ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND CONVERSATIONAL

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Abstract
There has been extensive discourse about the role of conversational methods in English language teaching (ELT), generating both agreement and disagreement among scholars. A review of the literature reveals that ELT is deeply rooted in the discipline and sub-disciplines of linguistics, roots which it has never fully severed. This paper aims to trace the influence of linguistics on ELT over the last six decades, highlighting the linear and nonlinear relationships that linguistics maintains with ELT. The core objective is to elucidate how linguistic theories and methodologies have shaped and continue to shape the field of English language teaching.
Keywords: Discourse, ELT, Improvement, Innovation, Conversational

Introduction

The question of whether linguistics plays a role in English Language Teaching (ELT) is highly pertinent and has been the subject of much debate. Reviewing literature on the topic reveals a spectrum of opinions: some scholars assert that linguistics and ELT are intrinsically linked, while others believe they are distinct fields. This intense partisanship and lack of objectivity complicate the task of evaluating the role of linguistics in ELT.

Examining the history of linguistics over the past hundred years, and particularly the last six decades, shows that linguistics and its sub-disciplines have profoundly impacted all phases of language teaching. The evolution of theoretical linguistics—from traditional Grammar to Structuralism, from Transformational Generative Grammar to Systemic Functional Grammar, and the current emphasis on Semantics, Pragmatics, and Sociolinguistics—illustrates this influence. These linguistic theories and their associated methods have significantly shaped the design and implementation of ELT curricula and methodologies.

Linguistics has provided a theoretical foundation that informs various approaches to language teaching. For instance, the structuralist approach emphasized the systematic study of language structures, leading to methods that focus on grammar and syntax. Transformational Generative Grammar introduced concepts of deep structure and surface structure, influencing approaches that emphasize understanding the underlying rules of language use. Systemic Functional Grammar, with its focus on language function and use in context, has informed communicative language teaching methods that prioritize real-world language use.

Moreover, the rise of Semantics, Pragmatics, and Sociolinguistics has shifted the focus toward meaning, context, and the social aspects of language. These fields emphasize the importance of understanding language in use, which has led to the development of teaching methods that incorporate authentic language materials and real-life communication scenarios.

The interplay between linguistics and ELT is complex and multifaceted. Linguistic theories provide essential insights and tools that have shaped, and continue to shape, effective language teaching practices. This paper seeks to explore these relationships in depth, shedding light on the ongoing dialogue between linguistics and ELT, and highlighting the innovations and improvements that have arisen from this dynamic interaction.

Structuralism

Structural linguistics developed as a reaction against traditional grammar, fundamentally altering scholars' perceptions of grammar. Richards and Rodgers (2006, p.54) noted that this reaction was influenced by the movement towards positivism and empiricism, spurred by Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Structuralism emphasized treating linguistics as a scientific study of language, advocating for objectivity, verifiable descriptions, discovery procedures, the primacy of oral language, and the unique patterns of each language. These principles provided sound theories and techniques for language teaching.

Structuralists offered a more comprehensive and detailed description of language, which significantly influenced both the theory and methods of the Audio-lingual Method (ALM). They viewed language as a highly structured, rule-governed system that is meaningful within a given cultural community. Grammar was seen as "the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged to convey larger meanings" (Richards and Rodgers, 2006, p.55). Structural linguists analyzed language by identifying the smallest meaningful sounds (phonemes) and grammatical units (morphemes, stems, prefixes, suffixes) and then larger units such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Language was viewed as a system of structurally related elements used to encode meaning, with these elements being phonemes, morphemes, and words. Language learning, according to structuralists, meant mastering these building blocks and the rules for combining them from phoneme to morpheme to word to phrases and sentences (Richards and Rodgers, 2006, p.55). This belief led to the development of the Audio-lingual Method, which focused on the mastery of speech through the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The structuralist notion of language as a system allowed for viewing second or foreign language learning as the juxtaposition of two systems. Fries and Pike (1949, as cited in Richards, 1974, p.4) suggested that this juxtaposition could lead to a new system combining features of both languages, and even to inter-systematic interference (Weinreich, 1953, as cited in Richards, 1974, p.4). This idea of interference resonated with both linguists and language teachers, as it seemed to explain the challenges of second language learning. This led to the emergence of the Contrastive Analysis (CA) approach.

The origins of CA were pedagogic, and it helped language teachers by identifying similarities and differences between the learner's native language and the target language, thus highlighting areas of facilitation and interference (Ellis, 1986, p.23). As S.P. Corder (1973, p.280) proposed, language teachers should leverage the similarities, emphasizing both facilitation and interference. Although CA did not always predict errors accurately, it was useful for retrospectively explaining errors.

Structuralism provided a robust framework for understanding and teaching languages. By emphasizing the systematic and scientific study of language, it laid the groundwork for methods like the Audio-lingual Method, which sought to develop language skills through structured practice and mastery of linguistic elements. The introduction of concepts like interference and the development of Contrastive Analysis further enriched the field of language teaching, offering valuable insights into the complexities of learning a second language.

Error Analysis and Transformational Generative Grammar
As an alternative to Contrastive Analysis (CA), a more refined approach known as Error Analysis (EA) evolved. This approach shifted the focus from merely identifying similarities and differences between languages to systematically studying the errors learners make. Errors were viewed as a window into the learner's competence, offering insights into what the learner has mastered and what still needs to be learned. This systematic study of errors provided valuable feedback to teachers about the effectiveness of their instruction and the areas where learners needed more support.

With the publication of *Syntactic Structures* by Noam Chomsky in 1957, the emphasis in linguistic theory shifted from describing language to understanding the internalization of language. Chomsky's work marked a departure from the behaviorist view of language learning as habit formation and memorization of dialogues. Instead, Chomsky posited that language learning involves the acquisition of an abstract set of rules that enable speakers to generate grammatically correct sentences.

Chomsky's focus was on characterizing the abstract abilities that speakers possess, which allow them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.159). He introduced the concept of Transformational Generative Grammar, which claims that knowledge of a few basic sentence structures (kernel sentences) and transformational rules enables learners to generate a wide variety of sentences. According to Chomsky, "the grammar is a device for generating the sentences in a language" (Thomas, 1967, p.197).

A kernel sentence is a simple, active, declarative sentence. All other sentences are derived from these kernel sentences by applying transformational rules. Transformational rules either introduce new elements (e.g., negatives, adjectives), rearrange elements of a kernel sentence (e.g., interrogatives), or do both (e.g., passives). Chomsky implies that passive, interrogative, negative sentences, and those with adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions, are more sophisticated than kernel sentences (Thomas, 1967, p.197).

For teachers, this notion of kernel sentences and transformational rules proved to be very helpful. It allowed for the organization of language instruction according to the increasing sophistication of structures. By teaching learners simple, active, declarative sentences and some transformational rules, teachers could help them produce grammatically correct and more complex sentences. This approach provided a logical order for selecting and arranging grammatical elements, building effectively on preceding material.

The most important contribution of Chomsky's theory is that it permits a teacher to select and arrange grammatical elements in a logical sequence, making it easier to build on previous

lessons. This method not only aids in teaching grammar systematically but also enhances learners' ability to generate creative and grammatically correct sentences in the target language. By focusing on the internal rules that govern sentence construction, teachers can help students develop a deeper understanding of the language, moving beyond rote memorization to true linguistic competence.

Besides this, Chomsky's theory of competence and performance, along with the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), provided evidence that language learning is a mental phenomenon. It involves processes of trial and error and the deduction of rules from the input to which learners are exposed. According to Chomsky, if a person has competence in a language, they can produce grammatically correct sentences and distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences.

However, Chomsky's theory faced criticism from sociolinguists like Campbell and Wales (1970) and Dell Hymes (1971). Campbell and Wales argued 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 importantly, appropriate to the context in which they are made" (Campbell and Wales, 1970, as quoted in George, 1992, p.135). Dell Hymes proposed that a native speaker must not only produce grammatically well-formed sentences but also understand and produce sentences appropriate to the context (Corder, 1973, p.92). George (1992) quotes Newmeyer, who in turn quotes Lakoff, suggesting that Chomsky's framework "sets up artificial boundaries and rules out of the study of language such things as context, social interaction, and deixis" (Newmeyer, 1982, as quoted in George, 1992, p.135).

This critique led to the concept of communicative competence, highlighting the importance of developing learners' ability to use language appropriately in various contexts. Hymes (1971) emphasized that communicative competence involves not only grammatical correctness but also the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in social contexts. This shift in focus was foundational for the development of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach.

Michael Halliday's (1975) focus on the functions of language rather than its forms, and Canale and Swain's (1980) notion of communicative competence, provided the linguistic foundation for CLT. These theories underscored the need to teach language as a tool for communication, not just as a set of grammatical rules. CLT methods emphasize interaction and real-life communication, preparing learners to use language in various social contexts. This approach influenced several language teaching methods, including Wilkins' Notional-Functional Approach, Widdowson's discourse-oriented approach, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approaches.

Strevens (1965, p.73) remarked that "the place of linguistics is behind the classroom teachers." He argued that the real contribution of linguistics is to enhance the teacher's understanding of the nature of language, making them more competent and effective. Linguistically oriented teaching materials yield satisfactory results only when used by teachers who are aware of the linguistic ideas and assumptions upon which they are based (Verma, 1993, p.76).

The question posed at the beginning—"What has linguistics contributed to the field of English language teaching?"—can still be answered only partially and semi-objectively. Despite this, it is clear that linguistics has made significant contributions to ELT, particularly in terms of methods and techniques. While acknowledging the ongoing debates and evolving perspectives, it is evident that linguistic theories have profoundly shaped the way English is taught and learned, enhancing both pedagogical practices and learner outcomes.

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