

Assumptions Regarding Language Learning and Teaching in the Classroom

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[Abstract] In this paper, the author touches upon some basic considerations that seem to require deliberation in order to approach the task of teaching a second language in the classroom setting in a meaningful way. What is it that we are teaching? How is that which we are teaching learned? What are the roles of the teacher and the student in the language learning classroom? How can the different aspects of language, i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking be synthesized to further the language learning process? And lastly, while not exhaustive by any means, the purpose of this paper is to assist in focusing on approaches to language teaching and it is hoped that it will lend insight to others with the same concerns.

[Key words] language, acquisition, processes, assumptions, approaches, methods.

Introduction

The role of the language educator, with a view beyond purely academic pursuit, is assumed, at least by this author, to include activity in research that should help to reveal the beliefs upon which we act. In the case of the language educator, this research has a tandem nature. While engaging in the analysis of various aspects of human linguistic behavior, the language teacher must familiarize herself/himself quite intimately with the psychology of learning. In the decision to implement certain practices which we presume will yield the desired result, we are also putting into practice those assumptions toward the nature of learning which we have grasped as having truth value. At the same time, an understanding of the nature of learning is applied to the linguistic principles that control the behavior of language users. Hence, we have the dual responsibility of the language educator; to be familiar not only with the underlying principles and rules governing such a complex entity as language, but also to recognize and implement educational principles with their concomitant curricular and methodological implications.

I find myself in agreement with the view that any approach toward second language education is "a set of correlated assumptions dealing with the nature of

language and the nature of language teaching and learning.” (Anthony 1972:95) At the same time as describing the nature of what it is to be learned (i.e. a second language), an effective approach should be accountable for the treating of educational considerations which potentially yield methods that are productive. In addition to, and springing from concern with, educational processes are the roles of the teacher and the students themselves as realized in the classroom environment.

There is some doubt concerning the efficacy of detailed linguistic analysis in connection with the ability to affect linguistic competence in second language learners. Skepticism has been expressed by Chomsky, for one, about the

“significance, for the teaching of language of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology. It is possible - even likely - that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated, and cannot be presumed. It is *the language teacher himself* who must validate or refute any specific proposal.” (italics mine) (Schumann & Stenson 1974:1)

However, valuable insights have been provided by linguistics, for example, in the development of research done by the descriptive linguists who broke away from the prescriptivist idea that all languages fit into the classical mode (i.e. Latin, for instance). The revelations that each language system is a purely arbitrary one and that correct speech is what people say, not what grammarians decree they should say are very valuable to us indeed. They spring from the activities of the descriptive linguists, “rather than beginning with Latin grammar and searching for that system in the language being studied, [beginning] with the language itself and [studying] the recurring patterns.” (Chastain 1976:107)

The primary nature of this conflict in outlook tends to point out the first assumption that the language educator must concern herself or himself with and that is about the nature of language itself. Considerations of the characteristics of a subject matter such as language help to develop in the teacher tangential postulations about how it is learned and consequently the best method of how to teach it.

The Nature of Language and its Acquisition

In order to capture what may be the foundations of *my* basic assumptions of language learning, I feel it is necessary to state, generally, a definition of what it is that we as language teachers are attempting to teach. Our understanding of the nature of our subject matter may avail of us some revelatory clues as to what types of processes are demanded in the acquisition of a second language. There may be as many descriptions of language as there are those who would attempt to describe it, on the one hand, and on the other, there are some quasi-standardized

postulates that bear adoption, or rather consideration, no matter what our approach may be.

One field of study that has made a substantial and influential attempt at the definition of language which can be useful in the formulation of a theory of acquisition (and hence, in derivation, second language acquisition) is the field of transformational grammar. Some important considerations and concepts concerning language have emerged through the study of transformational grammar which gives some basic tenets such as those put forth by Chomsky, including the following (parentheses mine);

1. The use of language is controlled by rules.
2. Language is infinitely varied.
3. Competence (that which we know how to say) precedes performance (that which we can and do say).
4. The relationship between surface structure and deep structure is understood by the user of the language.
5. Two types of grammar rules are utilized by the native speaker (and by extension the language learner). Generative rules are applied to form base sentences and transformational rules account for their various permutations.
6. Meaning is communicated through either semantics or syntax plus phonology.
7. All humans are born with an innate capacity to learn languages.
8. There are certain basic elements of grammar that are common to all languages. (Chastain 1976 : 138-139)

Hence we have the foundations and groundings for a cognitive approach towards language learning that go beyond earlier solutions to problems concerning learning. Some of these earlier conceptualizations, nonetheless, are compatible with this approach. The 'formal' approach, for example, with its understanding of "language as an abstract system of rules (generally in conformance with the 'universal' rules of Latin)" (Jackson 1979) is not at odds with it. These rules concern the structure of words and their arrangements as contained in the *written* language of 'canonized' classics. The emphasis of linguistic analysis however, is based on a traditional or latinate (i.e. deriving from Latin) grammar dissection. This stance leads to the view of (second) language acquisition as "a conscious cognitive processing of linguistic rules through practice for the purpose of developing and disciplining the mind." (Jackson 1979) Such purposes, while well and good, perhaps stultify the potential of a cognitive approach by not taking into account non-graphic aspects of the language and their complementary and enhancing nature.

In the course of learning a second language through oral and listening practice, where the main application of the cognitive processes attend to 'meaning', the purpose is to develop *in the mind* an understanding of the language as it is used.

Grammar dissection does have its place in the acquisition of a grasp of the inner workings of a language. However, as an approach to language learning in and of itself, it is perhaps unfulfilled by its uninventive sterilization of a language and by treating it solely as a subject matter to be viewed as so many mechanical manifestations, the mastery of which is the reason for study.

Another differing but not conflicting approach is that which is called the 'direct' approach. This approach views language "as a living, social activity of human beings displaying patterns of substance (phonic and, at least potentially, graphic), form (grammar and lexis), and context. This position, in turn, leads to the assumption of acquisition as an unconscious process of establishing connections between linguistic substance and their meanings through 'direct experience' of the target language in meaningful contexts." (Jackson 1979) This stance, again, doesn't seem at odds with the cognitive approach with its emphasis on an innate ability to understand meaning as it is communicated through the linguistic substance of syntax and semantics. However, its reliance on direct experience ignores the fact that much of language learning occurs outside of this type of experience and is mentally generated. While the basis of some modern methods such as 'total physical response', inductive methods using the target language only (i.e. Berlitz etc.), and those using colored wooden rods and such, the 'direct method' tends to overlook the vast resource of knowledge and the ability of critical analysis that most second language learners bring to the task. The learners that we deal with at the university level, at least, display powers of analysis that would be misused if limited to acquisition of the immediate (i.e. sensate) active use of the language. At the same time that direct methods don't seem to take advantage of intellectual processes, they seem to ignore one of the most purposeful uses, and one of the earliest desires of most learners of a language, which is the expression of abstract feelings, beliefs and thoughts.

That the application of linguistic analysis to language learning came to be viewed skeptically (as mentioned above with Chomsky), perhaps came about by reaction to the very approach that the descriptive linguists had taken in addition to the methods they had chosen. At the time of the development of the 'audio-lingual' approach, behaviorism was in its ascendancy with an emerging application of the stimulus-response (S-R) theories of learning and their concomitant methods in various fields. There is a "close connection between descriptive linguistics and stimulus-response learning theories and teaching techniques [that] has continued to the present." (Chastain 1976: 25) The view of language adopted by this approach is that "it is a structured system of arbitrary vocal sounds and sequences of sounds which is used, or can be used, in interpersonal communication by an aggregation of human beings, and which rather exhaustively catalogs the things, events, and processes in the human environment." (Jackson 1979) As to the methods used

in transferring the knowledge and practiced use of such a system, antecedents can be found in the studies of Wundt, Thorndike, Watson, Skinner, and such, in which reinforcement strengthens habits of use. This is important to the view of language learning as a "mechanical process of habit formation of correct (i.e. native) use of language as it occurs." (Jackson 1979) However, disregarded are such considerations as explanations of the learning processes by which a language user could become capable of generating an infinite number of sentences for which there are no models. As pointed out by Chastain, "Recent theoretical models reflect a conception of language that is much more complex than that accepted by behavioristic psychology and structural linguists" (1976 : 143)

Nevertheless, the major shortcoming of this approach is that with the definition of learning that stresses observable behavior, disregarded are many of the mental processes that have been recognized by others as playing an important part in learning. The role of these mental processes in learning has been well established as exemplified by Piaget's "portrait of the [learner] as an active organizer of experience, building up schemes for action through processes of assimilation and accommodation." (Fontana 1981 : 80) The schemes that he talks about "...grow in number. They become co-ordinated and differentiated. They become organized so as to afford symbolic as well as physical solutions to problems. The *symbolic* systems themselves become qualitatively more powerful with growth, which is promoted through different interaction with a challenging environment." (Fontana 1981 : 80) (*italics mine*)

Newer theories of learning as developed by cognitive psychology have moved away from, and in reaction to, the conditioning models offered by the behaviorists. The cognitivist view of language, with its base in transformational grammar, is that of "an abstract, double-deckered (i.e. syntactic/semantic) rule-governed behavior which is creative, and uses a finite means for infinite ends with an oral and, the possibility of, a written component." (Jackson 1979) In the acquisition of a language, "the cognitive definition stresses the [active] role of the mind in processing the information acquired. Learning is the perception, acquisition, organization and storage of knowledge in such a way that it becomes an active part of the individual's cognitive structure." (Chastain 1989 : 143) This acquisition is viewed as innate and this innate ability allows the learner to process information such as that contained in linguistic data tending to result in the creation of a knowledge of the rule system of the target language that is unconscious (i.e. competence in the language is attained.).

No real pedagogy or method derived on the viewpoint toward learning and language taken by the transformational-cognitivists (i.e. cognitive psychologists or transformational-generative linguists separately or in tandem) has been forthcoming. This sphere of activity has yielded no real organization of particular

techniques for use in the classroom. However, the compatibility of this approach with others, as mentioned above, shows a strong potential for practical application in the classroom. The responsibility for the articulation of these types of theories with practical classroom application thereof lies, of course, with the teacher because, “[after all], theory and practice should complement each other, and the teachers are the ones who should concern themselves with the application of theory to the classroom instead of expecting to be told by the linguists and the psychologists how they should teach.” (Chastain 1976:143)

The Role of the Teacher

It goes beyond saying that the role of the teacher, in the type of formal instruction with which we concern ourselves, is pivotal. In the debate on the separation or efficacy of ‘acquired’ or ‘learned’ knowledge, recent research by Long has shown that all levels of learners, from beginners to advanced, appear to benefit from formal instruction. (Ellis 1985:233) Indeed, in some cases, such as natural situations which may only provide exposure to the language without the impetus towards its acquisition, formal instruction may be more desirable in that, by providing an ‘intake environment’, development is more closely nurtured, monitored and encouraged.

While I certainly feel that the central role in the classroom is the role of the student, there is a symbiotic relationship with the role of the teacher. If, for example, we say that language is ruled-governed (i.e. finite means, through systematization, can be used for infinite ends), there are two ways in which these rules and their uses can be learned. The first is explication through formal instruction (especially in the case of learners trying to gain an understanding of a language where they don’t have access to ‘natural’ input). The other is induction (some call it ‘acquisition’ vis a vis ‘learning’, others refer to ‘discovery learning’) The primacy of induction lends itself to learning in any field and in a wide variety of environments, whether they be formal or informal learning situations. Therefore we must keep in mind that formal instruction, while being beneficial in and of itself for the learning of rules does not have an *a priori* relationship to induction through which acquisition of, and competence in, a second language are attained.

Be that as it may, that which is provided by the instructor in the classroom environment is (on the surface at least) of the nature of explication. Whether this explication is realized in the detailed explanation of grammar points, vocabulary, and usage directly, or provided within the input generated in other activities, there is an organization, whether it be formal or intuitive, that has been laid out in the form of an agenda for study. As Brumfit points out, “language teaching will be most successful when it follows a well-worked out plan which directs and organizes

what the teacher does." (Ellis 1985 : 243) What the teacher does in this case is to provide not only his understanding of the language at hand, and all its intricacies to the best of his knowledge, but his power of diagnosis. This power of diagnosis reaches its potential in relation to the subject matter when faced with new examples of language or the situations in which they are used. It manifests itself in the choice of material for study in the classroom and when the teacher is called upon to act as a language resource. It also comes into play when determining what type and how much assistance to render to the students when they are faced with difficulties they may be unable to work out at that time.

The power of diagnosis is also applicable when individualizing the instructor's method of instruction. Determining the characteristics of each student as to their perceived abilities, understanding and capability is a major function of the active instructor. It would be an ideal situation, perhaps, were the students in a class all of the same linguistic level, cognitive advancement, and motivational impetus. However, this is not the case.

In instruction, the teacher's role is more than that of a dispenser of explicit grammatical rules. This is especially true, of course, when the teacher may not have a full intellectual grasp of the inner workings of the particular rule under consideration which, considering the complexity of the nature of language, may often be the case. It is then that the teaching of strategies for getting at meaning is important. These strategies should be of the sort that if they don't reveal the rules concerned they at least reveal the meaning that usage demonstrates. So, if we say that the acquisition of language is an outcome of the use of learning strategies, the teacher should be able to take advantage of his students' abilities to reason and analyze. These abilities are 'natural' to the student and can be assumed to have been used when he was learning his or her first language. They are of such a universal nature that they are not bound only to first language learning and can be assumed to be of use in learning a second language, and further, in all learning in general.

In the development of methods of instruction, the educator, while working within the framework implied by his understanding of prevailing theories of language and its acquisition should also bear in mind that language acquisition is subsumed under cognitive development and is one of its indicators. One of the most salient features of method development is that it "is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of development of the [learner's] powers and interests. The law for presenting and treating material is the law implicit within the [learner's] own nature." (Dewey 1964 : 435) In laying the foundation for linguistic learning strategies Slobin, for one, mentions two ideas that support the concept of primacy of cognitive development within the framework of language acquisition:

"New forms first express old functions, and new functions are first expressed

by old forms.” (Slobin 1973 : 184)

(Thus the principle of the primacy of cognitive development channels the creation of classroom methods so that what is taught is that which is ready to be learned.) and

“The rate and order of development of the semantic notions expressed by language are fairly constant across languages, regardless of the formal means of expression employed.” (Slobin 1973 : 187)

These consistencies are indicative of the universals across languages that give us operating principles that are said to be used by anyone acquiring a language. Those operating principles, which have been fairly well standardized in the field of second language acquisition are listed here in paraphrase of Slobin.

The learner;

- A. Pays attention to the ends of words
- B. Systematizes the phonological forms of words
- C. Pays attention to the order of words and morphemes.
- D. Will not produce a form until the function is understood.
- E. Knows that grammatical markers carry semantic meaning.

I might add that the learner also behaves under these principles *actively* in the formation of an understanding of the language. I assume that all language learners are operating under these principles and also feel that progress will be made if these cognitive strategies or generalizations are, if not brought to the attention of the student, at least restimulated so that the same process that were used in learning the first language can be revived in the learning of a second. As pointed out by Dewey, there is danger wherein “the neglect of this principle (of mental activity by the student) is the cause of a large part of the waste of time and strength in school work. The [learner] is thrown into a passive, receptive, or absorbing attitude.” (parentheses mine) (Dewey 1964 : 435)

It is a further assumption that some difficulties that students have in learning another language are caused by interference by the students' native language. This, however, does not seem to be a major consideration, taking into account the fact that only about three percent of learner errors can be attributed to such interference. (Dulay & Burt 1973) The assumption is that with careful analysis and comparison of both the first and second languages, points of discrepancy where the languages are dissimilar would be where errors occur. This idea, in turn, is based on the understanding of language as a set of learned habits acquired orally that was mentioned above when considering the 'audio-lingual' approach.

In addition, these types of difficulties created by interference may result in errors that may or may not be distinguishable from those caused by developmental (cognitive) errors. Since the resulting errors are also so small in number, I feel that they lose their significance in comparison with other possible causes of error

that have a greater power of prediction, such as a model of language that views all language activity (including errors) as meaningful activity and revelatory of mental processes. The recognition of the areas where meaning is represented and conveyed differently across languages can be instrumental in the act of getting at the meaning that underlies different forms of the target language. By being guided in the importance of getting at meaning the student can be taught or will recognize the need not to confuse formulae between those used in the first language and those which are used in the second to express given meaning.

It may be germane to say that the more cognitive processes the learner is allowed to use the better his learning of the second language will be. So that, in the development of methods, the instructor would do well to consider a wide variety of activities to encompass the various cognitive styles put to use by the learner and the wide range of linguistic cognitive development of the diverse individuals under tutelage. In this sense, we could say that rote memorization, although not formally embraced as the *best* method (at least by the cognitivists) also fulfills a need in the learning process. This would be the case where forms are systemized more or less arbitrarily as in the example of English verb inflection. Other cognitive processes such as generalization, analogy, or discretionary judgment would serve little purpose in the learning of such a system whose nature can be best characterized as a system of random exceptions. An added advantage provided by such methods as rote memorization is the benefit of providing the student with confidence in performance that the high level of potential success with such a method brings.

The Role of the Student

Ultimately, I feel that the central role in the classroom is the role of the student. It is what the student brings to the classroom that determines any measure of success in any classroom. This includes the understanding not only of the processes involved, but also, in the case of language learning at least, an understanding of what is possible and what is to be expected. As mentioned above in the discussion about formal instruction and explication, the other side of the equation lies in the relationship between informal instruction and induction. The student knows this. The student knows too that it is not one style of learning that takes precedence over the other even though we are in a formal situation and one might feel it necessary to focus on explanation and analysis. The student also has an understanding of both types of learning and their relationship and brings to bear both intellectual and intuitive processes simultaneously.

As to what can be expected of and by the student, I feel that language is a purposeful, meaningful activity that all people desire to engage in. People studying a

second language already know this of their first language. I feel that we can take advantage of the knowledge of language and its functions that the students already have. When they come to the classroom, the students presumably have the goal of establishing connections between linguistic substance and their meanings and how these relationships are manifested in the grammar. (Grammar in this sense would be the salient aspects of language, i.e. the surface structure of the language) I feel that teaching style should lean toward the realization of that goal.

The processes of induction and discovery in learning reside in the student and depend on the individual learner for their activation. In accordance, I feel that most language learning takes place by this means whether it be first or second language learning. By extension, I feel that the assumptions that we make about first language learning should be applicable to second language learning. Some assumptions about cognitive development in first language learning that are put forward by Sampson (Sampson : 245-248) as also relevant to second language learning, though overlapping in certain areas, are listed here. I basically agree with these and feel that they are in congruence with the assumptions that I have made above and have included my comments following in brackets [].

1) Fluency precedes accuracy.

[In line with the definitions of language and acquisition that were put forth in the discussion above about the different views of the nature of language, it should be realized what students coming to the language learning experience have in mind. In the 'direct approach, it is the goal of 'meaningful human activity' in which acquisition is a process of establishing connections between linguistic substance and their meanings (etc.). In the 'cognitivist' approach, language is rule-governed behavior which is creative, and uses finite means for infinite ends. This being the case, we can assume a willingness on the students part to try to express themselves in a way that is creative and real to them, with the limited knowledge of the language they have acquired. We can expect that the students may not want to wait, until they have 'mastered' certain forms or acquired a sophisticated vocabulary, to try their hand at communicating in the new language. This should be encouraged to the greatest extent possible, at least through activities that generate this type of behavior, and rewarded where appropriate in order to foster an advance towards accuracy.

2) Not all students are ready to learn a given concept at the same time.

[Nor in the same way. Different students all have different learning styles. It is up to the teacher to be aware of the different needs and attitudes of the individuals in the class and adjust lessons in relation to these differences. A student-centered class may be unproductive when the students are not at a maturational level capable of exercising their motivation; externally organized, teacher-assisted and controlled activities may be called for in this case.

Educators must be sensitive to the existence of different learning styles and whether the individual student is the type that is externally motivated or internally so.

- 3) [A teacher should] evaluate a student's present strengths and weaknesses and attempt to enhance the students attention and efforts to subjects, concepts, skills, etc., that the student can learn more about, explore, or acquire. [Subjects, concepts, and skills here are related to the language, meaning, and performance, respectively. This concept is related more to the cognitive intellectual development than the previous consideration. In this case, what is being analyzed by the teacher is not necessarily the motivational capacity of the student but the level and stage of acquisition at which the student has arrived. This in turn should lead to a careful examination of the continuing course and direction of study and their ancillary grammatical and vocabulary points.]
- 4) Function precedes form.

[To expand, it should be said that this principle refers to the understanding of the function as it embodies a meaningful concept in a community of speakers. When this is understood, the form (i.e. the surface structure with which we express this meaning) can be learned. We, at the university level are at an advantage where our chore is made easier by the fact that our students come to the classroom equipped with an understanding of human interaction in a social context. That the societies which use language are different on certain surface aspects is no real cause of conflict considering that societies, in general, operate under more or less universal constraints, conditions, and contexts.]

Also added to this list should be the observation that the acquisition of the 'passive' skills precede and form an *a priori* basis for the acquisition and exercise of the 'active' skills

Part of the latent understanding that students bring to the task and which understanding should be exercised is that all the modes of a language (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) can be of use and aid each other in the learning of language. The relationships are manifold. As an example, we can say the acquisition of the graphic manifestations (reading and writing) give support to the acquisition of the phonic manifestations (speaking and listening). Within these modes, the passive aspects of understanding (reading and listening) aid in the development of skills in the production or performance skills (speaking and writing). This being the case, we can say that the more access the student has to opportunity for exercise of these various skills the more improvement that can be gained in any one particular skill. An approach broad enough to include the complementary nature of the different modes is desirable so that the students who do not pick up the structures and vocabulary presented orally may do so visually and vice versa. If the initial introduction is comprehended, additional study in the other mode serves

to reinforce the concepts being studied.

Awareness of the sequential development of 'competence' vis a vis 'performance' in these four skill areas is important and should lend aid in the sequencing of learning targets when considering where emphasis is to be placed. The 'natural' sequence of acquisition as observed in the first language (in particular by the audio-linguists) where the order is listening, speaking, reading, then writing, may not be the proper focus for the second language classroom. This is a type of linear approach with many teachers focusing on exercising the modes of learning where production is the goal in prior sequence to (and often to the exclusion of) the receptive modes. However, I am in agreement with the idea that "[once] the receptive skills have been established by means of listening and reading, speaking and writing can be undertaken and developed toward communicative fluency." (Chastain 1976 : 282) Even in the first language, beyond the stage of having become a 'native speaker' (usually by the time one finishes elementary school, one can be assumed to have reached this stage), the development of sophisticated mastery, such as the expansion of vocabulary and complex grammatical understanding takes place more often than not through the printed page.

Conclusion

It has been my hope in this paper to focus on some of the concerns that help to form the assumptions toward language and language learning that educators, consciously or otherwise, tend to develop in the course of attempting to teach a language. The considerations touched upon here were concentrated in the areas of the nature of language, the nature of (second) language acquisition, the role of the teacher in the processes involved, and the overall role that the student plays towards the achievement of success. Through careful deliberation of the issues mentioned above I have come to develop a personal approach towards language and language learning. I hope that this approach was given sufficient exposure in the above discussions on the role of the teacher and the role of the student. My approach may perhaps be characterized as a cognitive approach toward language in tandem with a communicative conception of language acquisition. This allows me to develop procedural methods of presentation of the relevant material without contradiction to the axiomatic approach that I have come to chose. However, this is not to say that I, or we as teachers should, reject any view that is not in concert with that which we have embraced. On the contrary, there is much of value to be gained by continually examining other areas of inquiry so as to help modify our views, ultimately to the benefit of the students of whom we are in charge. While not exhaustive in the least, it is hoped that I have given due consideration to those approaches of the more general and standard trends of thought that have

helped to clarify and expand our understanding of the activity in which we are engaged.

That this activity takes place in the artificial confines of the classroom gives an added dimension that impinges and colors the application of any given approach or method. Further discussion will be undertaken in future in the area of the classroom techniques potentially developed by the different approaches and how they can be implemented within the framework of the classroom.

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