

THE ROLE OF LINGUISTICS IN TEFL METHODOLOGY¹

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This paper begins with a consideration of the language learning process from a transformational point of view. It is suggested that acquiring a language can be thought of as internalizing a set of rules of the language. Next, three possible roles for linguistic theory in TEFL methodology are discussed: (1) TEFL is completely dependent upon linguistics; (2) linguistic theory can be used to justify TEFL classroom activities; and (3) linguistics provides insights into, but does not determine, teaching methods. It is argued that the latter position is the most reasonable role for linguistics vis-à-vis foreign language pedagogy.

During their long association with the field of English as a foreign language, linguists have made important contributions to the oral methods of language teaching. As they helped to define this method and write new materials, they used linguistic theory as a source of ideas and as a means of justifying the classroom activities they proposed. In fact, the oral method became so closely allied with structural linguistics that it has often been called the linguistic method of language teaching. Thus linguistics assumed an undeniably important role in TEFL methodology.

Although the nature of the role of linguistics in language teaching has been discussed extensively, it is still a timely topic for two reasons. The first is that there is no general agreement upon the proper role of linguistic theory in teaching. The second is that tremendous changes have taken place in linguistics in the last decade. It is these changes and their possible impact upon the theory underlying TEFL methodology that I would like to discuss first.

It is well known that structural linguistics has been almost completely supplanted by transformational grammar as the leading theory in linguistics. Certainly this is true in the case of English grammar, for nearly all of the recent studies in this area have been carried out within this new theoretical framework. Consequently, in 1970, we find a curious paradox. The oral method

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advocated by Fries and others has become the dominant one in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language as well as in the teaching of other languages. But the linguistic theory which provided part of the theoretical basis for the oral method has been superseded. TEFL methodology has had its theoretical rug pulled out from under it—at least the linguistic portion of that rug and also the learning theory portion.

I am referring in particular to the attack of Chomsky and other transformationalists on explanations of language acquisition which make reference to such terms as stimulus, response, reinforcement, conditioning, analogy, and habit formation. Such concepts are probably adequately defined for experiments which involve barpressing, but it is questionable whether they have any value in explaining what happens when a human acquires a language. This should be clear once we realize that the normal use of language is creative. We have the ability to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences, very few of which we have heard before. Indeed, most of the sentences we encounter are novel. Certainly, it is inappropriate to use a term such as habit in discussing what is essentially a creative activity.

It can be assumed that every speaker has internalized a grammar of his language. It is the speaker's knowledge of the rules of this grammar that allows him to produce and understand new sentences. Native speakers are not taught their language. The child is confronted with an unordered mass of data including many ungrammatical sentences and sentence fragments as well as grammatical sentences. On the basis of such data the child constructs or internalizes a grammar of his language. The function of internalizing this grammar of rules is ascribed to a hypothesis-forming device. Since adults learn foreign languages we must assume that they still possess such a device. However, the adult's mechanism for language learning is most likely only a weak version of the child's.

The adult learning a foreign language is confronted with two kinds of data. First, there are the well-chosen examples of the classroom—the sample sentences of the explanations and the sentences which make up the exercises. Second, there are the ordinary sentences and fragments of normal conversation. These two kinds of data form the raw material that the learner uses in forming a set of hypotheses. In many cases, incorrect hypotheses will be formed only to be superseded later by some which more closely approximate those of the native speaker. In this way the language learner gradually internalizes a grammar of rules, which he then knows subconsciously. It should be pointed out that the rules

which the student internalizes are likely to be very different from those in linguistic descriptions. Transformationalists have never claimed that the rules they write are isomorphic with those internalized by the speakers of the language.

In addition to the linguist's rules and the rules known subconsciously by the speaker, there are rules which form part of the explanations given in the classroom. These latter rules are typically informal and simplified versions of the linguist's rules. They are informal in that ordinary words are used instead of symbols to make statements about the language. Such classroom explanations can be thought of as attempts to help the student form appropriate hypotheses about the language.

Thus there are at least three types of rules relevant to language pedagogy: (1) rules in a linguistic description; (2) informal statements which form part of an explanation in the classroom, and (3) rules which are internalized by learners of the language.

Viewing language learning as the internalization of rules rather than the formation of habits suggests that classroom grammar exercises should also be viewed differently. Instead of being the means for instilling habits, these exercises can now be conceived of as one means of allowing the students to react to and manipulate the data in order to internalize rules. Thus, the student no longer acquires a set of overt habits. Instead, he acquires a set of internal rules which allow him to use the language creatively, producing and understanding sentences he has never heard before.

Obviously, it is not enough to have students perform well in doing exercises. They must also be able to use the language in nonclassroom situations, communicating with speakers of the language. In fact, the contributions that the study of grammar can make to the language learning situation can all be negated if students are not able to communicate. Many persons have learned languages from people who were not able to make verbal statements about the grammar of the language they were teaching. Clearly the crucial factor has been the opportunity for the students to communicate in the language being learned. One of the great challenges that TEFL teachers are faced with daily is the problem of how to supplement textbook exercises with conversation practice revolving around topics which students are interested in discussing. There is no easy solution to this problem. The task of gradually moving from controlled practice to meaningful discussion will remain with the classroom teachers. It cannot be spelled out in a textbook. Only the classroom teachers can be alert and sensitive to the needs and interests of their students.

The role of linguistics in TEFL methodology is the topic of

this paper, and it may be appropriate now to ask what that role is. Three main positions on the role of linguistics can be usually differentiated. The first position assumes that linguistics completely determines the content of a course, i.e. the selection and ordering of the materials and the method of their presentation. The second position is that the role of linguistics should be to justify various classroom activities, e.g. to justify exercise types and even the overall methodology. The third position is much weaker than the first two and merely states that linguistics provides "insights" into the structure of the language taught, and that linguistic descriptions aid teachers in constructing explanations and exercises. These three main positions will now be discussed in greater detail.

The first position, which might be called the *complete dependence* position, states that a course for teaching a language should be based on the best linguistic descriptions available. These descriptions determine the content of the course, the order of presentation, the types of exercises and ultimately the way in which the course is conducted. This position is usually presented as follows: Linguists will prepare a grammar of English and applied linguists—material writers and teachers—will change this theoretical grammar into a pedagogical one. However, the complete dependence position often makes the incorrect assumption that a linguistic description can determine what to teach and in what order to teach it. It is easy to see why this assumption is both illusionary and incorrect.

First, we have no complete description of English from any theoretical point of view. A reasonably complete transformational grammar of English or of any other language is not likely to be finished in the Twentieth Century. There are only fragmentary grammars available, and there is no guarantee that the fragments we have include all of those grammar points that need to be presented in the classroom, and at the same time exclude insignificant points of English grammar that need not be presented to students learning English.

Secondly, such descriptions do not determine the relative amount of attention to devote to various grammar points, nor do they determine when and how much to teach and review. Hence linguistic descriptions cannot tell us what is important in the TEFL classroom. Thus the complete dependence position, which is usually presented as an ideal, is in fact untenable.

The second position is the *justification* position. It states that linguistics provides the theory underlying TEFL methodology and thus provides a justification for various classroom activities such

as foreign language exercises and drills. In connection with the discussion of rules, I gave an example of how certain classroom activities can be looked at as a means for helping the student internalize the grammar of the language he is learning. This example describes classroom activities, but as a theoretical discussion it might also be used actually to justify these activities. However, it is important to ask whether or not such a justification is really necessary. Most likely, it isn't. For example, transformational grammar is not needed to justify exercises in which items are transposed or deleted, or in which two sentences are combined to form a third sentence. Such exercises were in existence and were used successfully long before the advent of transformational theory. Any current justification is clearly *ex post facto*.

Perhaps the best justification for a classroom technique is workability. Jakobovits has suggested that teachers

... adopt a healthy functional attitude concerning the effects of their methods of approach, *concentrating on developing and constantly using realistic evaluation criteria that would dictate maintaining or altering their activities in accord with the results they achieve.* (1969: 187)

In other words, teachers should try out new techniques occasionally to see how they help in achieving the goals which have been set for the TEFL course. Those techniques that seem to work best should be retained, and their success provides any needed justification independent of linguistic theory.

The third of the three main positions is the *insight* position. It simply states that the role of linguistics is to provide insights. Studies of English, for example, illuminate various points of English structure. These studies may help teachers in constructing explanations and may sometimes provide ideas for exercises. According to the insight position, linguistic analyses of particular languages can give hints but not definitive pedagogical answers. Thus, these analyses say nothing about whether or not to teach something, nor how much time to devote to it, nor how to teach it.

The assumption that the role of linguistics in TEFL methodology is a limited one has been made by other writers. For example, in a recent state of the art paper, Wardhaugh has made the following comment.

It should be noted that the various linguistic insights that emerge do not determine any particular teaching method or methods. Too often in the past the assumption was made that a linguistic technique could be made into a pedagogical technique (for example, the "minimal pair" technique) or that apparent insights into linguistic structure achieved by linguistics had to be communicated

directly to learners. (1970: 5) Generative-transformational grammar provides language teachers with new insights into language. However, it gives them no way of teaching these insights. . . . (10)

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the role of linguistics in TEFL methodology has probably been over-rated in the past. Indeed, it has been greatly over-rated whenever the claim has been made that a course for teaching English as a foreign language can be based directly on linguistic descriptions. As has been pointed out above, TEFL can benefit from new insights in linguistics, and it seems that a reasonable role for linguistics is to provide such insights. This is a limited role, but certainly the only one which is defensible.

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