

The Spicer library history

The collection grows

It started with a collection donated by [Professor Sam Spicer](#) upon his retirement in 1983. This collection consisted of books he had bought himself. The books were lent out to students.

The second collection of the original books incorporated into the library was one bought by subscription by MA students on the 'early version' of the MA in Applied Linguistics in the mid 1970s, and run as a communal service for the students by the students. Books were stored in a steel cupboard located in the social area and borrowing was conducted during coffee breaks. This collection expanded steadily and its management consumed considerable time, given by volunteers from the student body, who then 'bequeathed' the collection to the next intake of MA students. The book acquisitions were chosen and paid for by the students themselves. But as it grew, the problems of administration, time and security also increased. It was then decided that the Department take over responsibility for the book club.

Too big for its boots

In 1987, recognising the need for an appropriate location for this large collection, Professor Martin Atkinson as Head of Department allocated the room the library presently occupies. During the ensuing years, a certain amount of departmental secretarial time was allowed for supervision of the library, but financial pressures finally made this provision unsustainable.

More books

The third collection was an important addition of books and, in particular, teaching materials that the first Librarians had built up for the Certificate and Diploma courses then run by the EFL Unit, in those days part of the Department. The Sloman Library found it difficult to carry that kind of resource, though they would gladly have received all the other books.

Since the first three collections were brought together, the library has been funded partially by the Department and the EFL Unit (now International Academy) for new acquisitions, though neither Department nor Centre actually has a budget for such purposes because library funds all theoretically go to the Sloman. Individuals, former students and members of staff, have also donated collections.

Donations

A major milestone in the Library's development came in January 2003 when Heather Spicer, Professor Spicer's widow, made a generous donation to it and pledged a recurring annual contribution of the same amount in the coming years. This donation goes towards purchasing new books to update the current collection.

Sam Spicer

Sam Spicer, as Arthur Spicer was familiarly called, had a University career spanning nearly forty years. Although his name appears on few publications, he was a forceful organiser and persuasive speaker on behalf of applied linguistics and particularly language teaching and its methodology. He had a major role in the Nuffield Modern Languages Project, and co-authored a major report on the training of language teachers in colleges of education. But more importantly, he was an influential teacher.

Sam's major concern was the low standard of foreign language teaching and learning in Britain, and he worked hard to raise it. As Chairman of the British Association for Applied Linguistics from 1979 to 1982, he was influential within Britain, and during the same period he also served on the Executive Committee of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée.

Undoubtedly, Sam's most significant contribution to teaching was made as Professor in the Department of Language and Linguistics at Essex, where for several years he directed the MA course

in Applied Linguistics. Many of his students have gone on to occupy leading positions in language teaching and applied linguistics.

Sam's students quickly became aware of the topics about which he felt most passionately: teacher training, foreign languages in the primary school, syllabus design, and "reasoned eclecticism" in language teaching methods. The last of these was perhaps closest to his heart. Given the state of flux in linguistics and psychology and the complexity of the human mind, he simply did not accept that any 'best' language teaching method could emerge. Rather, he believed one should examine the theoretical and practical issues and keep an open mind when choosing sources of language teaching techniques. Thanks to a general shift toward 'communicative' language teaching during the two decades that followed Sam's chairmanship of BAAL, his position may now seem little more than common sense, but Sam was defending it at a time when the search for the 'One best method' was a central preoccupation of applied linguists.

Sam's students and colleagues will remember him as fair, and above all, kind. He was not usually demonstrative. He was an autocrat, but a benign one, who was always ready to use his considerable authority to assist others. But he never once sacrificed his integrity in any of the high offices he held and always tenaciously pursued the ideals in which he believed.

Applied linguistics was only just beginning to establish itself as a serious discipline in Britain when Sam acceded to one of the very few chairs in the subject here. His tireless work, much of it behind the scenes, made a valuable and lasting contribution to the development of the field, and he must be counted among the pioneers in Britain.

It was Sam's donation of his books to the Department that started the Spicer Library. Since then Sam's wife, Heather, and children, Robert and Susan, have continued to support the library generously.

Appreciation written by Dr. John Roberts