, 2011) and falls short of the sophisticated understanding of language and pedagogy that L2 Vygotskian-based scholars employ in their research.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned criticism, the volume is an engaging work that offers graduate students and faculty members alike an opportunity to develop and extend their disciplinary understanding of applied linguistics. The text can serve as a useful resource for a graduate-level applied linguistics
seminar course or a professional reading or research group engaged in topics related to L2 teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


