

Language education: Missing link between lexico-grammatical theory and spoken English

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ABSTRACT

English Language education is important in its own right. Notably, English, as the most widely spoken language in the world, underpins the growth of international education, energizes individuals proficient in the use of English to conduct business internationally, and engage actively in global economic, social and political activities. To develop English language proficiency and acquire the level of adeptness necessary for comprehending academic content, learners need adequate English Education. Effective Education systems help teachers design instruction for English language learners. These strategies are geared towards helping students develop listening skills, attaining higher level vocabulary and understanding how to incorporate it into well-formed sentences. Adept English language education also incorporates cultural sensitivity. In studying world's cultures, groups do not only have different languages but also different world views, which should not be ignored when language varieties are studied. While several resources emphasize the lexico-grammatical features, the common syntactic structures peculiar to conversation and the coverage of features of spoken grammar are at best patchy. This results in a missing link, proven to be inadequate for many learners, particularly those for whom the development of oral fluency in informal interactions with native speakers is an important goal.

KEYWORDS: *English Language Learning; English language teaching; Translating grammar into spoken English; Language and Cultural competencies*

1. INTRODUCTION

UK International Conference (2004) described English Language as an important educational sector in its own right, but equally underpins the growth of international education more generally. The increasing demand for English Language attests to the fact that English has gained relevance and eminence in very many facets of the life of individuals and nations as a whole, and that this may be the result of its direct effect at promoting prosperity and influence through offering access to the global community and international societies. English has been consistently recognized as the singular language that can strengthen the capacity of countries to operate and do business internationally and enhance their participation in global economic and political activities. This has led to the growing presumption of a world where national boundaries have become increasingly unimportant, and where individuals, businesses and countries can operate in English language regardless of nationality, orientation or creed. This means that a deficiency in English Language skills can potentially pose as a barrier to effective participation in the global economy. In spite of these developments, modernization theory has warned against its major side-effects which are:

- i. that the spread of English supports unequal relationships between the 'developed' and 'developing' societies;
- ii. that global adoption of the English language as a uniform dialect may be associated with the institutionalization of inequality in the developing countries (Tollefson, 1991).
- iii. Furthermore, Rodney (1972) haunts this unequal relationship paradigm between the elite and masses by emphasizing the inability of the latter to participate in political and economic activities, because of their inability to speak or write the official medium of communication 'English'.

However, as English remains the most dominant language and dialect used globally in international relations, personal qualifications, commerce and trade, international journalism and law, science, study, international development and policy, many people are eager to be proficient in the use of the language.

2. CONCEPTS OF LEARNERS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Every aspiring English language learner is entitled to effective English Language Education, which should seek to develop the young learners' English Proficiency level for study. As a key learning strategy, the first, and perhaps most important issue is the amount of time that it takes to acquire a second language for school. While it takes one to three years for English Language learners (ELLS) to develop conversational proficiency in English, learners may need up to five to seven years to develop required skills that may qualify as academic English, that is the English needed for reading, writing, speaking and listening in the language content areas (Collier, 1999; Cummins, 2001). Most people seriously underestimate how long it takes to fully develop the necessary skills and acquire proficiency particularly in the context of academic language usage. The desired minimum required level of proficiency to be attained is an ability to comprehend written and oral academic content that will enable active participation in activities and coursework.

In addition to learning newer and higher level vocabulary, ELLs are also required to improve their usage of higher level language functions. Skills such as critical analytical skills, the use of inflections and transitions in grammar for predicting, explaining and justifying are also important elements for optimizing language proficiency. As an illustration of this point, middle scholars learning social studies learn vocabulary used in a typical unit focusing on population growth, such as words related to population dynamics, population shift, growth rates, and trends; they may also be required to learn additional descriptive mathematics vocabulary such as percentage, fractional increase and decrease, rates, ration, and proportional change (Burkart & Sheppard, 2004). Again the expectation for the young English Language learners is to learn new vocabulary necessary for comprehension and participation in the social class environment, and to understand how to effectively incorporate acquired vocabulary into well-formed and meaningful sentences in order to explain and make predictions. A good understanding of the underlying rubrics of the second language acquisition process improves the possibility of teachers and instructors at being able to influence the ELL's language ability through providing extra support and emphasis on expanding not only the content specific vocabulary, but also in developing the academic sentence structures. Teachers can analyze lessons and use word walls and word sorts, among other techniques, that help ELLs practice and acquire the vocabulary needed to understand the main points of any lesson. Teachers can also help young learners develop mastery of simple and complex sentence structures needed to discuss and write about concepts in the lesson. By encouraging the building of the requisite vocabulary and overseeing proper usage in accompanying sentence structures as language objectives, as well as coordinating language learning activities that support each lesson's content objectives, teachers ensure that English Language learners (ELLs) develop the specific academic language that is quintessential for optimal participation in the content classroom (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994); Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004).

English Education as a discipline is also directed at developing the learners' English adeptness required for work and leisure. They need to be able to communicate effectively in the language with colleagues and other allied members of their organization in a way and manner pertinent to their area of specialization to produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985). One important limitation to be considered is that English Language learners' (ELLs) although having requisite knowledge and information about the subject matter, may sometimes have difficulty expressing their knowledge in English (Bigelow & Ranny, 2005). Employing multiple modes of input, language teachers could address this limitation by presenting information in simplified form that makes use of a variety of modalities including visual, graphic, art, and audio, thus enhancing the language learner's appreciation of concepts and improving their ability to demonstrate intrinsic understanding of the information. For example, instead of writing a composition that requires a high level of language proficiency, English Language learners (ELLs) can use pictures, graphic organizers, demonstrations and drawings to show their understanding of academic concepts. This principle may also prove to be of tremendous value in organizations when carrying out an objective assessment or credentialing of ELLs who have not yet gained proficiency in their language speaking ability. Performance based assessments characterized by its greater emphasis on procedural knowledge, where individuals are expected to show what they know how to do with less emphasis on language speaking and/or writing ability, may be ideal for assessing English Language learners because of the lighter language requirement. These techniques are also applicable even for native English speaking students who need assistance in adequately demonstrating their content

knowledge. The use of digital literacy, according to Hoggart (1957), seeks to update foundation in cultural studies' text by examining contemporary concerns of multimedia and digital communication. In such scenarios, education systems must absolutely adapt and become accustomed to the newer conditions in order to remain relevant to the youth who engage in these practices.

Within the school system, teachers undertaking curriculum development and lesson planning may do so from the perspective of how they can present important concepts in multiple, less language intensive ways, and design instruction suitable for the English Language learners (ELLs); this may necessitate adjusting or modifying existing practices to reflect more current ideology that integrates ELLs into the mainstream learning, rather than create separate lessons that isolate English Language learners with concomitant fragmentation of valuable instructional time. Working from a language learning perspective, teachers can apply what they already know that may be of benefit to their English Language learners. In India, for example, practical training in laboratory communication skills is given to learners, some of the objectives of which are given below:

- To help them develop their soft skills and people skills, making the transition from college to workplace smoother and enabling them to excel in their jobs.
- To enhance students' communicative ability that in turn enhances their performance at placement interviews, group discussions and/or other recruitment exercises.

Laboratory practice is divided into two broad categories: the "English Language Lab" where listening comprehension, reading comprehension exercises, vocabulary and speaking tests are conducted, and the "Career Lab" where writing texts on resume/report preparation and letter writing are conducted. Also students may receive training in presentation, group discussion and interview skills (US, Department of Education, 2001). Thomas & Collier (2002) state that Language Education may also help students develop listening skills for academic and professional purposes with the following primary objectives:

- i. To help students acquire the ability to speak effectively in English in real-life situations.
- ii. To inculcate reading habit and to develop effective reading skills.
- iii. To help students improve their active and passive vocabulary.
- iv. To familiarize students with different rhetorical functions of scientific English.
- v. To enable students write letters and report effectively in formal and business situations.

Seidlhofer (2004) sees English Language Education as an integral part of language and culture. It makes sense to emphasize the fact that linguistic variation is tied to the existence of different cultures. An overview of the world's cultures illustrates the many languages spoken by many different peoples and groups across the world, and how differing world views are mirrored in their culture and languages. Considering the relatedness of language and culture, paying close attention to cultural beliefs and patterns thus becomes a vital element in studying language for understanding and meaning and should therefore not be ignored. This is a very important observation requiring a strategic approach in curriculum planning and development when different languages or language varieties are studied.

Skehan (1998) defines Language Education as a matrix from which English Language proficiency is made. A student with demonstrated proficiency in the use of English is able to learn and study in English, is able to ask questions, make conversation, and translate thoughts and ideas into speech. There is also demonstrated ability to understand teachers, reading materials, and to question what is being taught in the classroom. Important language skills that contribute to proficiency include the following:

1. The aptitude to figure out and interpret text at an age and grade appropriate level.
2. Listening – the capacity to comprehend what the teacher says, grasp and extract information, and to follow the instructional material through which teachers deliver tutoring.
3. Writing – the ability to create written text with content and format that satisfies classroom requirements in a manner consistent with age and grade level.
4. Speaking – the skill required in the proper delivery of oral language for effective learning and other didactic activities (such as peer tutoring, collaborative learning activities, and question/answer sessions) within the classroom and for other social interactions at school.

Research on the syntactic phenomena in English has largely depended on two important texts - one first published in 1985 by Quirk Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik (Comprehensive grammar of the

English Language), and another by Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad and Edward Finegan (The new Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English). Both texts have proven to be indispensable in the language learner's quest to understanding basic underlying concepts of syntax and analysis of the English language structure.

3. MISSING LINKS

An attempt at providing a detailed description of relevant syntactic phenomena was made by Biber and his colleagues in 'The new Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English' (LGSWE) just like Quirk et al did in 'Comprehensive grammar of the English Language' (CGEL). However, Biber et al in their book extend the efforts of Quirk et al in several important ways:

- Greater weight placed on linguistic function covered in the interpretation of quantitative results of the analysis.
- Prominence of the role of register as a factor in linguistic choices.
- Importance of spoken conversational English versus written English.
- In LGSWE versus CGEL, greater weight is placed on associations between discourse factors and preferences of the language users particularly in their syntactic and lexical choices.

4. THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

The institution of new methodologies and techniques, and the discoveries of second/foreign language acquisition research have brought about significant changes in both content and practice of teaching grammar. Consequent upon these changes, the prominence of grammar has fluctuated over the years. As Celce-Murcia (1991) states:

“During the past 25 years, we have seen grammar move from a position of central importance in language teaching, to low status, and back to a position of renewed importance, but with some diminution compared with the primacy it enjoyed 25 years ago and had enjoyed for so long before then.”

Importantly, grammar instruction is simply not the teaching of rules nor is it to be taught as an end in itself (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1988). Rather, it must be taught for the purposes of enhancing and improving communication. To this end, Corder (1988) claims that educational descriptions of the target language must be developed and planned to aid the learner learn effectively. Pedagogical descriptions are to be seen as facilitating learning, and therefore not the primary objects of learning. This is particularly important and helps to keep our goals and expectations in teaching grammar within proper perspective.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to Nisbbet, Tindall & Arroyo (2005), proficient learners may be more aware of their language needs as they tend to apply strategies that help them master the target language through practicing, reasoning, and analyzing, and other strategies that allow them to control their own learning through planning and evaluating learning. Importantly, many of these learners experience emotions and attitudes that may lower their anxiety levels and increase their motivation levels. In this regard, Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 295) remark that “language proficiency can be either effects or causes of strategy use.” They add that “use of appropriate strategies lead to enhanced actual and perceived proficiency, which in turn creates high self-esteem, which leads to strong motivation, spiraling to still more use of strategies, greater actual and perceived proficiency, high self-esteem, improved motivation and so on.”

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BIOGRAPHY:

Dr. Henry E. Asemota is a seasoned and experienced English professional with almost 30 years of teaching and research experience. He has published several articles and peer-reviewed publications and has authored different books dealing with English Grammar, Linguistics, and Literature.

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