

# Linguistics and psychology contribution to language teaching



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## **THE CONTRIBUTION OF LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOLOGY TO LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century investigations in the fields of psychology and linguistics have paved the way to new concepts of language teaching. On the basis of the acquired empirical evidence, linguists, researchers and scholars have developed certain methods to improve the process of child and adult language acquisition. According to Stern (1992), "One of the main features of the development of language pedagogy has been the continuous attempt to renew language teaching through changes in teaching methods" (p. 6). To a great extent, these new approaches "have reflected changes in theories of the nature of language and of language learning" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001 p. 1). The aim of this essay is to analyse the impact of linguistics and psychology on language teaching; such an analysis has been a topic of increasing importance over the last years, as the recent reforms and educational standards are considerably based on both disciplines. These reforms are introduced to account for individual differences of language learners and to diversify the process of language acquisition. Although many language teachers take psychology and linguistics courses in universities, only some of them can effectively apply their knowledge of psychology and linguistics to language teaching. This inconsistency can be explained by two key factors: firstly, there are many controversies in research findings and, secondly, the received results are not tested within the classroom environment. Thus, the role of a modern language teacher is to fill the gaps between theoretical assumptions of linguists or psychologists and practical usage.

Linguistics as a discipline investigates the structure of language and different processes of language acquisition. The gradual shift from structural to generative linguistics reveals the linguists' attempts to establish a new taxonomy for language teaching. Structural linguistics initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century delves deeply into word forms and their meanings. In Brown's (1980) viewpoint, "Structural linguistics had provided tools for dissecting language into its smallest parts and for contrasting two languages" (p. 242). This school of linguistics is more interested in modern speech patterns rather than in diachronic language changes. Withdrawing from the traditional historical-descriptive analysis, structural linguistics (together with behaviouristic psychology) has challenged the efficacy of the Grammar-translation method and has generated the emergence of the Audio-Lingual Method. As Larsen-Freeman (1986) states, the Grammar-Translation Method prevailed in language teaching up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This method provides learners with an opportunity to acquire grammar and vocabulary skills; however, this is not the case with communicative skills. The fact is that the Grammar-Translation Method "views language learning as consisting of little more than memorising rules and facts" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001 p. 5). In light of this, the method satisfies the needs of those learners who perform standardised tests or translations, but it is inappropriate for those learners who want to speak a foreign language.

In contrast to the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audio-Lingual Approach puts major focus on continual repetition of different language patterns and listening. Applying this method to language teaching, educators help

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learners recognise phrasal verbs and other language structures that were fully neglected in the Grammar-Translation Method. The obvious advantage of the Audio-Lingual Approach is that error correction is reduced, while motivation of learners is increased. In this approach, as Stern (2001) points out, imitation of speech is more crucial than understanding of the meaning. Although the Audio-Lingual Approach is certainly more effective for the formation of learners' linguistic competence than the Grammar-Translation Method, it is unsuitable for the formation of learners' communicative competence. However, in the Total Physical Response Approach proposed by Asher (1969) more heed is paid to learners' communicative competence. Integrating the concepts of structural linguistics and behaviourist psychology into his approach, Asher (1969) implies that both the first and second language is easily acquired if the balance between action and speech is achieved.

Unlike structural linguistics, generative/transformational linguistics proposed by Noam Chomsky (1966) deals with the analysis of learners' unconscious cognition rather than with the language production. In other words, generative linguistics specifies that there are certain natural rules with the help of which a learner constructs sentences. In the 1960-1980s the Natural Approach emerged on the basis of the concepts proposed by Chomsky (1966) and Krashen and Terrell (1983). According to Krashen and Terrell (1983), both children and adults use their innate LADs (Language Acquisition Devices) in the process of language learning. But unlike children, adults possess problem-solving skills that allow them to acquire language in conscious and unconscious ways. Two important conclusions can be drawn

from theoretical assumptions of Krashen and Terrell (1983): firstly, in childhood a language is acquired, in adulthood it is learned; secondly, communication is the major element of adult language learning.

Psychology as a discipline examines the functions of the human mind and their relation to human behaviour. The move from behaviouristic to cognitive psychology in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century signifies that psychologists became interested in scientific research and analyses of intellectual processes. Behaviouristic psychology supported by Skinner (1984) adheres to the idea that language teaching should be based on observations of learners' behaviours rather than on the examination of inner factors. Seen from this viewpoint, the process of language teaching occurs under the constant control of a teacher with the minimal use of reinforcement strategies. While the behaviouristic school of psychology has inspired the use of computer-based materials in language teaching, the cognitive school of psychology has generated the spread of discovery learning programs. Cognitive psychology has contributed much to the spread of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach supported by Widdowson (1978) and the Silent Way Approach proposed by Gattegno (1976). Special attention in the Communicative Language Teaching Approach is given to interaction, communication in a foreign language and use of authentic reading materials (Nunan, 1991). Taking into account the research on human cognition, the Silent Way Approach has changed the direction of language teaching. This approach allows learners to devise their own language hypotheses and verify their validity in practice. Unquestionably, the Silent Way Approach shapes learners' freedom of thought and helps them “

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develop their own inner criteria for correctness” (Larsen-Freeman, 1986 p. 62). As communication in the Silent Way Approach and the Communicative Language Teaching Approach occurs in the target language, learners’ communicative skills are formed in a rapid pace. Contrary to the Grammar-Translation Method, these approaches pay much attention to phonetics and phonology and introduce different “ problem-solving activities” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001 p. 27). While in the Grammar-Translation Method many parallels are drawn between the native language and the target language, such parallels are not employed in the Communicative Language Teaching Approach and other recent methods.

The idea of communicative competence is the core principle of other emerged methods, in particular, the Community Language Learning Method and the Suggestopaedia. These approaches reveal inconsistencies of prior methods, implying that there is a close connection between language and context. The Community Language Learning Method is quite popular in today’s language teaching due to its learner-oriented ethics. The Suggestopedia Approach concentrates on relaxation as an integral part of successful language acquisition; the widespread activity of this approach is listening to music during language lessons. Overall, all methods that have been developed under the impact of linguistics and psychology highlight group working and the use of individual approaches to every learner. Group working shapes learners’ communicative skills and problem-solving abilities; individual approaches are crucial for the formation of learners’ identities and recognition of factors that affect language acquisition. Many variables are juxtaposed in culturally or socially diverse learning environment; hence,

individual approaches allow to reveal all obstacles to language learning. Linguistics and psychology have demonstrated that the principal goal of any teaching method is to help learners use a language in everyday situations and in different settings rather than construct grammatically-correct utterances. The Task-Based Language Teaching Approach is developed for these specific purposes. Designing versatile tasks, an educator teaches language learners to respond flexibly to the given activity and co-operate with peers.

As the essay suggests, linguistics and psychology have significantly reinforced the need for efficient teaching methods. Under the impact of these disciplines, language teachers have started to experiment with approaches, making an attempt to reconcile theory with practice. The structural school of linguistics has provided educators with valuable insights on the process of language acquisition. The generative school of linguistics has revealed that language acquisition in children occurs on an unconscious level, while language acquisition in adults occurs on both conscious and unconscious levels. The behaviouristic school of psychology has reduced the importance of meaning in language acquisition, but has stimulated the implementation of computers in schools and universities. The cognitive school of psychology has rejected settled opinions and has defined the concepts that are successfully used in teaching culturally diverse learners. Taken together, linguistics and psychology have revealed that different methods should be used in language teaching, methods that integrate such techniques as reinforcement, individual approaches and communication (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). As new teaching methods came to the fore, the role

of an educator in language teaching was changed. In the Audio-Lingual Method, the Suggestopedia or the Natural Approach a teacher is treated as an instructor; contrariwise, in the Communicative Language Teaching Approach or the Community Language Learning a teacher is an assistant to language learners.

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