English Language Teaching and Linguistics

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Abstract

There has been a multifarious discourse about the role of linguistics in the field of English language teaching and we find agreement as well as disagreement. After reviewing the literature it becomes clear that English language teaching has its root in the discipline as well as sub disciplines of linguistics. Indeed these are roots it has never entirely cut. The present paper intends to trace the influence of linguistics on English language teaching over the last six decades. The core aim of the paper is to bring to light the linear and nonlinear relationship that linguistics enjoys with English language teaching.

Keywords- *Discourse, ELT, Improvement, Innovation, Linguistics*

Introduction

Whether linguistics has any kind of role in English language Teaching (hereafter, ELT) is a pertinent question. If we read literature on the topic, we find agreement and disagreement for its role. Some says, they are heart and soul together and for others they are two different bodies. The intense partisanship on its role and the lack of objectivity make the task of assessing the role of linguistics in ELT difficult. If we revisit the history of linguistics over the past hundred years and particularly last six decades, we find that linguistics along with its sub-disciplines has made an immense impact on all phases of language teaching. When we revert to the development of theoretical linguistics in the past century, we observe the shift from traditional Grammar to Structuralism, from Transformational Generative Grammar and Systemic Functional Grammar and present day thought to rising interest in Semantics, Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics. In retrospect, it is interesting to note that these theories and their methods have influenced and shaped the design of ELT.

Let us start with structuralism. Structural linguistics developed as a reaction against traditional grammar and it completely changed forever the language scholar's notion of

grammar. 'The reaction against the traditional grammar was prompted by the movement toward positivism and empiricism which Darwin's *The Origin of Species* helped promote' (Richards and Rodgers 2006, p.54) A generation which was habitual to see language as a system of communication, the structuralist emphases on treating linguistics as scientific study of language, objectivity and on exact, verifiable descriptions, discovery procedure, primacy of oral language and insistence on unique patterns of each language provided sound theories and techniques for language teaching. Structuralists provided a far better and extended description of language and it is this description that shaped both the theory and methods of Audio-lingual Method. Structuralist viewed language as highly structured and rule governed system, which is meaningful in a given cultural community and grammar as "the set of formal patterns in which words of a language are acquired to convey larger meanings. In analyzing the patterns of language the structural linguists proceeded from identifying the minimum meaningful sounds (phonemes) to minimal meaningful grammatical unit of language (morphemes, stems, prefixes, suffixes) to the larger units of phrases, clauses and sentences.' Language was viewed as a system of structurally related elements for the encoding of meaning. The elements being phonemes, morphemes, words" (Richards and Rodgers 2006, p.55). "Language learning means the mastery of these building blocks of language and learning the rules by which these elements are combined from phoneme to morpheme to word to phrases and sentences" (ibid). As it was assumed that this was also the appropriate method for teaching, Audio-lingual Method focused on mastery of speech and followed the four skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

With the emergence of notion of language as a system, the learning of a second or foreign language could be viewed as juxtaposition of two systems and juxtaposition of these two systems could lead to another system which combined features of both the systems (Fries and Pike, 1949 as cited in Richards 1974, p.4) and even to inter systematic interference (Weinrich, 1953 as cited in Richards 1974, p.4). This idea of interference appealed to linguist as well as language teachers as it appeared to explain the difficulty of problem of second language learning and this led to the emergence of an approach, known as Contrastive Analysis approach (CA, hereafter). The origins of CA were pedagogic and to some extent they help language teachers also (Ellis 1986, p.23). This approach provided the teachers with similarity and differences in learner's native language and target language and in a way provided them with facilitation and interference areas. As S.P. Corder proposes, 'language teachers should take full advantage of the similarities, stressing facilitation as well as interference' (Corder 1973, p.280). Though CA did not prove to be an effective tool for the teachers as many of the errors it predicted were never encountered by teachers but it was certainly useful in the retrospective explanations of errors.

As an alternative to CA a more refined approach known as Error Analysis (EA, hereafter) evolved. With the emergence of this approach, linguists started viewing errors as

something which can provide a window to the learner's competence. It was also felt that by the systematic study of the errors committed by the learners the teachers can come to know, how much of language has been learned by the learner and how much is left for him to learn.

With Chomsky's publication of *Syntactic Structures* (1957) the emphasis shifted from the description of language to the internalization of a language and it became clear that language learning is neither the process of habit formation nor something that can be acquired or learned by memorizing dialogues or performing pattern drills. For Chomsky the focus of linguistic theory was to, "characterize the abstract abilities speaker possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language" (Richards and Rodgers 1986, p.159). For Chomsky "the grammar is a device for generating the sentences in a language" (Thomas 1967, p.197). If a learner knows the grammar of a language s/he will be able to generate grammatically correct sentences in that language. His theory known as Transformational Generative Grammar claims that just by the knowledge of kernel sentences and transformational rules the learner will be able to generate creative sentences in a language. "A kernel sentence is a simple, active, declarative sentence and all other sentences are derived from these kernel sentences by applying transformational rules. Roughly speaking, a transformational rule is a rule that either introduces a new element (eg. negatives, adjectives) or rearranges the elements of a kernel sentence (eg. interrogatives) or does the both (eg. passives). Chomsky implies therefore that passive, interrogative, negative and sentences with adjective, adverb and conjunctions are more sophisticated than kernel sentences" (Thomas, p.197). Chomsky thus simplifies the notion of grammar by limiting it to kernel sentences and transformational rules. For teachers, this notion of kernel sentence and transformational rules proved to be very helpful as it provided the organization of language according to the increasing sophistication of structures. By teaching the learners simple, active and declarative sentences and some transformational rules, learners can be taught to produce grammatically correct sentences in that language. The most important contribution of his theory is that it permits a teacher to select and arrange grammatical elements in the most logical order and to build effectively on preceding material.

Besides this, his theory of competence and performance and Language Acquisition Device provide the proof that language learning is a mental phenomena and it involves the process of trial and error and deduction of rules from the input to which learners are exposed to. If a person has competence in a language, he will be able to produce grammatical correct sentences and will also be able to differentiate grammatical and ungrammatical sentences. But Chomsky's theory started receiving criticism from sociolinguists like Campbell and Wales (1970) and Dell Hymes (1971). Campbell and Wales argued with some plausibility that Chomsky's idea of competence omitted 'by far the most important linguistic ability… the ability to produce and understand utterances which are not so much grammatical, but, more important, appropriate to the context in which they are made…' (Campbell and Wales

1970:247 as quoted in George 1992, p.135). Dell Hymes proposes that a native speaker must not only be able to produce grammatically well-formed sentences, he must also be able to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they are made (Corder 1973, p.92). George (1992) quotes Newmeyer who quotes Lakoff as suggesting that Chomsky would unacceptably 'set up artificial boundaries and rule out of the study of language such things as …context, social interaction and dexis' (Newmeyer 1982:95 as quoted in George 1992, p.135). It is how the concept of communicative competence has come into being and these two concepts in a way paved the way for starting the importance of development of communication ability in the learner who learns English as a second language. These two concepts along with the Halliday's (1975) focus on functions of language rather than forms and Canale and Swain's (1980) notion of communicative competence provided the language foundation for Communicative Language Teaching Method and were foundational to most versions of Communicative Approach to language teaching, such as Wilkin's Notional Approach, Widdowson's discourse oriented approach and E.S.P. approaches.

Strevens (1965, p.73) says that "the place of linguistics is behind the classroom teachers". "The real contribution of linguistics is to increase the teacher's understanding of the nature of language and thereby make him more competent and therefore a better language teacher. Linguistically oriented teaching materials can produce satisfactory results only when they are used by teachers who are aware of the ideas and assumptions about language upon which they rest" (Verma 1993, p.76).

I conclude admitting that the question posed in the beginning- 'What has linguistics contributed to the field of English language teaching?'-can still be answered only in part and only semi-objectively. Admitting incompleteness and bias, I end the paper with the view that linguistics has contributed a lot to the field of English language teaching as far as methods and techniques are concerned.

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English Language Teaching and Linguistics
By
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