Linguistic Insights: The Role in the Teaching/Learning of English in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper is an investigation into the role which an adequate knowledge of linguistics can play in the enhancement of teaching/learning of English in Nigeria. The study is necessitated by the undeniable role which English plays in the world, especially in Nigeria, were its instrumental and non-instrumental values have become so compelling in recent times. There is an assumption however, that the English as a second language (ESL) teacher in Nigeria often lacks the ability to utilize the necessary linguistic research findings to boost maximum productivity in the teaching/learning process, which he needs mandatorily for efficiency. In this exposition, the numerous frontiers that can be explored by the ESL teacher, such as the organizational, pedagogical, psychological and sociological dimensions have been highlighted. It is hoped that these skills, when acquired by the ESL teacher, will enhance the teaching/learning of the target language in Nigeria.

Introduction

Despite its variegated considerations and methodologies, and as commented by Crystal (2008), that the notion of linguistics is ambiguous, there is a common denominator among linguists that linguistics is "the scientific study of language" (Lyons 1968). Linguistics as a recent and rapid growing area of study which has now

become widely taught in the 1960's, is the study of language as a means of communication primarily used by human beings in the society. Language has distinctiveness, first, in its quality of humanness and second, by its non-instinctiveness as a means of communicating ideas, emotions, feelings, and desires by means of a system and vocal sound symbols. According to Ferdinard de Saussure, Language is "Langue", Langue, because it is a social artifact, culturally established rules which govern all forms of linguistic communication within any community of speakers that share common linguistic knowledge. Language is intricately tied to man to the essence that it also programmes and guides the individual mental activity, releasing potentials for the analysis of impressions and synthesis of his mental world. It is in the light of the above that there has developed an interest in several fields of human endeavours for its investigation.

There are several dimensions to the study of linguistics. Sampson (1975:4) talks of two approaches, namely the "generalists" and the "particularists". It means linguists treat individual languages e.g., English, French, Chinese and so on. On the other hand, they consider the general phenomenon of human language, of which particular languages are examples. The next approach, the Comparatists is exemplified here by Ellis (1966). They believe that all languages have enough in common for them to be compared and classified into types. Hence, this approach is called "linguistic typology". Yet, Ferdinard de Saussure's idea constitutes another approach. He distinguished "two sciences of language ": diachronic as opposed to synchronic. De Saussure (1959:81) and James (1980:2) explain that "everything that relates to the static side of our science is synchronic: everything that has to do with evolution is diachronic". Similarly, synchrony and diachrony designate respectively a language state and evolutionary phase.

Applied Linguistics: Its Nature

As a branch of linguistics, the phrase "applied linguistic" is one of the most problematic terms to discuss among linguists. This is partly so because either some do not conceive of it an independent field of study or do not belief in its potency to offer anything for the improvement of the teaching/learning of the foreign language. Yet, there are ardent proponents like James (1980) and Crystal (1985) among others who believe in the contributions of applied linguistics to foreign language teaching/learning. Crystal (2009:31) states that applied linguistics is "a branch of linguistics where primary concern is the application of linguistic theories, method and findings for the elucidation of language problems which have arisen in other areas of experience. He further remarked that the most well-developed branch is the teaching and learning of foreign languages. From the foregoing discussion, it can be deduced that linguistics generally makes possible the description of languages. In applied linguistics, the findings of linguistic theories and descriptions are taken over and

applied directly to language teaching, translation and other relevant fields. This paper is concerned with the usefulness of the linguistic knowledge which an ESL teacher needs for the purpose of teaching/learning of English as a second language in Nigeria.

The Role of Linguistic Insights in L2 Teaching/Learning

For the ESL teacher in Nigeria, linguistic knowledge is of essence if he must impart positively on his learner. It is common knowledge that no one can teach what he does not know, anyone can only teach what he knows. Wilkin (1972:216) writes that "it is hard to imagine that languages can ever be taught without reference to the available language descriptions". It is linguistics that has provided that necessary language theories and notions to increase the understanding of the nature of language and of language learning. Without sound linguistic knowledge, the ESL teacher has apparently nothing to teach or at least will mislead the learner. Languages are structured, words are not just put together randomly in a sentence. They are rather patterned with specific rules. For instance, in English, an aspect of the rules of concord states that a singular subject takes a singular verb while a plural subject takes a plural verb. There are also other concord rules such as that regarding notional concepts, collective nouns, indefinite pronouns, pronoun and its antecedence and so on. The ESL teacher knows as well that there are also exceptions to the rules as inferred from the utterance of the native speakers. It is in the light of the above that the ESL teacher distinguishes sentences 1-3 below as grammatical and 4-5 as ungrammatical or ill-formed.

1. Birds fly
2. Each of the players has to wash his jersey
3. John, with his wife and twelve children is here

*4. Here comes the professor and his wife

*5. Bread and butter were all she served

Linguistic findings therefore equip the ESL teacher with the necessary linguistic intuition, that is, intuition about well-formed sentences and about sentence structures which are imparted to the second language learner.

Perhaps, the relevance of linguistic knowledge is more needed in the area methodology, that is, the appropriate choice of methods in the teaching of student in concrete learning situation than elsewhere. In linguistic theories since centuries ago, lots and lots of assumptions have been on the front burner regarding how best to teach foreign/L_2 in the world. It is common knowledge that there cannot be effective practice without knowledge of the underlying principles or theories. Theory still remains the hallmark of practice and practice is incredibly accounted for and derived from theory (Obi-Okoye (2002). Assumptions about how best to teach a foreign/L_2

has been teaching/learning a language emerged with its attendant strengths and weaknesses. Other methods such as: the cognitive code-learning, affective/humanistic approach, functional approach and endless lists of methods have been proposed for use by the teacher of the foreign/L_2. The ESL teacher therefore chooses one or a combination of methods in the teaching of English in the classroom. He knows the strengths and weaknesses of these methods and so taps from only the strengths of each. For instance, the idea of rote learning and the supremacy of writing over speech in language learning is de-emphasised. Communicative or the functional approach to L_2 teaching/learning is current. By this approach, the teacher exposes students to a wide range of real-life-concrete situations where learners exhibit performance and acquire the habit of using language contextually. This approach emphasizes communicative competence without grammatical competence. However, as result of identifiable flaws in all the approaches, no one approach is considered the most effective rather an integrative method is proposed. This is determined by the teacher at any point in time after considering the learner's needs, the teacher's capabilities as well as the environment. The approach is known as the "prudent eclestism".

One of the few areas where investigations into language structure have no much improved the pedagogy as its aim in the area of contrastive analysis. The concept of contrastive analysis was initially based on Osgood's theory of transfer, but now the theory has undergone series of modifications. However, contrastive analysis provides a basis for the interlingual comparism and contrast of mother tongue and target language. This will bring to light the similarities and differences between the MT and the TL of the learner and so makes it possible to predict, the difficulties that the learners will have. The overall implication of contrastive analysis is that the findings will enable the teacher to determine what to teach. These are built into language teaching materials, syllabuses, tests and researches.

Since two years after Lado's publication in 1957 of *Linguistics Across Culture*, an endless number of research have been carried out in applied linguistics on contrastive studies of different languages across the world. Some of them include: the "contrastive series" edited by C. A. Ferguson, under the auspices of the Applied Linguistics of Modern Language Association of America, Washington DC, the Posman (Polish-English), Zagreb (serbo-Croatia-English), and Teanglan (Irish English) Satuttgart (Germa-English) researchprojects etc (Nikel, 1974:1-16). In Nigeria, Banjo, A. (1969), undertook a study on the "syntactic and lexical rules of English and Yoruba", David, E. (1995), Gwete, N.B., (1980) Tamunobelema, I. (2006) on "Sentence structure in English and Okrika". In all of these, it is no gainsaying that the findings from researches on contrastive studies have greatly enhanced the second language teaching/learning in Nigeria.

In a similar development, studies in error analysis as a linguistic enterprise are no less beneficial to both teachers and learners of English as an L2. As an aspect of psycho linguistic study, it is believed that the errors an L2 learner of a language makes lie in the language system of the target language and not as a result of the influences of the native language. According to Headbloom (1979), these intralingual errors "imply general characteristics of rule learning such as over-generalisation or faulty application of rules or conditions". This is part of the process of L1 acquisition of child. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of the learner and may give us indication as to the learning strategies. In error analysis, the errors made by the learners are traced to their root and then, the steps and strategies to correcting them are taken. In English, for instance, research has shown that high redundancy, irregular verbs, and the lexicons as a result of the sense relation of words such as homonyms, homophones, homographs and polysemy are major sources of the learners' errors. Error analysis as a programme is designed to investigate into these inherent problematic features with a view to providing remedial teaching. Again, through the feedback of error analysis, appropriate syllabus as well as teaching/learning strategies is designed.

In every teaching/learning situation, materials to be taught are graded. Grading of language materials is "a complex process of grouping and sequencing inter-related patterns in terms of increasing complexity" (Anyadigwe in Obi-Okoye 2008:55-59). Grading is very essential in teaching/learning because it determines the sequencing of materials in terms of what goes with what and what comes before what? It is widely established that in teaching, learners learn faster when they are led from the known to unknown. Language items are graded in such a manner that one item must obviously be placed before the other in terms of their relatedness. For instance, in phonology of English, the vowel and consonant sounds ought to be taught before the supra-segmental features. In composition/ letter writing, knowledge of the informal features should be taught before that of the complex formal writing. In teaching aspects of vocabulary building the concepts of synonyms and antonyms are grouped together. Similarly, in teaching aspects of the English grammar, active and passive, singular and plural, and direct and indirect sentences are always grouped and presented together because they are related and the knowledge of one leads to the other. The essence of grading is to sequence linguistic items which will progress from what is simple to the learner to the complex and the relatedness of such items make teaching and comprehension by the learner easier. The ESL teacher therefore needs an in depth knowledge of theoretical and applied linguistics to be able to grade language items for the enhancement of teaching by the students.

The contributions of linguistic theories such as the behaviourists and the generativists are great assets to the ESL teacher. His thoughts, techniques and actions in the

classroom are guided by these standard linguistic insights. The ESL teacher knows the difference between L1 acquisition and L2 learning. He believes, as linguistics has shown, that L1 acquisition is built on LAD which requires exposure to linguistic environment and encouragement. On the other hand, L2 learning is a more formal situation with its peculiar features. It requires a formal setting, teacher, motivation, practice, feedback, reinforcement and the adoption of appropriate teaching/ learning techniques among others for the realization of positive results. The ESL teacher knows that appropriate intervals of delivery of lessons, certain evaluation methods are required to assess the performance of the learner. In this vein, the attributes of good language examinations/tests readily come to mind. They are: validity and reliability. Validity may be determined by the following; face validity, content validity, construct validity and empirical validity. In all that the teacher does with the students, he also bears in mind that not all the learners have acquired the same level of competence in the target language and so, sometimes, adopts discriminating approaches in his class. In other words, by his exposure to Linguistics research findings, the ESL teacher is equipped with the appropriate tests and measurement devices to access the progress made by the L2 learner.

The importance of translation in the teaching of L2 cannot be undermined. Translation is the process of changing something that is written or spoken unto another language. McDonough (2002:16) writes that translation theory is constructed to answer such questions as:

     i.   how faithful to the meaning of the original can a translation into another language be;

    ii.   what is expected not only in the case of propositional meaning, but also in the case of metaphor and idiomatic language;

   iii.   how culture-based meanings may

    iv.   be represented in the other language;

     v.   how translation may be evaluated……

    vi.   how the process of translating

   vii.   as a mental activity develops.

By the above citations, the components of translation can easily be discerned and it is obvious that the ESL teacher needs competence in this theory for effective service delivery. It means there that he needs an understanding of the universals of language and that of semantics to help him handle problems emanating therefrom. Translation means transference to meaning, and this can be effected only with a reasonable sophisticated knowledge of the languages concerned on the part of the translator.

Linguistics offers the ESL teacher the veritable tool of enabling him to teach language in socio-cultural contexts. By that is meant that language is not taught in isolation, but rather it is taught in relation to literature and culture. Also, linguistics offers guidelines in terms of register analysis of varieties of language which is considered as a process of helping students make appropriate choice of register out of their total register range. It is worth mentioning here that one of the qualities of an ESL teacher which should be inculcated to the L2 learner is the ability to shift register according to shift in situation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the criticisms that have been levied against linguistics as a factor by those who are sceptical about its potency, it can be clearly deduced from the foregoing discussions that there is a place for linguistics in foreign language teaching/learning. One may rather state that linguistic insights is the hallmark of language teaching. By linguistic insight we mean the ESL teachers being abreast of existing linguistic theories and research findings which he can utilize in the teaching/learning process. Corroborating with Stubbs (1986), the relevance of linguistic theories and description to language teaching have manifested in the provision of descriptive information and precise way of dealing with aspects of language such as the spelling system, vocabulary, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Furthermore, issues of organization of casual conversation, literary/stylistic language, as well as language disordered children are provided with useful linguistic clues. At the organizational, technological, psychological sociological and pedagogical levels, the ESL teacher needs such linguistic insights for the purpose of moving the learner to the level of linguistic competence in the target language:

In view of the foregoing therefore, the following suggestions are made:

(a) The ESL teacher should avail himself of current research findings locally and internationally with a view to keeping abreast of linguistic issues.
Such an insight will definitely improve his descriptive power of the target language he teaches, as well as providing him with the necessary tools with which to impart them.
(b) The ESL teacher in Nigeria should not only avail himself with linguistic information, but should also apply such knowledge into concrete classroom situation for the benefit of the learner.
(c) Governments should device a means of adequately funding the existing language research bodies and institutions with a view to enabling them meet set objectives. There should also be a deliberate policy by Government in the country to train and retrain English language teachers.

(d) Associations such as English Language Teachers' of Nigeria (ELTAN), Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN), Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) and so on, should be encouraged and sponsored by government annually for the much needed refresher courses for the ESL teacher. In this way, as the ESL teacher proves his professional qualities, the communicative and grammatical competence, the ESL learner's competence in Nigeria will be improved to enable him meet his local and international needs.

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