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Revisiting Selected Concepts in Linguistics for English Language Teaching

Dr. N.V.S.N. Lakshmi

Introduction

Linguistics is assumed to be the knowledge ‘*about*’ language but it is also an abundant source of knowledge ‘*of*’ language. Teacher’s knowledge *about* a language should be best explored in transferring it to knowledge *of* a language of the teachers as well as the learners in the classroom. Pedagogical implications of selected concepts like *Wh- movement and Sub-aux switch* (question formation); *Subject-verb agreement* (concord); *Co-indexing* (*discourse markers/cohesive devices/referral aspects*), (*disambiguation especially in written English*); *Level theory in phonology/morphology* (*word formation*) and *Halliday’s tonality, tonicity and tone* (*pauses, emphasis in connected speech*) are discussed in the present work. Since the focus is on the applications of these concepts, the theory behind each of them is not discussed in this article.

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Knowledge about and of language

Learner's background knowledge is quite often not exploited for teaching English in the classroom. *Transfer of cognitive skills from L1 to L2* takes place in the case of adult learners/andragogy. Being a learner of Japanese language in Japan, knowledge *about* and *of* one language i.e., English and Telugu, has become a rich resource of background knowledge to pick up the foreign language. Similarly, knowledge *about* the language helped me as a teacher to teach functional aspects *of* English to Japanese students.

English	<i>I</i>	<i>am</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>study</i>	<i>ing</i>	
Telugu:	<u><i>Nenu</i></u>		<i>English</i>	<i>(ni)</i>	<i>chaduvu</i>	<i>thunnanu.</i>
Japanese:	<i>Watashi</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>eigo</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>benkyo</i>	<i>shimasu.</i>
	(subject)	(particle)and (topic marker)	(object)	(particle) (direct object marker)	(root verb)	inflexional marker and indicator of tense

Review of Literature

Studies have been conducted on linguistic complexity in ESL reading comprehension especially with reference to lexical and syntactic features (Barrot, J 2013), linguistics relativity to SLA in terms of empirical evidence from pseudo-linguistic domains such as color categorization, time perception, spatial recognition and number recognition; overpassivization of ergative verbs (Pae, H.K. 2012); heteroglossic repertoires and different approaches to linguistic repertoires (Busch, B 2012). The present work attempts to revisit the selected concepts in linguistics for the benefit of students in order to create a logical and joyful learning experience of functional English in the classroom.

Subject-auxiliary Switch

If some of the common errors in English are studied carefully, *subject-auxiliary switch* is the reason for common structural errors while framing questions and wh-clauses.

Ungrammatical structure

- ✗ You **gave** a book to Mrudula?
- ✗ I don't know who **is Jai**.

Grammatical structure

- ✓ **Did you give** a book to Mrudula?
- ✓ I don't know **who Jai is**.

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✗ I know what **are you** doing.

✓ I know what **you are** doing.

In framing emphatic questions, understanding of **wh- movement** gives a clarity regarding the reason for ungrammaticality.

- Where are you coming from?
- Where are you going to?
- Who do you think has done this?
- To who (m) should I give this book?
- Who do you give this book to?
- How did you forget the person you studied together for ten years?
- Raju is believed to be in love with Rajani. (With whom)
- What do you think Ravi bought? (What)
- This is the person who taught us. (who)
 - ❖ *Kal Krishna ne Vamsi ko ek kitab di. (Hindi)*
 - ❖ *kinō Krishna wa Vamsi ni hon o ataeta. (Japanese)*
- Sethi will buy what? (What will Sethi buy?)/ Sethi will buy a book.
- Who did you say that Priya loves _____?
 A phrase cannot be broken in order to avoid ambiguity.

Phrases like

- New children's doctor
- Physics student from Medak

Subject-Verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement refers to singular nouns should be followed by singular verbs; plural nouns should be followed by plural verbs. There should be an agreement between the subject and verb in terms of the number and gender whenever the sentence demands. For example, *None of the students have gone to their techno festival.* In this sentence, the plural pronoun 'their' indicates that the verb has to be a plural one.

- *The coordinator and the head have come to the meeting.* (Two determiners indicate that the subject is plural, hence the verb has to be plural.)

Vs.

- *The coordinator and head has come to the meeting.*
- *One of the students has come to the college.*

Disambiguation and Co-indexing¹

In linguistics, Binding Theory determines the interpretation and distribution of pronouns and anaphors. It is formulated in terms of three principles which apply to anaphors, pronouns and referential expressions (R-expressions) respectively (Bhatt, R 2004). A pronoun (a "bindee") usually has an antecedent (a "binder") in context. e.g. Rakesh_i said he_i would do vs. but NOT *He_i said Rakesh_i would do. The following sentences illustrate some basic facts of binding. The words that bear the index _i is used to refer to the same person or thing.

- *Mohan_i gave his_i book to Meena.*
- *I know a skull-capped Muslim_i who is wearing a white shirt and he_j knows that I know him_i.*
- *Larry King_i is proud of himself_i. (But NOT Himself_i is proud of Larry King_i.)*

Ambiguity is a hindrance to clarity, which in turn may result in miscommunication. Ambiguity can arise because of misplaced modifiers in sentences. By inculcating a sense of which adjective/adverb refers to which noun/verb within the phrase or clause, ambiguity can be avoided. For e.g.,

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>The students were asked to study in the hostel.</i> (Refers to the location 'hostel' but not anywhere else.) | 2. <i>The students in the hostel were asked study.</i> |
| | (Referring to the hostellers but not day scholars!) |

Disambiguation of the sentences/phrases in writing

A word as a modifier	1. <i>Cancellation of the bus in the last minute drove the lady nearly frantic.</i> 'Nearly' qualifies 'frantic' but not 'drove'.	Cancellation of the bus in the last minute drove the lady nearly _i frantic _i .
A phrase as a modifier	2. <i>He got the legs_i of the chair_i cut off to suit the dignitaries.</i>	<i>He got the legs_i of the dignitaries_i cut off to suit the chairs.</i>

¹ Disambiguation is not done by using a tree diagram but co-indexing has been used without going into the details of the theory as the present work focuses more on the pedagogical applications of the concepts in linguistics.

An elliptical clause as a modifier	3. <i>While on a tour to Europe, my expensive tablet was stolen.</i> (missing subject in the clause)	<i>While <u>we were</u> on a tour to Europe, my expensive tablet was stolen.</i>
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Halliday's Tonality, Tonicity and Tone

The functional aspect of tonality, tonicity and tone can be looked at how to make the learners aware of meaningful pauses, emphasis and intention of the speaker respectively in connected speech. These three features which form the crux of oral communication have an important role to play in connected speech, conversation practice that can be taught to learners of different levels. Right pause, emphasis and tone can be used as politeness strategies and markers in oral communication.

Tonality (tone group boundaries), **tonicity** (tonic accented word) and **tone** (pitch variations) can be effectively applied to an activity based on 'situational dialogue' or a 'role play' activity or a 'telephonic conversation' to be more effective. This will help the learners to identify where to use the right pause, which word to be accented (usually the one that carries new information) and what kind of feelings you want to express through the tonal changes. The same philosophy holds good if it is at the functional level while teaching communication skills and soft skills for engineering students.

Tonality, tonicity and tone can be the inherent principles to teach the nuances of speaking skills. This can be best explored in the classroom by making the students *read aloud* or by a *role play activity* in the classroom.

Conversation - 1

A: //Do you 'know the 'story of a /bird/ that 'saved a 'woman dialing /108?//
(Question +that clause)

B: //It 'seems \incredible / but it's a \true ,story in ,fact.//

Conversation - 2

A: 'Where are you 'going /to? (There is an emphatic difference between 'Where are you going?' and 'Where are you going to?' Hence, to also gets highlighted.)

B: I'm 'going to `London.

Conversation – 3

(Identify the word that carries new information in each sentence and participate in a role play. Make sure that the intention or emotion of the speaker is projected through the tone.)

- Govind : Hi Geetha, shall we go for dinner?
- Geetha : Thank you Govind for your invitation. When?
- Govind : Tonight.
- Geetha : Tonight? But..I should go to tennis club. How about tomorrow?
- Govind : Oh..er..right. But I have my piano class tomorrow. How about on Saturday?
- Geetha : It sounds perfect. Alright then. We will go for dinner on Saturday.
- Govind : See you, Bye.

Level Theory in Phonology/Morphology (Word Formation)

Engineering students acquire logical thinking in the process of their education, the study of mathematics, programming or engineering drawing and so on. The level theory can be best explored and exploited for teaching word formation to enhance the vocabulary of students. It can be effectively used by keeping in view of the assimilation process. The phonological and morphological changes can be explained by using the order of suffix to gain the target word form. The students can be sensitized to the derivational and inflexional suffixes. The students may be encouraged to form different categories of words from one category in order to enhance their rate of vocabulary.

Verb → Noun	combine	+	-tion	combination
Noun → Adjective	beauty	+	-ful	beautiful
Noun → verb	beauty example	+	-fy	Beautify exemplify
Adjective → Adverb	beautiful possible technical silent/quiet	+	-ly	Beautifully Possibly Technically Silently/quickly
Adjective → Noun	generous possible	+	-ity	Generosity possibility

- Technique
- technology

- Technical technological
- Technically technologically
- ✓ Technique +-logy+-ical+-ly = Technologically
- ✓ Technique +ical+-ly = Technically
- ✗ *technique* +ly=~~technically or technologically~~

Students may be sensitized to the intricacies of word formation by creating an awareness of the etymology of the words. For example, a dictionary entry of the word ‘ignore’ can be as follows. Middle English: via Old French from Latin *ignorantia*, from *ignorant-* ‘not knowing’, from the verb *ignorance* ‘not know, ignore’, from *in-* ‘not’ + *gno-*, a base meaning ‘know’. (OALD 8th edition)

- ✍ il- before *l*, e.g. *illusion, illiberal, illogical, illegal, illegitimate*
- ✍ im- before *b, m, or p*, e.g. *imperial, improbable, imbalance, immoral*
- ✍ ir- before *r*, e.g. *irrigate, irrational, irregular, irrelevant, irresistible*
- ✍ i- before *g*, e.g. *ignoble, ignorance, Ignominious, Ignominy, Ignoramus*

The explanation for a derivational prefix *in-* can be as follows. **in-** is (*non-productive*) used with certain words to reverse their meaning. It is borrowed from Latin *in-* (“not”). Sometimes the Latin word has passed through French before reaching English (e.g. incapable, inhuman, inclement, incompatible).

☞ Note: Before certain letters, *in-* becomes:

- (*assimilated form before b-/p-/m-*): im-
- (*assimilated form before l-*): il-
- (*assimilated form before r-*): ir-
- (*assimilated form before g-*): ī-

Students can be taught the meanings of the root words and sensitized to the categories of different inflexional and derivational suffixes along with the morphophonemic changes that take place in a word. Creating awareness among the students about the language can be one of the effective strategies to enhance their own vocabulary; thereby individual learning also takes place simultaneously in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this article, an attempt has been made to study the practical pedagogical concepts in English by making use of the selected concepts in linguistics. While teaching English to engineering students, who come to the classroom with their logical thinking and background knowledge, a teacher can best explore and tap their potential to enhance their communication skills. If a teacher can sensitize the students to the nuances of logic in language, functional aspect of English can be easily taught which will in turn help the students to remember the L2 (English) better. This will not only encourage the students to learn the language in a more logical and systematic way but also they can enjoy themselves while learning the grammar or function English in the classroom.

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