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An Attempt to Narrow the Gap Between Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Instruction

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Resumen

Aun cuando la lógica sugiere que la relación entre la lingüística aplicada y la enseñanza de lenguas debiera ser cercana, la realidad nos muestra a veces lo contrario. Este divorcio difícil de entender, acompañado de un cierto temor entre algunos profesores de lenguas ante todo lo que sugiera a teoría por una parte, y el escaso interés de parte de los académicos de la lingüística aplicada por tratar aspectos didácticos, puede explicar tanto la diversidad metodológica existente en la actualidad, como la confusión que puede fácilmente derivar de ella, en especial entre los maestros jóvenes. A través de este trabajo, intentamos contribuir a acortar la brecha entre estas dos áreas a través del tratamiento de algunos temas claves.

Palabras claves: – diversidad metodológica – adquisición – perspectiva naturalista – perspectiva cognitiva

Abstract

Although the logical thing would be to think that the relationship between applied linguistics and the teaching of languages should be close, reality sometimes shows us the opposite. This divorce which is difficult to understand, accompanied by a certain degree of fear among some language instructors concerning anything that suggests a theoretical aspect on the one hand, and the scarce interest on the part of research-oriented applied linguists in dealing with methodological issues on the other, can explain the diversity that exists today as well as the confusion that can easily stem from it, especially among young teachers. This paper intends to contribute to narrowing the gap between these two areas through the treatment of some key issues.

Key Words: – Methodological diversity – acquisition – naturalistic view – cognitive view

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language today is certainly much more complex than it was decades ago when there was complete uniformity in terms of the procedures teachers were supposed to know. Although the theory supporting the only method used in the 60`s does not seem to have any advocates today, the procedure that foreign language instructors utilized was clear and relatively easy to apply. As long as teachers at that time did not question the theoretical tenets behind it

(which certainly came to have a bad reputation), it was the only methodological choice.

"Diversity" has definitely replaced "homogeneity" which can be considered quite a positive change since having access to a wide variety of methodologies is without a doubt more interesting than uniformity. However, the same interesting diversity can invite a certain degree of confusion, especially when foreign language instructors are young and still lack experience.

In an attempt to explain the confusion that exists today, especially when it comes to choosing a particular methodology for teaching English as a foreign language in high schools, I would like to postulate the idea that we should first learn to understand and interpret the different theoretical views that stem from applied linguistics, including second language acquisition (SLA). In doing so we can succeed in discovering some interesting implications which in turn can help us determine an adequate methodological path. Even an eclectic position should ideally derive from the knowledge that theory provides.

Applied linguistics, which ironically is not always a very "practical" field, should ideally feed foreign language instruction. On the other hand, the classroom and all its potential with a strong focus on the learner and his/her language learning strategies should constitute an attractive source of research for applied linguists. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. I completely agree with Michael McCarthy (2001: 124) when he states that: "My own experience of communicating with teachers at professional conferences in more than 30 countries leaves me with the conclusion that at the time of writing, yawning gulfs still separate what we "research-oriented" applied linguists find interesting and what "action-oriented" applied linguists (i.e. the teachers) find relevant. We can either shout across these Grand Canyons and hope to hear one another, or lower a few ropes on either side and meet and talk in the silent valleys that lie in between. What I have learnt (a lesson not always easy to apply) is that it is my ethical duty as an applied linguist to make my theoretical position clear and understandable and to mediate the theory of others. If I do the opposite, and make theory appear too complex and too hard for practitioners, I have failed. From my own perspective, at least, the discourse of applied linguistics should be plain and lucid."

Based on these considerations, the relevant question is how to narrow the gap between applied linguists and teachers. In an attempt to do so, I will try to present a couple of ideas that derive from the theoretical end of the spectrum hoping to provide some clear explanations for the diversity and

apparent confusion in the area of foreign language teaching today. First, a few words on the term "method".

2. The Concept of "Method"

The relevance of the concept of "method" has changed over the years. Nowadays, some experts prefer the term "methodology" since it implies the possibility of using several procedures in a less rigid manner, allowing the kind of eclecticism that has become widely accepted as the "right" path to take.

On the other hand and in spite of the fact that many are suggesting the use of an eclectic methodology instead of a unique "method", we cannot ignore the success that many foreign language learners have had through the systematic use of individual methods.

Whether foreign language instructors decide to use a single method or an eclectic approach, Edward Anthony's traditional use of the "approach", "method", "technique" hierarchy continues to be quite popular among foreign language educators, as Douglas Brown (2001) points out.

3. Agreements and Disagreements

We have said that teaching a foreign language in the 60's was much easier than it is nowadays. In an article published in FORUM (1987), Larsen-Freeman illustrates the diversity that characterized the 80's (which still characterizes our field today in many places) in terms of agreements and disagreements in the field of foreign language teaching.

One of the disagreements mentioned by Larsen-Freeman has to do with the value of error correction which is not a simple issue precisely because in order to explain the lack of consensus we must make reference to some theoretical notions, specifically to two "schools of thought" within rationalist thinking, which define language in basically the same manner but profoundly disagree when it comes to characterizing the specific processes through which competence is developed.

One of these theoretical views is illustrated by a theory of second language acquisition (SLA) that makes a distinction between "learning" a target language versus "acquiring" it in a natural way, that is to say, in the same way human beings acquire the first language (L1) at a very early age, when there is no formal instruction, just a caretaker interacting with us. I would like to call the latter view "naturalistic" whereas the former position may be called "cognitively oriented" (Obilinovic, 1996).

4. Two Basic Schools of Thought

The two schools of thought already mentioned agree on a basic definition of language and the active role of the learner's mind. However, when it comes to the exact procedure for developing competence they differ considerably.

The "natural school" advocates believe that the language acquisition device (LAD) or "built-in device" continues working after puberty. In opposition to this view is the so-called "Cognitive School", whose advocates defend the adult's cognitive superiority in the sense that regardless of whether the LAD is or is not active the second time, adults have a cognitive advantage which should allow them to become successful language learners. Even if the built-in device "shuts off" once the critical period is over, the adult's cognitive superiority should make up for a potentially "deteriorated" L.A.D. The adult does not need to be exposed to a natural process (like a baby in L1) because his/her mind is perfectly able to deal with the formal or artificial learning of syntax and lexicon. The cognitive school does not say anything about the phonological aspect, though.

Let's briefly focus on two fundamental tenets of the cognitive school:

- a) If an individual reaches the formal operations stage s/he should be able to handle the intellectual components of the second language, its grammar and lexicon, with practically little or no difficulty.
- b) The cognitive school stresses formal learning, in other words, it ignores the natural process of acquisition in adults and only focuses on induction and deduction (the two types of formal learning).

5. Natural Versus Artificial

No one denies the fact that the acquisition of the first language happens without formal instruction. The child goes through the process in a natural way. The controversy begins when we focus on "another language", a target language, particularly after puberty, once the critical period is over.

Some experts believe that the process after puberty can be as "natural" as "the first time", whereas others defend the formal, conscious, "artificial" process of "learning", the latter meaning that the learner pays attention to the "form" of language, not only to the message conveyed. S/he works consciously by understanding explanations given (that is to say, through

a deductive procedure) or discovering patterns and rules in the data provided by the teacher (in other words, via induction).

In spite of being a key issue, I'm afraid we still do not have clear-cut answers. This is where sound theories and adequate theoretical questions derived from the work of linguists and applied linguists can contribute to the related field of foreign language instruction.

Krashen (1995), among other applied linguists, has established an almost perfect "parallel" between first and second language acquisition, the idea being that all the features that characterize the acquisition of the first language (and the acquisition of a second language at an early age) must be present "the second time", after puberty: a silent period, no systematic error correction, a weak affective filter, "roughly-tuned" input (as opposed to finely-tuned or graded input).

Others find all these requirements unnecessary since the adult's cognitive superiority should allow him/her to go through the process in a more "artificial" but equally successful manner.

Wilga Rivers, in an interesting interview for Forum (1991:3) explained this "cognitively oriented" position clearly. In this interview she provided excellent arguments for her defense of the two routes that lead to "formal learning" and at the same time, through these arguments, she tried to explain why the "natural" process of acquisition may not be the most adequate process when it comes to adults trying to develop competence. Thus, she pointed out that: "We are involved in the one science in the world that seems to be afraid of principles. You don't learn chemistry without learning the periodic table. People would consider it the height of the ridiculous if every child learning chemistry had to recreate the science of chemistry. And yet some people seem to think that this is what students should be doing with language. There are surely shortcuts to learning."

L2=L1 : A Perfect or Imperfect Parallel?

The issue of whether adult second language acquisition/learning occurs just like first language acquisition continues to be a controversial theoretical problem. For those who adhere to the "naturalistic" view, the parallel is exact. On the other hand, for those who defend the adult's cognitive advantage, the parallel is not even relevant.

Behind all this there is a crucial question which Sharwood-Smith summarizes extremely well (1994:19). He states: "The cracking of the L1 code takes place at a more or less intuitive level leaving only the simpler

lexical aspects open to conscious reflection Children do talk about words and sounds but they certainly do not mull over the finer points of grammar." And he adds: "it does not require any serious conscious analysis or instruction. One big question is: Does the L2 learner have a subconscious LAD of this kind or are second languages learned in a quite different way?"

The first language is acquired in a subconscious way because of the genetic capacity human beings are born with. What we need to find out then is whether this can also happen after puberty with another language once the critical period is over or whether the process necessarily has to be an "artificial" (but potentially successful) one. In other words, do most human beings use the same LAD for the L1 and the L2 or do they use different mechanisms? Can an "artificial" process of either deduction or induction (as opposed to acquisition) turn out to be successful in terms of advanced proficiency levels?

Krashen's well-known theory (1995) represents an innovative and controversial answer in this respect since it basically claims that after puberty there are no fundamental neurological obstacles for the "natural acquisition" of target language. In other words, our language acquisition device does not necessarily stop working if the right kind of affective filter and the right kind of input are present.

Let's speculate a bit about the possibility of acquiring an L2 after the age of 12 (when the critical period is over and lateralization is complete). What are the main conditions for successful second language "acquisition", according to Krashen? The main conditions are supposed to be comprehensible input on the part of the instructor, a silent period with exposure to listening which should be conducive to the spontaneous emergence of "speaking", focus on "meaning" (the "what" rather than the "how"), time and a low affective filter.

One of his most controversial ideas is that the ability to "speak" the target language develops by itself, the main requirement being a systematic exposure to listening.

6. A Bit of Background to Explain the Diversity

Let's go back for a while to the question of diversity in the use of methods.

In Great Britain, as Situational Language Teaching (SLT) began to be questioned and became unpopular, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) became fashionable (see Richard and Rodgers, 2002). This basically

means that a method based on mechanical work was replaced by one in which meaningful interaction was important. In the United States the same thing happened but with some slight differences. The Audiolingual method (ALM), which became popular during World War II, was replaced in the 70's by the Cognitive Code Approach, which in turn was influenced by Chomsky's theoretical view on language and language learning. The change was a drastic one in philosophy and theory, and as a consequence, in methodological practice too.

Language was no longer viewed as a habit formation process but rather as rule-governed creativity. The learner who succeeded in learning a target language began to be viewed as an individual who can generate any sentence or novel combinations of utterances after having internalized the basic system of rules.

The ALM belonged to the empiricist camp in which language learning was characterized as a habit formation process whereas the Cognitive Code Approach and Communicative Language Teaching can be situated within the rationalist tradition in the sense that they view language learning as a hypothesis-making process. Naturally, as English teachers know so well, a series of "newer" methods were developed later on. However, in spite of the great diversity that has characterized our profession for decades, no method seems to have replaced the more traditional ones with the same intensity and conviction. Instead, with an interest in developing "principled eclecticism" some specific techniques have become popular, task-based instruction, content-based instruction, interactive learning, cooperative and collaborative learning, among others (Brown, 2001) Another interesting innovation seems to be the importance given nowadays to the teaching of vocabulary (Sheehan, 2004).

7. Induction or Acquisition?

A profoundly controversial issue concerning the concepts of "induction" and "acquisition" is the specification of the "right" term to what children really "do" when they pick up the L1. In other words, do children in their first language acquisition process implicitly "acquire" the rules or do they formally "induce" them?

The distinction would not be a controversial one if all applied linguists used the two terms interchangeably. However, some authors do insist on establishing some fundamental differences between the two processes, associating "acquisition" with the process children spontaneously go through for the first (or second) language and connecting "induction" with a conscious process based on a systematic attention given to the "form" of the input.

The distinction does not seem to be that simple, though. When we define the Direct Methods as being fundamentally "inductive" we must remember that at the time they were designed their authors had in mind naturalistic principles, which seems today like a contradiction. In other words, the Direct Methods tried to force students to do in a classroom situation what children "naturally" do when picking up their L1, namely, "to induce it". This assumption should be questioned since it is not yet clear whether babies engage in an "inductive" process (as "little linguists") or in a slightly different process (receiving a lot of help from their caretakers through the so-called "Motherese").

The techniques of mimicry and memorization, so closely associated with the Audiolingual Method which was also "inductive", were used in an attempt to reproduce what children were said to do with their mother tongue. In other words, the linguists responsible for the ALM also believed that the "natural thing to do" was to "induce" the patterns of L. Despite the fact the Direct Methods and the Audiolingual Method are based on completely opposite camps, for their advocates, the "natural" process that children engaged in was equated with an "inductive mode" of picking up the language.

Krashen's essential theoretical premise, on the other hand, happens to distinguish induction (defined as one type of learning) from acquisition. According to his theory, children only acquire the L1 whereas adults (individuals after puberty) have three choices: they can "learn" via deduction and via induction and they can also "acquire" the target language if certain conditions meet. Since "acquisition" seems to lead to fluency, in his view, he defends it over formal learning.

8. Children Versus Adults

Of all the different theories that attempt to explain the differences between children and adults, the cognitive hypothesis – as we said before – is quite optimistic since it claims that adults should have no difficulty with the intellectual components of language. However, this is not necessarily true, as many foreign language instructors know.

The affective hypothesis is another interesting hypothesis which tries to explain why some adults have difficulty attaining a native-like accent. The explanation basically suggests that puberty brings with it a cognitive advantage but at the same time it is accompanied by a stronger affective filter. In other words, adolescents may be cognitively superior but they are also likely to be more easily inhibited than young children.

9. Some Implications

The decision concerning whether a foreign language teacher should promote induction, deduction or natural acquisition must necessarily be based on his/her own adherence to the "natural" school or to the "cognitively oriented" view. Our theoretical beliefs will necessarily lead to decisions concerning the exact methodological tools used to promote the "right" process(es). Since at the moment we do not seem to have a "universal truth" in these matters, our understanding of the different theoretical positions is fundamental.

Another implication is the need to find a certain degree of consensus concerning an adequate characterization of "success" in second language learning. Although for many decades teachers emphasized the development of a "native-like" accent as a crucial component of successful learning, some experts are a bit more cautious with respect to this issue. Douglas Brown, for example, states that "It is important to remember in all these considerations that pronunciation of a language is not by any means the sole criterion for acquisition, nor is it really the most important one. We all know people who have less than perfect pronunciation but who also have magnificent and fluent control of a second language, control that can even exceed that of many native speakers" (Brown, 1994:58)

If we overestimate the importance of a "native-like" accent and at the same time we adhere to the neurological and psychomotor hypotheses, the end-result will certainly be discouraging. However, if we adhere to the cognitive view, our own conclusions will be based on the optimism with which this position views the adult learner. If we are convinced that the affective hypothesis makes perfect sense, we will promote fluency and underestimate accuracy, an alternative that does present dangerous risks especially if our professional duty is directed towards the training of teachers.

If individual methods become obsolete (although I think they should not) and language teachers belonging to the "post-method era" agree on using eclectic procedures exclusively, the key issue remains the same: how exactly is the teacher supposed to present the data, that is to say, the input or language. In other words, regardless of how important the vocabulary of the language is, the basic skeleton of the system will have to be "picked up" by the learners and this is an issue we cannot avoid. Even in today's scenario where techniques have become more fashionable than methods, regardless of whether the language instructor stimulates the use of content-based instruction, interactive, cooperative or collaborative learning, including task-based instruction, the crucial issue

is still the same, how exactly will the language (data or input) be presented.

I tend to believe that the answers basically depend on whether the affective position (natural acquisition) is adopted or whether the cognitive view is chosen (induction and/or deduction). All the other techniques used only make the process more interesting and lively, but are not the essence of the issue.

10. A Continuum?

If applied linguistics is defined as the application of knowledge that stems from linguistic research to more practical matters including the teaching and learning of target languages, we can clearly see that there shouldn't be a gap between applied linguistics and foreign language instruction. In fact the two should be placed along a continuum which would have theoretical linguistics with an emphasis on language description on one end, applied linguistics somewhere in the middle, and foreign language instruction (or "methodology") on the other extreme. As Paul Lennon says (1988:2): "there exists a great gulf between language teachers on the one hand, and linguists, pure and applied, on the other, so that ideas do not flow from linguistics to teaching via the critical and testing medium of applied linguistics."

Unfortunately, this continuum is sometimes just an idealized notion. In fact, theoretical linguists are not necessarily interested in the application of their research findings. Foreign language instructors, on the other hand, do not always have access to theoretical knowledge, which in turn raises the question of whether foreign language instruction is a science or an art. Finally, applied linguists do not always focus on narrowing down the gap between the two extremes.

Although practice cannot be replaced by theory, we strongly believe that a basic theoretical background should contribute to the decision making process that foreign language teachers will always have to be involved in. The use of a particular method or the adoption of an eclectic philosophy cannot truly succeed unless foreign language instructors understand and feel identified with the theoretical position behind their choice.

Our efforts to interpret theoreticians may not result in direct and concrete applications for our classroom work, but we will certainly find essential implications that will make our decisions easier.

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