

What Teachers Need to Know about Language: Summary and Critique

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss an article written by Fillmore and Snow entitled 'What Teachers Need to Know about Language'. As such, this paper is divided into two parts: summary and critique section. It would first summarise the concepts of educational linguistics under the following key aspects: teacher roles, knowledge of oral language, knowledge of written language, and professional development programs for teachers. In the second part of this paper, the writer would analyse the main ideas and arguments presented in the summary section using the writer's point of view in alignment with current research and practice to support the notion that teachers need to know more about language to function effectively in the classroom.

Key Words: teacher roles, oral language, written language, professional development

Introduction

The pedagogical literature refers to the existence of a growing number of issues in the education of students from non-English backgrounds. As children come to school at different levels of ability and from diverse backgrounds, teachers are increasingly demanded to offer such students the appropriate learning experiences that will prepare them to meet the standards in given content areas. In line with the high expectations of parents for their children's language and literacy development, today's teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills in second language learning and teaching. A good understanding of how

language works in education, or commonly called educational linguistics, would enable teaching professionals to connect theory, practice and student outcomes.

SUMMARY

In the article entitled 'What Teachers Need to Know About Language', Fillmore and Snow (pp. 5-34) discuss about the roles for which teachers need to know about language, the kind of knowledge that they need to understand, and several suggested courses for promoting teachers' professional growth in second language learning and teaching.

Teacher roles

In this chapter, Fillmore and Snow (pp. 5-12) outline five reasons why teachers should know more about language. These include teacher roles as communicator, educator, evaluator, educated human being, and agent of socialization. According to these authors, effective instruction in a diverse classroom is likely to occur when there is good communication between a teacher and his/her students. To understand what students are saying and to be verbally understood by students, teachers need to be linguistically competent. Sufficient knowledge of linguistics would enable teachers to identify and value the different language patterns students have.

The second reason why teachers need to know about language issues is related to the teacher position as an educator. As children enter school at different levels of language competence, it is the duty of teachers to support their language development throughout the schooling years. Teachers should be able to design the right content of language instruction and solve the language problems faced by students. For optimal learning to take place in diverse classrooms, teachers must become familiar with how language functions in a variety of contexts in addition to their subject matter knowledge.

As far as evaluation is concerned, Fillmore and Snow (p. 8) argue that student learning ability should not be judged on a global test basis alone. Given that linguistic behaviors vary from culture to culture, students' failure to pass a test is not necessarily indicative of their language incompetence. Therefore, knowing the sources of language variation would help teachers assess student progress and ability in an objective way.

As with all other educated people, teachers should also be constantly engaged in pursuing the knowledge of language. While linguistic knowledge is crucial in the development of literacy skills for every individual, it is needed by teachers to ensure an improvement on the professional front. In the simplest terms, teachers should first understand language matters before they could transfer the knowledge and skills of language to their students.

As agents of socialization, Fillmore and Snow (p.11) describe teachers as having a significant role in helping children make their cultural transition from home to school. With enough support from teachers, the transition process would run smoothly. ESL and language minority students would become more motivated learners when they know that their teachers value their home languages and cultures. To successfully facilitate learning for ESL learners, teachers need to know something about educational linguistics.

Knowledge of oral language

Following the roles for which educators need to know about language, Fillmore and Snow (pp. 14-25) go on to discuss the importance of oral language knowledge for teachers. In support of the view that oral language is a foundation for literacy skills, the two American researchers posit that every teacher needs to know the components of oral language and how different language structures work across languages to support students' language development. Such knowledge, which includes phoneme, morpheme and discourse patterns,

would give teachers important tools for exploring why students produce speech errors and how their oral language problems could be improved in the future.

In the area of vocabulary instruction, children whose first language is not English might find it difficult to comprehend the concepts of English irregularities such as past tense and plurality. ESL students, for example, often encounter problems when they have to choose between *writed* or *wrote* for the past form of the verb *write*. Given the fact, understanding how words are formed and how languages change through time is important for teachers to be able to teach vocabulary to their students effectively.

Relatedly, Fillmore and Snow (p. 18) assert that vocabulary acquisition is likely to take place when there is sufficient exposure to the words being learned. Students need to be taught about the relationship between a word and its similar form, the grammaticality of words in a sentence, and how a word is connected with other concepts. Furthermore, vocabulary instruction could be powerful if teachers provide students with topics that are of great interest to them.

In addition to lexical knowledge, teachers should also familiarise themselves with the principles of sociolinguistics. This branch of linguistics helps teachers understand that one English dialect is not better than other dialects of English. In the case of vernacular dialects, for example, the knowledge of sociolinguistics would enable ESL teachers to respect the students' home language and provide them with sufficient support in learning the academic English.

Teaching students from language minority the skills of academic English is important for their success as language users both at school and in jobs. For instance, the ability to understand and summarise texts, the ability to evaluate evidence and arguments, and the ability to use grammatical sentences allow students to become highly competent users of

language. In this situation, all teachers need enough knowledge of how language functions in academic context.

In line with the academic English teaching, Fillmore and Snow (pp. 20-25) argue that direct instruction should be implemented. Given the fact that many students fail an academic English test because they have not received the appropriate instruction of language structures and speech patterns, it seems reasonable for students to work with teachers who have expertise in educational linguistics so that they could meet the required academic as well as professional language demands.

Knowledge of written language

While it is clear that teachers would benefit from knowing the basic principles in oral language, also crucial to teaching ESL learners is the understanding of written language issues. According to Fillmore and Snow (pp. 25-28), the first aspect of written language that teachers should be aware of is spelling. Despite the peculiarities of English spelling, it is important for teachers to understand how English orthography develops and operates in order to teach the alphabetic principle in English. It is worth-noting that developing students' awareness that letters represent sounds is essential in the development of their reading and writing skills.

Along this line, students should be exposed to different types of texts ranging from narrative to expository writing to acquire the required language structures in academic learning. Given the diversity in school classrooms, understanding the differences in story structure across languages could help teachers implement appropriate approaches to developing students' ability in English academic writing.

To become skillful writers, Fillmore and Snow (pp. 29-30) maintain that students should not only be taught how to write well; they should also receive informative feedback in their writing errors. Students need to know their current writing progress and powerful ways

to improve their writing ability in the future. Effective writing instruction requires that teachers have a good understanding of grammar and continuously assess their students' writing.

Given that school goals are directed towards improving the academic skills of both English speaking and non English speaking students, teachers and school administrators should work together to provide students with appropriate text materials. In this case, educators would not be able to select relevant materials for their diverse students unless they have a good understanding about the nature of bilingual education and the principles of educational linguistics.

Professional development programs for teachers

In the last part of their article, Fillmore and Snow (pp. 32-34) offer a number of language-related courses that teachers need to take to promote their professional development in English pedagogy. The suggested courses include the areas of linguistics, cultural diversity, sociolinguistics, language development, second language learning and teaching, academic language, and educational text analysis.

Attending these courses would enable teachers to address the core problems existing in their diverse classrooms. Linguistic knowledge, for example, would help teachers examine the difficulties student have with spelling and pronunciation. Sociolinguistics familiarises teachers with useful ways to accommodate various discourse patterns and dialects in the classroom. Courses on language development and pedagogy would provide teachers with many insights into the factors that affect and support language learning. In addition, an understanding of academic English would help teachers recognise the use of language in written texts and in formal contexts.

CRITIQUE

Having read Fillmore and Snow's article above, I am in agreement with them on the idea that a good understanding of educational linguistics should support teachers' personal growth as well as their professional functions in the classroom. Knowledge of oral and written language would enable teachers to plan the right content of instruction and implement relevant strategies to achieve student achievement. I also believe that classroom teachers need to undergo effective professional development programs to enhance their expertise in second language learning and teaching.

Teacher roles

To start with, I would like to describe my basic premise about teaching English. Underlying all of my teaching ideas is the belief that teachers play a vital role in making a positive change towards student learning. As put forward by Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 83), I agree that improvement in teaching and problem-solving in the classroom lie in the hands of a teacher who is willing to learn new concepts, explore current approaches and experiment with different strategies. Relatedly, Peery (2004, p. 1) suggests that if we are to improve education for our children, we must improve the education of the teachers who are involved in student learning process. In the simplest terms, student achievement is positively correlated with teachers' professional growth.

Given that the performance of teacher has a great impact on student achievement, it follows that there is a need for the continuous learning of teachers. Regarding teacher learning, Fenwick and Tennant (2004, p. 55) posit that while 'learner' and 'educator' are two inseparable elements in teaching-learning processes, teachers should act as collaborators and co-learners rather than supervisors or authorities. This means that teachers should be constantly engaged in the process of learning to be able to teach better. Teachers' job is not only concerned with the transfer of knowledge and skills to students, it should also involve

the pursuit of new knowledge and skills in related fields including knowledge of language (Slepkov, 2008, p. 85).

Language serves as the means of oral and written communication for people both in society and in school (Nunan, 1999, pp. 71-72). While many authors believe that children's language patterns are shaped by their home environment, the school setting is widely accepted as a place where children could refine their language use (Aldridge, 2005, p. 177). For ESL learners, language is an issue as they are learning English curriculum materials while still developing proficiency in English itself. Although some students could follow the lessons, many encounter difficulties in producing the required academic English work (Lucas et al., 2008, p. 361). In this case, teachers should notice these language problems to be able to transform students' language.

The issue of helping ESL students succeed in their learning has generated a considerable amount of concern among education specialists. The fact that more than two thirds of the total American teachers are not well-equipped with linguistic knowledge and skills (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2002 cited in Echevarria, 2006, p. 17) has increased the demand for providing linguistically responsive teachers in ESL classrooms. For that reason, I have found that teachers need to understand the key principles of second language learning and teaching to meet the communicative needs of the various learners (Lucas et al., p. 362). It is important to know that a teacher who is linguistically knowledgeable is likely to determine students' language and literacy success (Hill, 2006, p. ix).

Knowledge of oral language

Working with ESL learners who are struggling both with their English and daily subjects requires teachers to understand how language works and develops. As their difficulties center on language areas, one of the basic concepts that teachers should know is

the relationship between oral language and literacy. The importance of oral language in the development of literacy skills has been emphasised by many authors.

While Snow et al. (1998 cited in Hill, 2006, p. 20) contend that spoken language is the base for building literacy, Hallahan et al. (2005, p. 407) posit that students with oral language difficulties are at risk of both reading and writing difficulties. Oral language is a prerequisite for written language as it marks the beginning of using language as a symbol for meaning. These research findings should encourage teachers to explore oral language instruction to improve school literacy.

Of particular significance for the instruction of oral language are the knowledge of basic language elements and the useful ways of teaching them. Bos and Vaughn (2005, p. 71) describes language instruction as occurring in the contexts of content, form and use. Content is usually termed as semantics, that is a branch of linguistics which study concepts and word meanings. As ESL students tend to possess less vocabulary than their native peers (Echevarria, 2006, p. 20), it is recommended that the instruction of content be emphasised on teaching the vocabulary of certain concepts or how one concept is related to another (Bos and Vaughn, 2005, p. 76). It may also be useful to provide students with opportunities to use the words in meaningful ways to deepen their knowledge of words as they feel connected to their real world (Echevarria, 2006, p. 20).

Form refers to the sound and structure of words and is connected with three disciplines: phonology (sound rules), morphology (word formation), and syntax (word order). In a series of studies, researchers (Blachman, 2000, Catts and Kahmi, 1999, Wagner et al., cited in Bos and Vaughn, 2005, p. 72) have demonstrated that teaching letter-sound connection to children could increase their ability to recognise and decode unfamiliar words. Relatedly, Hill (2006, p. 117) suggests that word play with sounds such as rhymes, jingles and famous songs should be taught to students to develop their phonological awareness. Several

strategies that teacher should know for teaching form also include helping ESL students learn a variety of English affixes and sentence structures (Bos and Vaughn, 2005, pp. 91-92).

Another important aspect of language is use or pragmatics. Pragmatic skills deal with how a child could communicate effectively in home, community and school environment. While knowing how informal language differs from formal language is an essential factor in academic learning context, direct interaction with people who know English well would promote ESL learners' development of both conversational and academic proficiency (Lucas et al., 2008, p. 363). In addition to conversational proficiency, the academic ability to understand, analyse and extract meanings from texts is predictive of school learning success (Echevarria, 2006, p. 19). Along this line, it is important to know that the way a speaker uses language is also influenced by the social groups in which he/she lives (Yule, 2006, p. 205). Thus, understanding the features of social dialects that students have not only could help teachers promote student learning but could also make students feel valued because they know that their language is respected (Aldridge, 2005, p. 179).

From the descriptions above, it is clear that language components and language development are interdependent. In other words, progress in one area has an impact on others. To paraphrase Owens (2005, p. 345), students who experience difficulties in the use of language appear to have limited knowledge and understanding of content and form. Given that oral language is made up of various linguistic units and that language is spoken in different ways across cultures, I agree that classroom teachers should be familiar with the areas of content, form and use in English and how they differ from other languages to be able understand the conversational and academic language abilities of the students and help them enhance their oral language ability.

Knowledge of written language

As with oral communication development, a child's written communication also develops as they enter school. Despite the opinion that there are more challenges in learning written skills than oral skills due to some differences in their characteristics (Smith and Elley, 1998, p. 16), Cambourne (1988, pp. 32-42) suggests that problems in writing could be solved by using similar principles and conditions which make oral learning successful. Conditions like immersion, demonstration and response/feedback are some of the natural factors which lead to children's literacy success. As the home setting provides little opportunities for children to learn to read and write, teachers need to make the nature-based conditions available for children in the school environment

Therefore, while students need to experience immersion in all types of written texts, demonstrations of how English spelling patterns operate are also needed. The knowledge of writing conventions not only supports students' written language development; it also helps teachers understand why many ESL learners find writing difficult. While research shows that children who are poorly exposed to print are likely to have problems with writing conventions (Smith and Elley, 1998, p. 13), the fact that South Australian primary school students' spelling standards have declined in the last fifteen years (Westwood, 1994, p. 31) verifies that teachers should understand the complexities of English orthography to be able to guide students in acquiring the required text structure throughout their schooling years.

However, immersion and demonstration are not enough. While teachers have the responsibility for providing language-rich school environment and for supplying demonstrations, students need to receive relevant feedback from their teachers for better improvements in their writing skills (Baker et al., 2003 cited in Hallahan et al., 2005, p. 440). In the words of Hallahan et al. (2005, p. 345), "teacher and student assessment of writing progress, strengths, and needs" increases the likelihood for student success in learning to write

(Hallahan et al., 2005, p. 435). Therefore, to be familiar with the errors that are frequently made by learners, teachers need to have a good understanding of grammar so that they could address those weaknesses (Feng and Powers, 2005, p. 67).

As noted earlier, children come to school with their diverse linguistic backgrounds. With regard to text materials used for instruction, teachers' responsibility lies in selecting appropriate textbooks for their students. A study conducted by Dzaldov and Peterson (2005, p. 223) has shown that teachers' knowledge of students' sociocultural identities and interests has a great impact on the determination of book appropriateness for their students. As such, the diversity of language and literacy instruction requires teachers to be culturally sensitive and linguistically competent.

Professional development programs for teachers

In schools where teachers deal with language minority students, professional development programs for teachers should attend to language-related knowledge and skills which are necessary for meeting such students' unique needs (Lucas, et al., 2008, p. 362). In this regard, teachers need to learn how language is acquired, how it develops and how it works and functions in a variety of contexts (Echevarria, 2006, pp. 18-19). Also fundamental to teaching ESL/EFL students is the expansion of teachers' pedagogical knowledge. Approaches to teaching derive from many sources ranging from research findings to principles of language teaching. An understanding of major theories in language teaching is essential in the making of lesson plans and instructional strategies (Brown, 2000, p. 201).

Having taught English to ESL/EFL learners for about ten years, I have found that teachers' knowledge of language principles would guide classroom activities. By using a principled approach, teachers might reflect on their tenets and practices and be better prepared to base their classes on a better view of pedagogy.

Conclusion

Given the increasing numbers of ESL/EFL learners in mainstream classes, it is imperative to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills in related fields. While they should be familiar with the knowledge of oral and written language, a good understanding of pedagogical principles could help teachers design the appropriate content of instruction and scaffold learning for their diverse students. In the simplest terms, every classroom teacher needs to understand educational linguistics.

Considering that teacher learning is predictive of student learning success, I agree that teachers should undergo language-based professional development programs to be able to enhance their expertise in second language learning and teaching to achieve the standards of academic learning for every child.



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