

Linguistics Contribution to English Language Syllabus Design

*An Evaluative Report about the Case of Biskra
University*

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Abstract: Linguistics and language teaching have controversially been considered as two separate disciplines. Yet, in fact, many language teachers consider linguistics as the mother discipline, and they rely on the guidance of the linguist to teach second and foreign languages. The question posed here is related to language syllabus design and linguistics, so to what extent can linguistics contribution provide a comprehensive theory for the language syllabus designer [teacher] in the Algerian context? Does the language teacher eventually rely on the linguistics contribution in designing their course syllabus? The present paper aims to spot the light on the English language teachers' reliance on the linguistic theory in designing the English language courses in Biskra University as an example. To answer the above questions, a sample of (N=12) university teachers from Biskra University were selected based on the purposive sampling techniques; (N=3) teachers were selected for each level from first year level to Master II level. The data collection tool was mainly an online questionnaire via Google Doc. Through the data collected, we have noticed that (N=10) teacher respondents do not rely on linguistics contributions in their language syllabus design. They claimed that linguistics is only a course to be taught separately; and it is not applicable to the foreign language teaching context at a university level. They further justified that their course design is only based on the student needs' analysis. Moreover, they stated that in their course design, they mainly focus on the learning theories to understand students' needs and capacities more than the study of language. In the light of these results, we can recommend the necessity to raise teachers' awareness to understand and balance the both sides: the language from the side of linguistic theory and the learner from the side of learning theories.

Keywords: Linguistics contributions, Foreign language teaching, Language syllabus design

Introduction

Linguistics is considered as a science and teaching is an art, yet they are closely related to each other especially in the case of the L2 teaching. The process of any foreign language teaching includes 'selection', 'grading' and 'presentation' as the major steps. Moreover, Linguistics plays an important role in the whole process of teaching; it is the study of languages, and as such, is of great importance to language teachers. Linguistics helps teachers convey the origins of words and languages, their historical applications, and their modern day relevance; therefore, the teacher is supposed to rely on its contributions to deepen and enrich their knowledge about the language as well as to profit to elaborate a relevant understanding of the language teaching secrets. In addition to that, it helps to design the language syllabus that copes with the students' present and target needs.

I. Literature Review

Language is an expression and a mode of communication. Among all the other languages in the world, English language is one of the most popular languages in the world. The demand of

learning English is increasing rapidly day by day that so many hundreds and thousands of teachers in education are specializing in English Language every day to meet the needs of such a huge population. However, in order to make them “language-perfect,” teachers really need a deep understanding of Linguistics so that they can come up with a more refined teaching material for the language students. Linguistics is to be instilled completely in English teachers because when they are on duty, they work like correspondents, education specialists and assessors. They also work as educated human beings and are also the forerunners of developing sense of negotiators of socialization to their students.

A. Linguistics as a science

Linguistics is a discipline that oftentimes falls into at least two very different categories¹ while theoretical linguistics is usually considered as a discipline within the social/behavioural sciences, language pedagogy is usually thought about as educational in nature. Linguistics courses in English language program taught in the target language are hosted in language departments of universities. Its courses should depart from what students have learned in their previous language courses and begin by deconstructing the presupposition that prescriptive forms should prevail in native-like language use.

Linguistics holds a contradictory place in second/foreign language departments; courses in this discipline are required together with other content and skill courses. However, those who take it as an obligatory component within a language degree think it as relevant in as far as it supports the language learning process². This latter is logical if we consider that language teachers have teaching as their primary career objective³. Therefore, most of the linguistics courses which are usually required to take in order to get an additional teaching certification are on language pedagogy and not on linguistic theory.

B. English language teaching

Language teaching is historically developing with the advances in the studies of linguistics, psychology and mainly applied linguistics. It became a profession in the twentieth century when linguistics and psychology of learning sought to find more effective language teaching methods which was and is still the task of the applied linguist. Titone⁴ asserted that English language teaching can be form-based or meaning-based. First, the form-based teaching focuses on the grammar, vocabulary and the sound system of the language, yet the meaning-based language teaching stresses the language use and appropriateness in multiple situations. The linguist’s task here, or more precisely the applied linguist, is to deal with problems related to language teaching in terms of the form and meaning.

English language is nowadays the international language of business, medicine, science and technology. It is used in countries where English is not their first language; thus, it is

¹ Petray, M. J. (2004). *Changing Linguistic Pedagogy: A Case Study of Five Introductory Linguistics Textbooks* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.

² Treffers-Daller, J. (2003). “Variation in teaching: two perspectives on teaching linguistics”, in *LLAS Occasional Papers*, 12-14.

³ Hudson, R. (2003). “How can key skills ‘sell’ linguistics to students and employers?” in *LLAS Occasional Papers*, 3-8

⁴ Titone, R..(1968). *Teaching Foreign Languages*. Georgetown University Press.

considered as a lingua franca. Due to its rapid spread in all fields and countries, Kainth and Arora⁵ argued that 'it has become a potent tool of socio-cultural and knowledge exchange as well as an effective soft skill of enviable market value.' As a result, countries have introduced English language in their schooling curriculum as second, foreign or even official language from the primary school to the university. Hence, teaching English language became an urgency to cope with the rapid changes all of the world. Khansir⁶ thought that 'teaching of English language develops learners' ability to enhance their international communication and improve cultural quality so as to meet the needs of their country's social development and international exchanges'.

C. Importance of linguistics in English language curriculum

If one considers the relationship between linguistics and the teaching of English, it is clear that linguistics has had an abiding influence which has moved through a number of phases. The relationship between linguistics and English language teaching has shifted along a continuum from a direct relationship to a more indirect one. On the other hand, Johnson⁷ pointed out that language teachers have always looked to the linguist for guidance on how to teach languages. He further added that language teachers have always considered linguistics as something of a mother discipline. The teachers' main concern is with practical issues; they must solve the problem of what to teach and how to teach the second language. They cannot proceed in an ad hoc manner; nevertheless, every technique they use can in fact be related to an underlying principle⁸. Therefore, language teaching can be defined as a principled problem-solving activity.

On the other hand, Wilkins⁹ states three aims of linguistics: first, to study the human language faculty, second, to develop theories to explain language behaviour, and third to provide the most efficient means for describing languages and to make the most accurate and comprehensive descriptions available. Therefore, linguistics is concerned with the description of language structure as well as the description of language use (sociolinguistics) and language learning (psycholinguistics). It is not aimed at solving problems of language teaching. Clearly, there are contradictory views towards the relationship of linguistics to language teaching which raise plenty of questions about its contribution and application to the field of language teaching and learning, and about how the language teacher can benefit from and explore linguistic theory to cope with the students' needs.

The relationship between linguistics and Foreign language teaching has always been a controversial one. Many linguists have argued that linguistics has nothing to say to the teacher. Sampson¹⁰ states "I do not believe that linguistics has any contribution to make to the teaching of English or the standard European languages. The many people who claim that it has seem to me

⁵ Kainth, M. and M. Arora. (2012). "Using Communication Language Teaching in Developing Students' Communicative Competence in Engineering Institutes in India: An Analysis". *International Journal of Communication*, 22: 91-100.

⁶ Khansir, A.A. (2013). "Applied linguistics and English language teaching". *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 15 (8): 1140-1146.

⁷ Johnson, K. (1982). *Communicative syllabus design and methodology*. Oxford: Pergamon.

⁸ Widdowson, H.G. (1979). *Explorations in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Wilkins, DA (1972). *Linguistics in language teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.

¹⁰ Sampson, G. (1980). *Schools of linguistics*. London: Hutchinson : 10

to deceive themselves and others". On the other hand, Johnson ¹¹ points out that language teachers have always looked to the linguist for guidance on how to teach languages. He noted that language teachers have always considered linguistics as something of a mother discipline. Language is what both the language teacher and the linguist are concerned with: the teacher is concerned with "teaching something which is the object of study of linguistics, and is described by linguistic methods"¹². Linguistics will therefore always be a field of study relevant to language teaching. The problem, of course, is to determine the precise nature of this 'relevance'.

II. Methodology

A. Data collection/analysis procedures

Since the research sought to explore the teachers' reliance of the linguistics contributions in their teaching career, to conduct the present study, we used an online questionnaire via Google Doc. The questionnaire was close-open to teachers of Biskra University. The questions were mainly nine (09) questions which turn around the linguistics position in teaching English language in the Algerian University. The questions 02 and 03 are complementary; two questions in one question. Yet, the responses were analysed descriptively but by using the tables.

B. Sample

The purposive sampling technique was used to select our respondents to the online questionnaire. It is a type of non-probability sampling which relies on the researcher's judgement in the selection of the participants in the study.

A purposive sample, also referred to as a *judgmental* or *expert sample*, is a type of nonprobability sample. The main objective of a purposive sample is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a non-random manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population (*Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods, 2008*)¹³ and since the researcher is a teacher at Biskra University, she selected a sample of (N=12) university teachers from Biskra University were selected systematically; (N=3) teachers were selected for each level from first year level to Master II level. The selected respondents are in-service teachers who have experienced teaching for more than three years at Biskra University.

III. Results and Discussion

English language teachers from Biskra University have answered the online questionnaire based on their experience and their present situation. The results are shown according to the

¹¹ Johnson, K. (1982). *Communicative syllabus design and methodology*. Oxford: Pergamon.

¹² Halliday, Mak., McIntosh, A and Strevens, P. (1964). *The linguistic sciences and language teaching*. London: Longman : 166.

¹³ [Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods](#). (2008). Lavrakas, P.J (ed).

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questions asked. The respondents showed their interest in the research topic, and they agreed to respond to contribute to the findings of this research.

The questionnaire results were encoded in form of 7 tables which were interpreted and discussed simultaneously. Each question is considered as a title for the results of the questionnaire.

Have you ever taught linguistics to EFL classes?

This question was asked to know the extent of teachers' comprehension and awareness of the importance of linguistics contributions based on their teaching experience of the course of linguistics.

Table 01: teachers of linguistics

yes	No
04	08

(N=04) respondents from 12 respondents taught linguistics. The rest did not teach linguistics, and they have no idea about what is being taught in the linguistics course. The four respondents taught linguistics for more than 3 years. Therefore, their responses would be clear and based on their teaching experience and their knowledge about this field of study.

Do you explore linguistics contribution in designing your course? Why?

This question was complementary to the previous question, for it sought to recognize the experience effect on their attitude towards teaching this course.

Table 02: exploring linguistics contributions in designing courses

yes	No
04	08

(N= 04) answered 'yes' and consider it as an important course to be taught and to be taken into account in designing any course, yet the rest (N=08) consider it as a less important course and as tiring and complicated, especially for the students. This response proved that the majority do not estimate the linguistics contribution to language teaching; they further believe it is needless. Therefore, the teaching quality is at risk due to the fact of underestimating the importance of linguistics contribution of more than 100 years of research about language.

According to you, linguistics is an art or a science? Justify your answer

The purpose of asking this question was to know more about the teachers' knowledge about linguistics and the debatable statement about linguistics.

Table 03: teachers' definitions of linguistics

Linguistics -science	Linguistics -art
12	0

(N=12) consider it as a science and justify their answers by the common definition that linguistics is 'the systematic study of language'. This proves that they are aware of its effect as a science, but they do not consent its effect on the course design, and this is the contradiction.

What is the purpose of teaching linguistics as a course for academic English purpose?

This question was posed to know more about the teachers' awareness and attitude towards teaching linguistics as a course and as a departing point in their English language courses design.

Table 04: purpose of teaching linguistics

Necessary	Unnecess ary
8	4

(N=08) responded that teaching linguistics purports to understand the language features, functions and structure. This helps to elaborate knowledge about the language being learnt or taught for academic purpose. They thought that linguistics is a necessary course to a certificate in academic English and it has the same importance like the other courses like written expression, oral expression and grammar. Yet, (N=04) think that it is unnecessary in teaching English for academic purposes.

How will it help the graduated students if they will be future teachers?

This question was asked for the sake of knowing more about their attitudes towards the linguistics course contribution in the English language curriculum.

Table 05: effect on graduated students in their career

Necessary	Unnecess ary
8	4

(N=09) thought that linguistics helps them to enrich their knowledge about language structure and function, and it will not help them in their future career because the necessary courses that can help them are grammar, writing, speaking, reading, and pronunciation. (N=03) thought that it will help them only at university level, and if they will be future university teacher of linguistics.

According to you, to what extent do you rely on linguistics contributions to design your course?

This is the main question of this research. For this question, the respondents agreed mostly on their in-reliance on the linguistic contributions to design courses for English language classes of Biskra University.

Table 06: teachers' reliance on linguistics

rely	Do not rely

10	2
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(N=10) teacher respondents do not rely on linguistics contributions in their language syllabus design. They claimed that linguistics is only a course to be taught separately; and it is not applicable to the foreign language teaching context at university level. They further justified that their course design is only based on the student needs' analysis. Moreover, they stated that in their course design, they mainly focus on the learning theories to understand students' needs and capacities more than the study of language.

To what extent can teaching linguistics help to develop your teaching career?

It is a direct question to the teachers which is related mainly to their English language teaching career and their knowledge about linguistics.

Table 07: teachers' career and linguistics

Important	Less important
12	0

(N=12) thought that linguistics help them to enrich their knowledge about language, and they thought that it is important to develop their career in term of understanding and placing their targeted students. According to them, linguistics is the course of knowledge about language, it helps to develop their career but it does not help them to design their courses. This proves that all teachers consider and believe in its necessity in language learning and teaching, but they consider it as difficult and incomprehensible to students especially at early level. This is a contradictory view about linguistics as a course and its importance in English language teaching.

IV. Implications

The results shown above do confirm the real situation of linguistics course in Biskra University as an example of the Algerian University. The present situation alerts the necessity to integrate a more serious program for training pre-service and in-service teachers to understand the role of linguistics studies in their career and its importance in elaborating language programs as well as the course design. From this research, we do also call for the necessity to raise teachers' awareness to understand and balance both sides: language from the side of linguistic theory and the learner from the side of learning theories. Moreover, the results proved that the problem is mainly related to some extent to the missing phase in training pre-service and even in-service teachers. These latter should be exposed to a training program in which they learn mainly the benefits of getting the language theories into applications to make a feedback and a feedforward to better teach English and to working in parallel with the linguist and mainly the applied linguist to do so.

Conclusion

The present research spots light on the real situation of linguistics contributions in teacher's daily job with the students of English language. In other words, learning a language to communicate is totally different from learning about its linguistic intricacies. Language teachers enjoy teaching a language, not many of them find theoretical linguistics as a worthy, valuable, easy-to-grasp subject with real-life applications; consequently, they neglect it. Nevertheless, good training programs for in-service teachers of foreign language can make the English language teachers of Biskra University interested in the subject if we make them aware of its endless applications in their career and their course design at all university learning levels.

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