

Linguistics and language teaching: Friends or foes?

**María Luisa Blanco Gómez and
Rosalie Henderson Osborne**
CESSJ «Ramón Carande»

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the relationship between linguistics and language teaching, pointing out how linguistics may facilitate the teacher's understanding of the workings of the language and, consequently, the process of explaining that language to the student. We intend to demonstrate that highlighting frequent translation errors, related to vocabulary, word-order, word-formation, etc., and their subsequent correction in class, contributes to an improved language awareness on the part of our students.

Resumen

Este trabajo intenta analizar la relación entre lingüística y enseñanza de una lengua, haciendo especial hincapié en cómo la lingüística puede ser un factor crucial en el proceso de comprensión del funcionamiento del lenguaje por parte del profesor, de tal manera que dicho proceso facilite una mejor enseñanza de las lenguas. Destacar errores que encontramos con frecuencia en traducciones relativos a vocabulario, orden de palabras, formación de palabras, etc., y su posterior corrección en clase, contribuye a una mejor comprensión por parte del alumno de cómo funciona la lengua.

In our field of teaching we are obliged to master EFL (English as a Foreign Language) as well as ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Therefore, ESP teaching is different from ELT, for it requires us to be fully qualified in EFL and as much as possible in the subject area. Yet, ESP is not just a matter of science words and grammar for scientists or for business students: the fact that the language is used for a specific purpose does not imply that it is a special form of the language, different in kind from other forms. ESP is not different in kind from other forms of language teaching, since it does not require a specific methodology. The principles for teaching ESP should be oriented towards effective and efficient learning. At this point it might

Linguistics and language teaching:: Friends or foes?

María Luisa Blanco Gómez and Rosalie Henderson Osborne, pp. 50-57

Encuentro. Revista de Investigación e Innovación en la clase de idiomas, 11, 1999-2000

be interesting to mention the *continuum*, to which Widdowson refers (1983), from ELT to ESP teaching. Our question is: Does the effective ESP teacher require additional skills or abilities to those required in an effective teacher of ELT? The answer we offer is both yes and no. *No* in the sense that the skills required are the same, whereas we answer *yes* when referring to the critical importance of the subject matter, mastering specialized vocabulary, problem solving methods and special communication strategies within professional groups.

Once we have dealt with the difference between ESP and ELT teaching, we should take into account the essential relationship between linguistics and language teaching. We firmly believe the study of linguistics is fundamental for the language teacher, whether she is a teacher of ESP or ELT, because, as we shall go on to point out, linguistics facilitates the process of understanding the workings of the language and, consequently, the process of explaining that language in a way which is easier for the student to grasp.

Thus, we believe that linguistics cannot be separated from teaching, for a knowledge of linguistics is essential for *language awareness* in the language teacher. Before continuing we must stress the fact that some native teachers, as well as some educational institutions, seem to believe that if they can speak the language they can teach it, but this is not always the case. One of the reasons is that they possess an implicit knowledge, but sometimes they find it difficult to make it explicit. It is a temptation for the native teacher to teach without the appropriate qualifications and/or training. Not only does this apply to native teachers, but also to non-natives, since some of them tend to believe that after simply studying English, they are efficient teachers of the language. But once again, we should highlight the fact that having a good linguistic basis helps the teacher, whether native or non-native, to better understand the workings of the language and how to explain the language to her students.

The non-native teacher, who usually shares her L1 with her students, can understand her students' mental process since she has undergone it before. At the same time, the native teacher, who possesses a good knowledge of her students' L1, is also able to better comprehend this process. So, as we can see, there is an important difference between *knowing* the language and *knowing about* the language, both processes being crucial when teaching a language. We agree with Cook when she

affirms that 'the more we know about language learning, the better we can teach' (1986:3), which once again corroborates the issue in question.

Linguistics is important for the language classroom: a knowledge of Applied Linguistics serves to awaken the teacher –whether native or non-native– to the enormous variety of language use and the wide range of alternatives for language activities. Applied Linguistics gives the teacher a useful strategic advantage when challenged as well as increased confidence in her pedagogical choices.

We think it is very important to be able to transfer this language awareness to our students. This is not so easy considering that nowadays our students are not even aware of the workings of their own language, which makes the job more difficult for the teacher. At this stage, we cannot avoid mentioning that, in spite of the fact that they have to study the Spanish language and its workings until they reach university, our experience confirms their lack of language awareness in their L1, i.e., morphological, syntactic and lexical neglect. This creates an additional problem, as we must devote a good deal of class time to explaining such questions, which seem to be entirely new for them. A large majority is not even aware of the different parts of speech, not only in English but also in Spanish.

Going back to the importance of linguistics, we must express our agreement with Swales' answer to the following question:

Are there hopes for a more interdisciplinary relationship between linguistics and language teaching? Not until Chomsky stops asserting that all questions concerning that relationship are 'trivial' and 'uninteresting' (1993:291)

On the contrary, the relationship between linguistics and language teaching is not only interesting but decisive. Why? The reason is quite simple: In the same way as Widdowson (1983) refers to the *continuum* between ELT and ESP teaching, we assert that there is a continuum between linguistics and language teaching (i.e. a continuum between language proficiency, language awareness and performance). This is the reason why we cannot isolate anything: grasping the linguistic phenomenon generally helps us to have a better command of the language, to be more aware of the language and to perform in the classroom more efficiently.

Some time ago there was a trend focusing on *contrastive linguistics*, which was later abandoned because it was criticized by some scholars, who assured that contrasting two languages was not at all useful for the language teacher. However, we believe this contrast to be crucial for the student's learning as long as they possess the language awareness we have just referred to. What we are pointing out here is that, as

teachers of English to Spanish students, we have found that, even though it does have drawbacks, a contrastive analysis of the language offers more benefits than disadvantages when teaching key points of the language. It is in the hands of the teacher to take advantage of the benefit of contrastive analysis. This is one of the reasons why we regard the use of Spanish in the classroom as important, for we believe some use of the mother tongue could also be conducive to correction of errors, leading to language competence in L2.

Our experience has taught us that this is a good means –although not the only one– of awakening the student's language awareness. In this way, we are stimulating them to reflect on the workings of the language and discuss similarities and differences in class. We provoke grammar discussions in the following way: after correcting their exercises, we reproduce some of the most common errors on transparencies and in class they have to identify the mistake as well as discover the source of that mistake. The most typical errors are recurrent in our students' compositions and oral communication: negative transfer, overgeneralization, etc., but here we shall only refer to their written work.

In the first place, we should mention the fact that our students come from relatively different backgrounds, that is to say, they study either Business Administration, Economics, «Gestión y Administración Pública» or they work as accountants in different firms or in banks. The very first day of class we encountered the following mistake, which, surprisingly, was made by almost everybody in the class. Upon expressing their opinion, the majority of them used the expression «Be agree with»:

*I am agree/*I am not agree

which, obviously comes from negative transfer. At this point we have to mention the well-known phenomenon of *negative transfer*, which all language teachers have to deal with at one time or another. Many native language structures can be useful in learning the target language; nevertheless, dissimilar structures may provoke negative transfer, and distinguishing between the two is often one of the main objectives for the language teacher.

This type of errors is frequent, but our intention here is not to deal exactly with aspects of interference but, rather, we shall try to analyze a similar phenomenon occurring in our students' translations from English into Spanish. At the beginning of our course, we asked them to translate a short economic text from English into Spanish.

Two of the sentences taken from this text are the following:

- They base their optimism on two conditions lacking last spring, when consumer buying also grew.
- A similar improvement last spring, also greeted as the first stage of a recovery, came to a stop in August after failing to increase jobs.

Using only these two sentences, we shall present some of our students' translations and attempt to highlight the most frequent errors, which we, not only as teachers but as linguists, consider as needing special focus and a greater attention in class.

1. Vocabulary:

a) We discovered that our students, though often dominating a more technical vocabulary, had serious problems with a subtechnical vocabulary. By subtechnical vocabulary, we are referring to words or word chunks which we often come across in economic-business texts, such as «improvement», «recovery», «lack», «increase-rise». For example, we might point out the following:

- Lacking = surgidas, poseídas, referentes, siguiendo, careciendo.
- Recovery = reconversión, resurgimiento, recorte, reconstrucción.

b) Our students also demonstrated misinterpretations of words:

- Spring = velocidad, carrera
- «Ellos basan su optimismo sobre dos condiciones que llaman a la velocidad, cuando el consumidor compra bajo también».
- Improvement = comportamiento, acuerdo, implicación, improvisación, imprevisto, incremento, inconveniente.
- Spring = vez, época, invierno, estación
- Failing = caída, caer, sentirse
- «La pasada primavera tuvo lugar una mejora en la economía y esto podía ser el primer paso para la recuperación del país. Sin embargo, esta mejora paró en agosto después de saber que el incremento de puestos de trabajo cayeron».
- «En primavera los efectos de la inversión suelen ser positivos aumentando el crecimiento para parar en agosto, época donde se puede producir una caída del empleo».
- «Un imprevisto similar, además, ocurrió como el primer estado de recorte, vino una parada en agosto, después de una caída del empleo».
- «Una mejora similar, la última primavera, también fue buena al principio de la recuperación, vino a parar en Agosto después de caer en el incremento de puestos de trabajo».
- «El similar inconveniente de la última primavera se paró en agosto después de sentirse un incremento de puestos de trabajo».

Here we may note two different types of translation for the word «improvement». On the one hand, they interpret the word for almost any word in Spanish which begins

with «in» or «im». On the other hand, they seem to only concentrate on the suffix «-ment», which is added to many verbs to form a noun. Those who know a little about word formation realize that «-ment» is a noun suffix, but they ignore the root, always thinking that the only word which ends in «-ment» is «agreement», one of the most frequent subtechnical words in economic texts.

2. Word order:

a) Sentence word order: Some of our students ignore the strict word order of English, producing examples as the following:

«A pesar de la escasez de la última primavera, su optimismo se basa en dos condiciones, cuando el consumidor compra también crece».

«Un problema similar surgió la pasada primavera, sólo el crecimiento que el primer paso de una reconstrucción que vino y se paró en Agosto después de la caída del incremento de los puestos de trabajo».

We can see that they pay no attention to SVO order of English.

b) Noun Group word-order: As to noun groups, word order is completely different in English and in Spanish. Some of them are aware of the fact that when they encounter two or more nouns, the last one is the most important, but, as we may observe, they still produce frequent errors, such as the following:

– consumer buying: «la compra de consumidores, la compra del consumo».

At the same time, we also found examples of students who knew the meaning of the words but who showed a serious lack of knowledge of word order as well as word-formation. For example:

– consumer buying: el consumidor compre, el consumidor comprando.

We may pause here a moment to insist upon the importance of the suffix «-ing». As we all know, this is one of the most prolific suffixes in English, which is the reason why many students get confused as to the role it plays in different sentences. The meanings our students proposed for «lacking» are «surgidas, poseídas, acontecidas, desaprovechadas», which show that they interpreted it as a word ending in «-ed». On the other hand, when they see a word ending in «-ing», their natural tendency is to think that it is a gerund.

3. Conversion

In linguistic terms, conversion is considered to be the situation in which two parts of speech are spelt in exactly the same way. However, when we talk about conversion what we mean is something which our students do habitually and which consists in the wrong interpretation of one of the parts of speech, that is to say, when a noun is interpreted as a verb or just the opposite, as exemplified in the following:

«Esta base de optimismo en dos condiciones careciendo la última de sentido, cuando consumidor comprando».

«La base de ese optimismo careció en dos aspectos el último invierno, cuando los consumidores compraron a la alza».

4. Word avoidance

Sometimes, when students do not know the meaning of a word, they simply overlook it, producing a completely different interpretation of the sentence, as in the following example:

– They base their optimism on two conditions lacking last spring, when consumer buying also grew»

«Basan su optimismo en dos condiciones de la pasada primavera».

– A similar improvement last spring, also greeted as the first stage of a recovery, came to a stop in August after failing to increase jobs.

«Una implicación similar la pasada primavera también ocurrió como la primera etapa de una reconversión, llegó a parar en agosto después de incrementarse los empleos».

5. To-infinitive

Something our students also tend to do is to interpret every single to-infinitive as expressing objective, whether it does or not, as in:

– A similar improvement last spring, also greeted as the first stage of a recovery, came to a stop in August after failing to increase jobs.

«Un incremento similar en la última primavera llegó a parar en agosto después de fallar para incrementar el trabajo».

So far we have dealt with only some of the most frequent problems we have come across in our students' translations. How can we solve this problem of lack of language awareness on the part of our students? We discovered that, at the end of the course, one of our achievements was to make our students more familiar with terms such as

«negative transfer», «interference», «avoidance», «word order», etc., since we had discussed them in class –similarities and differences between the target language and their source language. This technique has proved to be very useful since it has contributed to a broadening of their language awareness. So, if you are capable of grasping the language as a teacher, this may lead to positive transference to your students. This communicative process not only causes language awareness, but language proficiency, which is the language teacher's main goal: language proficiency in L2 as well as L1.

References

- Cook, V. 1986. «The Basis for an Experimental Approach to Second Language Learning.», in V. Cook, ed. *Experimental Approaches to Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon: págs. 3-21.
- Swales, J. 1993. «The English Language and its Teachers: Thoughts Past, Present and Future». *ELT Journal*, 47/4: págs. 289-299.
- Widdowson, H. 1983. *Learning Purpose and Language Use*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

María Luisa Blanco Gómez (e-mail: <mblanco@poseidon.fcjs.urjc.es>) and **Rosalie Henderson Osborne** (e-mail: <henderson@poseidon.fcjs.urjc.es>) teach at the University Juan Carlos I, Pº de los Artilleros, sn. Madrid 28032.