

WHY LANGUAGE TEACHERS NEED LINGUISTICS

Vivian de Klerk
Rhodes University

In 1967 Paul Roberts wrote "It is probably fair to say that Linguistics is the hottest topic on the English Teacher's agenda at the present time. It is the one topic almost certain to be on the program wherever English teachers come together ... linguistics is hot in the sense that it gives off heat. Views tend to be extreme and to be extremely held." (1967:27) Despite the view at the time that Linguistics could solve all the problems of language teaching and show us delightfully simple ways of bestowing literacy on the illiterate, for some reason this credibility has not spread downwards and filtered through to schools and now it is 1992. Still today most teachers trained to teach language do not have sufficient knowledge of linguistics *per se*, and don't know what it is, as I can vouch for, having frequently been asked "so tell me, what languages do you teach" or "what are linguistics?" - a dead giveaway! Today I want to argue strongly in favour of the recognition of Linguistics as a teaching credit for language teachers.

I would like to argue that Linguistics, broadly conceived, provides the necessary theoretical framework for the presentation of any language, and that contemporary linguistics, with its emphasis on language in society and culture gives the teacher important insights into the teaching of language and has far more relevance today to the practical concerns of education than it may have had had 20

years ago. Why should language teachers study some linguistics?

1. Recent developments in the field:

Linguistics has come a long way since the soulless and boring drills of the behaviorists in the 40's, and the painstaking comparative analyses of structuralists. Both in theoretical and applied areas, we have witnessed amazing advances, and we now can lay claim, despite being a relatively young discipline, to a very respectable science of phonetics and semantics, and to convincing theories of language structure, ranging from transformational generative accounts and functional systemics to cognitive grammars and more. There have been enormous developments in the sociological and psychological fields which have fed directly into linguistics, and the result of all this is a formidable body of knowledge of unquestionable relevance to anyone engaged in language teaching, as I shall try to show in a moment.

2. The nature of School populations

Current socio-political changes have highlighted the need to confront language-related issues in our complex multi-lingual country. Increasingly the community needs experts in second-language teaching, because by far the majority of learners in South Africa are L2 learners. With Model B, now C schools (we are really getting to know our alphabets), teachers trained as first-language teachers are going to find themselves teaching increasing numbers of such L2 learners - the multilingual classroom will soon be the norm in South African schools.

Second language learners do not have intuitive mastery of the L2 grammatical and semantic systems; they are going to make errors, and the teachers are going to have to be able to detect them, explain them, diagnose them and try to remedy the problems.

3. What is happening in South African Classrooms?

There is an impending crisis in South Africa's classrooms. If one looks at the type of language teaching which takes place in our schools, one becomes aware of how few teachers know anything about linguistic approaches to language teaching, and I want to demonstrate this with some oral and some written material fresh from the chalkface, so to speak.

Firstly let us listen to part of an English lesson to std 3 by an experienced teacher, who was delighted to have been asked if she could be taped. She did not have advance notice, so had not made special preparation - this is her annual lesson on concord:

T: *Good morning class*

C: *Good morning teacher*

T: *Uh this morning we are going to talk about singular (writes)....
what are we going to talk about?*

C: *We are going to talk about singular*

T: *Singular and plural*

C: *Singular and plural*

T: *We are going to talk about singular and plural*

C: *We are going to talk about singular and plural*

T: *Plural*

C: *Plural*

T: *We are going to talk about singular and plural*

C: *We are going to talk about singular and plural*

T: *Singular means one*

C: *Singular means one*

T: *Again*

C: *Singular means one*

T: *Plural means many*

C: *Plural means many*

T: *Again*

C: *Plural means many*

T: *What does plural mean?*

C: *Plural means many*

T: *What does singular mean?*

C: *Singular means one*

T: *Yes .. when we talk about one thing we say it is in the singular form. When we talk about one thing it is in the...?*

C: *Singular form (quietly)*

T: *When we talk about many things they are in the ? ...*

C: *Plural form (quietly)*

T: *They are in the ? ...*

C: *Plural form (quietly)*

T: *Plural form. Right. When we talk about one the verb must have an s. When we talk about one the verb must have an s. Please read the sentence*

C: *She washes herself*

T: *Read that sentence again*

C: *She washes herself*

T: *Yes ... a singular noun has what? hands up ... Zusani?*

Z: *A singular noun has no s*

T: *Class?*

C: A singular noun has no s

T: What about the verb? what about the singular verb? Kleinbooi?

K: A singular verb has an s

T: Good. Class?

C: A singular verb has an s

T: Right I want one of you to read this sentence. Kusa ... Michelo?

M: The dog eats porridge

T: Class?

C: The dog eats porridge

T: Right I want you to say this same sentence but now in plural ...
in plural. Remember a plural noun has a what? Isaac? Sepi?

S: The dogs eats porridge

T: Again?

S: The dogs eats porridge

T: A PLURAL NDUN HAS A WHAT?

What this teacher is doing is using an audiolingual method to teach a text-book approach to concord. Perhaps because she is not 100% sure of the issue herself, or because she thinks this is how it must be done. While I would not wish to criticise her ability as a teacher, and I admire her obvious presence and control in a class which numbered over 60, there are glaring defects in the lesson:

- the audio-lingual approach of parroting formulaic rules and definitions, is boring, unrealistic, and rather confusing. Krashen is highly critical of such an approach, saying the problem is often exacerbated by focus on form, not meaning. (Larsen-Freeman 1991:140)
- the rules about adding 's' to plural nouns and to singular verbs are going to give trouble, because there are so many exceptions;

be is an obvious high frequency exception, not to mention the *es* which appears on vast numbers of verbs, e.g. *he goes*. And what about the past tense?

- No explanations are given: pupils who call out incorrect answers are simply ignored, and the teacher continues to ask until someone offers a correct answer.
- the children wrote exercises at the end of the lesson: over 70% got the wrong end of the stick

This lesson is typical of 1000's occurring daily in our schools.

A teacher with training in linguistics would know how important it is to get learners involved in talking about the language, and in discovering the underlying system for themselves. She would be painfully aware of the pitfalls and complexities in the system. Self discovery is far more effective than lists of rules: provide the data, let the pupil work out the rule, and it will stick. But if a teacher isn't sure of the rule herself, she is not going to allow the possibility of having to answer embarrassing questions about grammar; she will boggle the pupils with rules, even though use of terms like *singular* and *plural* is questionable with 11 year olds.

What about written language? This letter written by a Std 9 L2 learner of English can be used in order to demonstrate the relevance of linguistics to a teacher. The assignment was to write to someone overseas to explain the South African situation to them. The script, given verbatim below, obtained a mark of 7/30.

Dear Sir

I became happy to get the time of doing these words on this opportunity. Me I am the man loves the news of the world. In this South Africa where we are staing, the things are not working out right.

The politics fight against other. But all that were made by the political chieves. Others wants to be above so that way make many distabances.

Maney people were die others are still dying. Only to find that they are the blacks fights against a blacks. Yours sincearly ...

The teacher underlined the first three lines of the letter with the terse comment "meaningless" and also underlined the phrase "others wants", but wrote no comments or corrections. The result? a despondent teacher, a desperate pupil. And one wonders what anybody has learned from the exercise. How could a knowledge of linguistics help?

4. Syntactic Knowledge:

Linguistics provides its students with a thorough knowledge of syntactic systems. According to Margaret Berry "even if teachers do not believe in teaching linguistics to children, linguistics is still useful, indeed essential, for the teachers themselves" (1975:5-6) Linguistics trains one in awareness of the largely unconscious knowledge we have about language, and of the patterns that are observable in particular languages.

A teacher trained in linguistics would recognise that errors of concord, aspect and tense predominate here. The relative pronoun also poses problems. In order to provide a good explanation of such aspects of the language, the teacher needs a thorough understanding of the reasons for the errors. To write "meaningless" next to the errors, or simply to underline them will not achieve much.

Some comparative knowledge of other languages, generally provided in linguistics courses, would enable the teacher to understand the tendency African learners have to repeat the pronoun *me I*: information about subjects is repeated on the concord marking of verbs in African languages.

The pupil wants to know why before she can correct herself, and knowledge of grammar is put to the test in the classroom every time a pupil asks why. One does not have to teach grammatical processes explicitly, but one still draws upon private knowledge in order to explain things, and to decide how to teach, remedy and test various aspects of the language. Obviously this pupil needs extra training in the rules of concord, and not the kind we heard on the tape.

Teachers of L2 need to be trained in grammar, and it does not really matter which of the several models of grammar currently available they study. What is important is the fact that they need to develop skill in linguistic analysis, they need to be exposed to linguistic formalism, they need to acquire not only knowledge of the system but awareness of why it is like that, so that they can provide pupils with grammatical explanations, and the resources to enable them to write and to interpret literary and non-literary texts.

5. Phonetic Knowledge:

Part of the understanding of how language works comes from an understanding of phonetics, which is also an essential part of all courses in linguistics. The development of phonetic science is a milestone in the history of language teaching, enabling teachers to approach the teaching of the spoken language methodically, in accordance with general phonological principles, taking account of phonetic features of vowels and consonants, the order in which they occur, and the larger patterns which they form, and the particular sounds which will be problematic when learned after certain L1. In addition pronunciation differences are very closely associated with social group membership, and consequently are value-laden; teachers need to be aware that speakers whose accents are not prestigious are not substandard in any way; such accents are learned from other speakers, and are not the result of slovenly speech habits.

Among errors in the letter which link directly to phonetics are the misspellings of *distabances*, *oppatunity* and *sincearly*. Anyone trained in linguistics will recognise that the five vowel system of African languages, and the avoidance of diphthongs has direct affects on pronunciation and spelling of English and have predisposed the pupil to spell like this. If pronunciation were tackled first and pupils were exposed to mother-tongue spoken English on tape or radio, the spelling would probably right itself in many instances.

6. Knowledge of Semantics:

If the teacher had some knowledge of semantics s/he would also have a clear understanding of the arbitrary link between words and meaning and of how and why languages divide up the world as they do, and of the perceptual and cognitive mechanisms which humans use to learn and express meaning. By demonstrating to pupils how all speakers negotiate meaning using the rule-governed symbolic system at their disposal, one can overcome negative attitudes and stereotypes regarding certain languages. Contrastive semantic study would show teachers why Xhosa speakers mix their pronouns in English (because the single prefix *u-* stands for *he* or *she*), why they confuse certain words:

do and *make* (because *-enza* covers both in Xhosa).

stab, *prick* or *inject* (because *-hlaba* covers all). A knowledge of semantics enables the teacher to anticipate problem areas.

One such problem area for the African learner of English is the article: the lack of determiner in African languages is inevitably going to make mastery of the complex English determiner system difficult, and we find evidence of this in the letter where the pupil writes:

the things are not working well and

in this SA where we are staying.

the blacks fight against a blacks

Attention is obviously overdue here. In addition, part of semantics is vocabulary building, and lexical problems in this letter are varied:

*get the time of doing these words,
the politics fight against other.*

Learners need vocabulary, but this teacher appears to have overlooked this fact. Speakers store words in semantic fields, so teaching them thematically would help the learner. A basic stock of idiomatic phrases (such as *each other* or *looking forward to hearing from you*) is indispensable, and the teacher would do well to provide some of these basic building blocks of language.

7. Knowledge of Discourse Structure:

Linguistics has demonstrated the value of knowledge of language beyond the level of the sentence. Concepts such as the structure of a text and the functions of its constituent parts, paragraph structure, coherence and cohesion were powerful ideas in developing ability to compose and read academic discourse (Jordan 1980, Kaplan and Shaw 1983) The teacher writes "meaningless" on this letter because of a feeling that the letter does not flow.

Part of the reason for this is the pupils lack of vocabulary, and part of it is a dismal lack of connectives, ignorance in ways of joining and subordinating sentences, and this pupil has no alternative but to use abrupt simple sentences. Even his use of "but" and "so" is incorrect. The disjointed style used in the letter is indicative of poverty of linguistic resources to build an argument. If the teacher had been trained in linguistics and discourse analysis, she would know how to approach remediation. It would appear that great emphasis has been put on how to lay out a letter, but little or no attention has been devoted to the message

being expressed in the letter: it starts and ends very abruptly, and the pupil lacks even the most basic of formulaic phrases.

Idiomatic expressions are the basic building blocks of communicative competence, but we have to be careful not to take them too literally. Witness the incident in which my 4-year old was watching Loving (unforgivable I know) and the beautiful woman turned to the philandering lover and said *I'm afraid I cant see you any more - "Mommy, said my son, she's gone blind!"* Getting accustomed to such subtleties requires exposure to the language.

Linguistics, in the words of Roman Jakobson (1960) is "the global science of language" its target area being language in all its manifestations: close study of classroom discourse, for example, has raised awareness of inadequacies in teacher-talk, and the need for more exposure to "real-life" discourse structures. The tape we listened to earlier on demonstrates the phenomenon perfectly, and a training in linguistics would sensitise teachers to the dangers of such teaching styles. It is the pupils who need to speak in the classroom, as language learning is far more effective with active involvement, not passive listening.

8. Knowledge of Sociolinguistics:

A training in sociolinguistics, usually part of any course in linguistics, will firstly help explain that the apparently stubborn resistance many L2 learners have to acquiring a native-like accent in the second language is not because of laziness, but is often attributable to an unwillingness to cast off the membership badge, as it were, of the linguistic community to which the speaker

belongs: accent is part of identity and self-perception, and speaking an L2 too well can be interpreted either as one-upmanship or as disloyalty; either way, such factors discourage accurate adoption of the foreign accent, and the teacher needs to be aware of this.

Teachers also need to be aware of how the varieties of language, (dialects and registers) relate to social prestige, especially in a class with pupils from different language backgrounds. We all have conscious and unconscious attitudes to language, and "these attitudes and opinions affect our image of ourselves and of others - enhancing or undermining our sense of linguistic security and promoting solidarity with some, hostility to others." (Hudson 1981:337). Linguists recognise that to condemn varieties would be like asking botanists to condemn weeds. A training in linguistics helps overcome prejudices about language which impinge on our daily lives, and influence attitudes, and this is particularly important in the case of L2 teaching. The standard must be taught, but other varieties also have their place and deserve tolerance.

Teachers trained in linguistics tend to aim for an objective balance between tyrannical prescriptive rules and actual usage. Many "old-fashioned" teachers rant and rave about not ending sentences with prepositions, or not splitting infinitives, but linguistics, with its descriptive approach to language is tolerant of such usages, and focusses on successful communication, as opposed to perfect communication. Future developments in South Africa are likely to democratise language, and lexical and syntactic changes are likely to be extensive. Change is not necessarily a bad thing, and teachers trained in linguistics will better understand this and know how to

cope with it.

9. Knowledge of Psycholinguistics:

A training in linguistics provides an understanding of the child's acquisition of first and second languages, and about human language-learning ability, and the effect on language learning of such factors as age, linguistic environment and motivation. An understanding of the processes involved in learning meanings and words and of how the human mind stores and gets access to meanings will inform teaching and testing methods as well as curriculum planning and syllabus design.

Linguistic research provides empirical and experimental evidence which has advanced our knowledge about language learning and techniques of teaching language. To understand any recent literature in second language acquisition methods, problems etc., one needs familiarity with the language of linguistics - a metalanguage which is massive and wide-ranging: a closed book to those not trained in linguistics.

10. The current syllabus:

A further argument in favour of the validity and importance of a training in linguistics to the L2 teacher comes from an analysis of the syllabus for second language learners at primary and secondary levels: only 20% of the syllabus is focussed on literature, and likewise only 20% of the final mark is devoted to examination of literature. 80% of the course is devoted to the linguistic system, and therefore the training of ESL teachers should have a similar

bias towards linguistic rather than literary aspects.

But, amazingly enough, linguistics is excluded from the list of accredited teaching subjects by the Department of National Education. Why?

The explicit exclusion of Linguistics is probably due primarily to the fact that legislators and course planners may have formed their expectations of a university language course on their knowledge of the mixed language-literature courses of the years 1930-1960 which often had language as the dominant component (Palmer 1965). Most Afrikaans and Afrikaans en Nederlands courses have maintained this mix, but slowly, from the 1950's the thrust of University English studies moved from language to literature, and it is literature which has become dominant (if not exclusive) in most University English courses in the Republic.

Indeed, at some Universities, language studies are either extinct or conducted only by Departments of Linguistics. The result of this is a generation of graduate English teachers who have little or no grounding in English language studies proper because the courses they did focussed mainly on literature and poetry. Obviously there is something very wrong with such courses and this has long been a matter of national concern, and drew comment in the report of the de Lange Commission (1981:148) which questions the relevance of certain degree courses for language teaching.

As Greenbaum says "The teaching of grammar in any sense .. presupposes adequate training of teachers of language, and we simply cannot assume this. In the last thirty years or more, most teachers

coming into the profession have not encountered the study of language during their schooldays. The little they received and still receive in their teacher training is not enough to provide a secure basis for teaching. Changes in the quality of teaching in the schools must await the recognition that there is a need for all teachers to be adequately trained in the study of their own language and in the methods for teaching the language" (Greenbaum 1988:31) (See also Bullock Report 1975:332; 343-6)

Secondly, perhaps another reason for exclusion of linguistics is misconceptions about what linguistics is, about what those funny little grey-haired men get up to in their ivory towers. I have a deep suspicion that many believe that all we do is carefully analyse the click sounds of remote dialects in Namibia, the pronominal systems of the Yoruba tribesmen, or the relationship between Old Norse and Old English. While these topics are a legitimate concern of linguistics, I hope that I have shown that there is a lot more to linguistics than that.

The main intellectual thrust in Linguistics has shifted from historical work at the beginning of this century, to two predominant focus areas: the study of contemporary language systems (meaning, structures and sound) and the study of language in culture and society, which focusses increasingly on the communicative process, in both speech and writing. Courses which strike a balance between pure and applied linguistics, and which occasionally refer to other languages for comparative purposes, in order to provide a broad understanding of general or universal linguistic principles, are invaluable to any language instructor.

In making a plea for recognition of the very valuable contribution that Linguistics can make to second language teaching, perhaps I need to widen my appeal and ask all linguistics departments to make their courses more relevant to the needs of society today, because it is high time that educationalists sat up and took notice of what linguistics has to offer; others certainly have: for example, all applicants who wish to study the Montessori method at accredited institutions are obliged to have studied a full course in Linguistics, not English literature.

In education there is a serious shortage of language specialists (as opposed to literature specialists); this is likely to become increasingly urgent. There is something we can do to improve the situation: to motivate urgently for the recognition of Linguistics as a teaching credit by the Department of Education. If all of you in the audience are linguistics lecturers, I am probably preaching to the converted; I hope some of you are school teachers, educational administrators, textbook writers, curriculum planners and perhaps one of you is even the Minister of Education.

I currently await a response to my appeal to the minister. The matter, I am told, is being considered. It is my firm belief that we can do something to address the impending crisis in schools, by allowing those who have a training in linguistics to teach language in schools!

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