

The Significance of Teaching Linguistic Theory inside the Foreign Language Classroom

Chahrazed Hamzaoui

Belhadj Bouchaib University, Ain-Temouchent (Algeria)

Abstract: Linguistic theories have always had some influence on foreign language teaching to varying degrees as they often aid construct the theoretical foundations for language teaching practices. As such, understanding these theories and the significance of their application in language teaching is of paramount importance for language teachers who may lack about their relevance. Many consider language teaching as an area of theoretical linguistics albeit, as it is argued, 'applied linguistics' should be remodeled as an interdisciplinary channel through which linguists and teachers can address matters of mutual interest. This paper, first, discusses how various types of linguistic theory - structural, generative, and functional linguistics - have affected foreign language teaching; then, it addresses the prevalence to examine the place of theoretical linguistics not only in foreign language classrooms, but in curricula as well. It also tackles the chief contribution of linguistic theory to language teaching through evaluating its appropriateness for pedagogy in order to convey meaningful and accurate insights about the target language to students. Finally, this paper presents an innovative teaching approach that analyzes language in a scientific systematic manner while focusing on those features of language that are of direct relevance to future language teachers.

Keywords: Foreign language classroom, Language teaching Linguistic theory, Pedagogy

Introduction

Research involving the relationship between linguistic theory and language teaching can be traced back to the late of 19th century. While theoretical linguistics is usually considered as a discipline within the social/behavioral sciences, language teaching is usually thought about as educational in nature. When reassessing this relationship, a twofold viewpoint emerged: On the one hand, it was believed that the importance of linguistics had been overvalued. Sampson (1980, p. 10), for example, argues: "I do not believe that linguistics has any contribution to make to the teaching of English or the standard European languages". Lamendella (1969) thought that it was a mistake to look to transformational grammar or any other theory of linguistic description to provide the theoretical basis for second language pedagogy. On the other hand, it was to highly recognize the general contribution of linguistics to language teaching. Johnson (1982, p. 10) opines that language teachers have always looked to the linguist for guidance on how to teach languages. He (1982) says that language teachers have always considered linguistics as something of a mother discipline. The relationship of linguistics and language teaching is, indeed, a dual one. It means, on the one hand, some theories of linguistics can be applied to language teaching, i.e. linguistic theory governs the development of language teaching theory.

A language teaching theory expresses or entails answers to queries about the nature of language. These questions connect language teaching theory directly to theoretical linguistics. This paper first discusses how various types of linguistic theory have affected foreign language teaching and addresses the prevalence to examine the place of theoretical linguistics not only in foreign language classrooms, but in curricula as well. It also tackles the chief contribution of linguistic

theory to language teaching through evaluating its appropriateness for pedagogy in order to convey meaningful and accurate insights about the target language to students. Finally, this paper presents an innovative teaching approach that analyzes language in a scientific, systematic manner while focusing on those features of language that are of direct relevance to future language teachers.

Literature Review

A. How linguistic theory governs and affects foreign language teaching?

In the years of Second World War, America was in significant need of soldiers acquainted with foreign languages. In order to meet this plea, some linguists like Bloomfield (1942) engaged in using knowledge about linguistic theory to examine the language to be taught; the result proved to be satisfactory. Bloomfield (1942) proposed that the only efficient teacher should be the trained linguist working alongside his/her students, for language teachers often lack command of the language and only the trained linguists know how to govern the students learning from native speakers and how to teach the forms of the language.

We have to admit that as language teachers, we must have a good command of the knowledge of linguistics in order to improve our way of teaching. For example, in teaching pronunciation, a good knowledge of phonetics from the part of the teacher can not only help the students understand the construction of organs of articulation and how a sound is produced by the cooperation of the organs, but they can also learn how to classify vowels and consonants, and how to produce a sound effectively with the correct position of the tongue. As such, the language teachers must adopt the phonetician's analysis of speech sounds and the International Phonetic Alphabet for pronunciation training. Let us have a look at how different linguistic theories affect foreign language teaching.

1. Structuralism and behaviourism

By the year 1960, the impact of structural linguistics on language teaching had attained its peak in the United States. Structural linguistics emphasized the importance of language as a system and scrutinizes the place that linguistic units like sounds, words and sentences have within this system. The structuralist approach to language was coupled with behaviourist learning principles, resulting in a scientific and confident application of linguistics to second language teaching in the audiolingual method. Albeit behaviourism set aside the mental activity, it focused the importance of practice and repetition in language learning, which is believed to be a crucial aspect in learning a foreign language. The audiolingual method stresses three points: the teaching of speaking and listening before reading and writing, the use of dialogues and drills and the prevention of the use of the mother tongue inside the classroom.

The basic presumption of the audiolingual method, inspired by Skinner's theory of behaviourist psychology on the one hand and structural linguistics on the other, was that learning a foreign language is an automatic process of memorization of set phrases that could be achieved through constant repetition and drills. Audiolingual method considers speaking and listening as the most basic language skills, which concur with today's English teaching situation. Nowadays, in Algeria, more and more people start to learn English as a foreign language in order to be able to

communicate with foreigners. They believe that speaking and listening are far more important than reading and writing because when they need to communicate with foreigners, they can understand them and express themselves accurately. Nevertheless, language teaching takes much more than speaking a language and knowing how to teach it.

2. *Generativism*

Wardhaugh considered it “[...] impossible to understand current issues in teaching ESL without some understanding of the linguistic theory associated with Chomsky’s linguistics” (1974, p.118). Flores, after an exhaustive analysis of texts and articles which have sought to connect Traditional grammar (TG) to the classroom, has the following practical advice: We must keep expectations separate from realities, or achievements. Since the early sixties, expectations about the applicability of TG grammar to language teaching have run very high. However, the attempts to test the feasibility of its application and to develop actual materials have been extremely disappointing (1973, p.77).

Despite many EFL teachers assume that generative grammar is pedagogically inadaptable to language teaching, Thomas (1976) does not agree with this assumption. In a summer course conducted at Indiana University in 1961 with 30 students who were supposed to answer the following question “What do secondary school teachers--not professional linguists--think of generative grammar?” The answer was positive since the students were convinced that certain deductions from Chomsky's theory could be applied to the teaching of grammar. While the impact of structuralism on language teaching and pedagogy was pervasive and powerful, the impact of Traditional grammar was completely different. TG theory stressed mental activity. It proposed that human beings have the ability to learn a language. It is the inborn ability instead of practice that made human beings obtain the rules of a language and understand or produce countless numbers of sentences.

In the late sixties, new developments in language teaching took place. A typical example is the cognitive theory of language learning. This theory emerged where TG concepts became tied up with a ‘cognitive’ view of the psychology of language learning. Chomsky’s view of language as a system of rules was interpreted in the cognitive code method to mean that perception and awareness of rules precede the use of these rules, and that a conscious grammatical understanding of a language rule should precede the provision of opportunities for practice in language teaching (e.g. Chastain, 1971). Chomsky’s insistence on the creative characteristics of the language faculty led to the rejection of mechanical practice and an emphasis on the creative an innovative use of language.

Proponents of the cognitive anti-method (such as Newmark, 1966; Newmark and Reibel, 1968) adopted a more radical method in which it was left to the learner to depend on his innate capacity and to control the learning process himself. Language acquisition was not seen as an additive process; a learner was supposed to learn ‘whole chunks’ at a time. It was not regarded as necessary to attend to linguistic form. This method was a radical alternative to the audiolingual method. It is interesting to note that both of these methods were based on one linguistic theory, but arrived at different and diverse interpretations.

The empiricist theory that is, pedagogically audiolingualism, psychologically behaviourism, and linguistically structuralism opposed cognitive theory. Some linguists, like Diller (1970) acknowledges his preference for the cognitive position; while others, like Chastain (1976) and Rivers (1981, pp.25-27) declared that both theories are complementary and serve different types of learners or teachers or represent different phases of the language teaching process. Empiricist theory is believed to be useful for language teaching and learning while cognitive theory is more useful for linguists, i.e., for linguistic analysis.

In 1970s, a group of linguists including Oller (1970) and Widdowson (1978), who were closely in touch with teaching practice, gave language teaching and language pedagogy the necessary linguistic direction and focused on real language use. As an illustration, Oller (1970, p.507) claimed that pragmatics has implications for language teaching; it defines the goal of teaching a language as prompting the students not merely to manipulate meaningless sound sequences, but to send and receive messages in the language. Through my personal experience in English teaching and learning, I noticed that having some knowledge of pragmatics can help us teach or learn English accurately and explain some language phenomena clearly and thus make students have a profound insight into the nature of language.

3. Functionalism

In the late sixties Michael Halliday was also considering language from the point of view of its social implications and he concurred with Hymes in seeing “[...] the linguistic system as a component - an essential component - of the social system” (1978, p.51). The changes in linguistic theory till the 1970s saw a shift away from the study of language seen purely as a formal system towards the study of language as communication; a shift towards sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, semantics, speech act theory and pragmatics. This had a major impact on language teaching, culminating in the so-called communicative approach to second language teaching, which was a reaction against the predominant formalistic view of language teaching. Its initial impact was on syllabus design.

Wilkins (1976), influenced by Halliday’s functional approach to language and Austin’s speech acts, produced a notional syllabus which took the language teaching world by storm. The work of the Council of Europe is another example of the change in approach in the 1970s. It was based on current semantic and sociolinguistic concepts, including Wilkins’ notions and functions. The council developed their own syllabi and produced inventories which specified situations in terms of learners’ roles, settings and topics, and listed language activities, functions and notions (Van Ek, 1975).

The questions examined in functional analyses of language are questions of the implementation of linguistic knowledge; that is, how language is used in interactive discourse. For example, English active and passive clauses represent two distinct syntactic structures which can be used to convey a given semantic proposition. As a descriptive enterprise, functional approaches examine the conditions which favor, or perhaps cause, the selection in real-time discourse production of one or the other alternative. Those conditions, sometimes articulated as discourse or text conditions and sometimes as cognitive or even social conditions, represent an

essential component of the overall knowledge of the language by the native speaker. They also represent part of the targeted competence in the target language for the foreign language learner.

B. The contribution of linguistic theory to foreign language teaching

In the case of FL teachers, the misconception is that they can teach what they learned in the way they learned without any further linguistic training:

[M]any classroom teachers give little evidence of much, or any, exposure to concepts deriving from linguistics [...] many teachers of second languages do not know an allophone from a telephone, a grammatical transformation from an ecclesiastical reformation, or a sentence pattern from a holding pattern (Wardhaugh, 1972, pp. 292-3).

Many language teachers still believe that knowledge of theoretical linguistics is extraneous to their practice. Nevertheless, “since language is both what L2 teachers teach and linguists describe [wouldn't it seem] self-evident that the findings of linguistics should be relevant to how the content of language courses is to be defined[?]” (Widdowson, 2000, p. 21). The question, then, is not whether language teachers should be trained in linguistics, but which components of linguistics should be focused in teacher training courses (Ellis, 2010). In fact, linguistics for teachers should not be ‘watered down’ linguistics courses, but it is also assumed that language teaching is not linguistics any more than ‘mathematics is physics’. In this line of thought, we need to provide future language teachers with a good picture of what they are working with (language) and leave the rest alone. This might leave out discussions on today’s linguistic theory, but would focus the description of the various aspects of language embedded in any other linguistics-for-linguists course as well as the need to be up to date with appropriate applicable research.

It is evident that a teacher must be sceptic and critical of linguistic theory. All suggestions from the fundamental disciplines must be considered with caution and scepticism. But, as Widdowson (1990, p.10) points out, this is dissimilar from disregarding them altogether. One is reminded, here, of Chomsky's (1966, p.43) much-quoted scepticism about the significance of linguistics for language teaching. But what Chomsky, in fact, says is that linguistics and psychology are associated with ways of approaching 'the problems of language teaching from a principled point of view', in other words, the theoretical disciplines provide a reference for establishing principles of approach. He only questions whether these disciplines can inform pedagogic technique directly.

C. Language teaching as a problem-solving activity

Wilkins (1972, p.216) lists three major goals of linguistic theory: (1) to study the human language faculty, (2) to establish theories to explain language behaviour, and to provide the most effective techniques for describing languages and (3) to make the most appropriate and understandable descriptions possible. Linguistics, thus, deals with the description of language structure as well as the description of language use (sociolinguistics) and language learning (psycholinguistics). It is not aimed at solving problems of language teaching. A teacher is concerned with practical issues. Language teaching is in essence a problem-solving activity: the

teacher must determine the flaw of what to teach and how to teach the foreign language. He cannot proceed in an ad hoc manner. Nevertheless, every technique used can in fact be related to an underlying principle (Widdowson, 1979). Language teaching can, thus, be defined as a principled problem-solving enterprise. This entails that the language teacher is not interested in the application of linguistics or any other discipline; he is interested in finding solutions to language teaching flaws. And he will look at any subject which can aid him in doing so. It also entails that he will do so in a principled manner, so that his teaching can be related to underlying principles. This is where the role of the applied linguist comes in.

D. The teacher's approach to foreign language teaching

The linguistic theory will always be behind the teacher. It has a direct influence on his approach to language teaching. Every teacher has an approach -whether be it cognizant or incognizant- to language teaching. The burden of language teaching incites the teacher almost invariably to think about the nature of language; as an illustration, his theory of language will govern whether he introduces the language analytically or non-analytically to his students. The reason for his decision will indicate a perception of the nature of language or a theory of language. His method such as a decision about drill work will similarly be based on a perception of foreign language learning.

A theory of foreign language teaching is, therefore, a significant feature of teaching and learning. It is generally agreed that what occurs inside the classroom will actually complete the success of teaching. An approach implies an answer to two questions: What is language? and How is a (foreign) language learned? For principled answers to these questions, a teacher has to refer to the linguistic theory; he must have some knowledge of linguistics. Linguistics, therefore, provides the teacher with an approach; with insights such as the form or meaning distinction, and implications -as for methods and techniques- for language teaching.

In fact, many of our EFL students leave the linguistics classroom without knowing how drawing syntactical trees or transcribing phonetically is going to assist them in their future career. As Pinker (2007) mentions "I have never met a person who is not interested in language" (xiii). One way or another, most students in the humanities or social sciences can find one or more of the below cited uses of linguistics useful for them:

- a. Linguistic inquiry in foreign language assists the learner discover components of their native language they had never thought about.
- b. Knowledge of linguistics poses ample benefit for enhancing language proficiency and learning other languages.
- c. Knowledge of linguistics is substantial for reaching comprehension of any other discipline in the humanities or social sciences.
- d. Linguistic training assists teachers comprehend language evolvement and the reasons why foreign language learners learn language the way they do (for example developmental errors vs. mistakes).

e. Linguistics aids us comprehend additional cultures and other viewpoints that are mirrored in language use, as well as our own.

f. Linguistics' knowledge aids in designing syllabi.

In the aftermath, an ideal introductory course in Linguistics should expose not only a basic introduction to the basic fields of linguistic inquiry including phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, but also to those fields that are inherently connected to the former, such as: sociolinguistics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, first/second/multiple language acquisition, discourse analysis, etc.

In a nutshell, any other area that makes use of language for its objectives could be embraced as a last, practical aspect in the course: language assessment, language and law, language of advertisement and politics, language and power, etc. The major factor when teaching these courses is that, in order to make the material accessible and engaging, we need to let the students relying on themselves, taking charge and discovering the information by their own. I propose submerging the class with exercises in which students have to detect the rules underlying the target or any other language either known or unknown. Activities like these are aimed to open students' minds into the vast array of linguistic principles that govern languages at the same time that they discover how similar languages are in many other respects. One of the tasks for this course, for instance, could be asking them to find the reason why French speakers have trouble with the voicing of [h] in words like 'hamamatun' in Arabic or why English speakers have trouble telling the difference between 'todo' and 'toro' in Spanish.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is concluded that language is the very concept with which the language teacher's whole career is concerned. There is little or no doubt that the linguistic theory has an essential role to perform. Linguistics provides important implications for the preparation of syllabi, teaching programmes, materials and methodology. In EFL classrooms, the teacher cannot proceed without any reference to linguistic theory. However, not all the answers are likely to come from linguistic theory. Applied linguistics is, therefore, in the process of extending its horizons, turning to unfamiliar territory, such as cognitive psychology, for answers to problems which teachers have to face. Future language teachers are usually required to take language teaching methodology courses, but language teaching takes much more than speaking a language and knowing how to teach it: we need to know how language works as a system so we can make informed choices in our teaching. This way, language pedagogy, applied linguistics and theoretical linguistics are the three pillars of language teaching. When teachers develop an innovative methodology and when they teach linguistics in a 'more exciting and inductive way' through open-ended questions and by letting students conduct their own investigations, they will be in the right path to recognize the major role of linguistic theory in language programmes.

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