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Teaching Language vs. Teaching About Language

Abstract

Linguistic labeling hinders the teaching of language. Teachers of English as a Second Language give too much emphasis to labeling and not enough to the skills of the language. Several examples are given to demonstrate the author's point.

Importance of language skills

As progressive as recent language-teaching talk sounds, with its "communicative syllabuses" and studies of "psycholinguistic factors involved in second language acquisition," many modern-day second language teachers still find it difficult to part with a trait inherited from nineteenth century pedagogy: "linguistic labeling." As in the case of ESL teachers, this involves the frequent use of grammatical rules and their terminology in an attempt to teach English language production.

However, there is a big difference between "teaching a language" and "teaching about a language". The former is what TESL teachers are supposedly involved in - i.e., teaching the skills of the target language - how to read, write, speak, understand through listening, recognize cultural implications, and perform language-related tasks such as filling out forms and taking tests. The latter, however, is the domain of linguistics. This field embraces the study of theories and terminology about language itself and includes learning to use the labels sometimes used among ourselves (and, unfortunately, sometimes among ESL students) to differentiate, for example, between a "subject" and a "predicate" (or a Noun Phrase and a Verb Phrase in more "recent" terms).

The skill of being able to identify a language label or to assign this label to a piece of language is not teaching the language at all, but rather teaching about it. For example, when a TESL teacher decides to choose an exercise such as the one which follows from, what I would call, a "linguistics" book, students learn about sentence parts but may never be able to produce them:

Underline the linking verb in the following sentence once. Underline the predicative form which follows it twice. In the blank, label the predicative form as predicative nominative, predicate adjective, or predicate pronoun.

The teacher standing on the corner seems happy. _____

Also, it may be argued that it is unfair to expect an ESL student to use linguistically-based terminology in order to produce language as in the following example (although it probably is one step better than the exercise just cited):

Use the following symbols to write your own sentence:

S LV C: _____

Note: The student is expected to have memorized from an earlier lesson that S = Subject; LV = Linking Verb, and C = Complement, as in "Georgia is glamorous".

For additional examples of "recognition (not production) tasks", see the Appendix.

Using linguistic labels

So what are the options? When, if ever, is it fair to the ESL student to use linguistically-based terms or labels? Those of us who teach or have taught advanced writing or composition know that it is nearly impossible to avoid completely using certain labels or terms. In most cases, students must be able to identify the parts of a sentence as subject and verb or to be able to recognize and name prepositions, adverbs, and the other so-called parts of speech so that the teacher can efficiently go about the task of monitoring and correcting homework. Usually the teacher does so by simply saying, for example, "Look Pierre, what you just wrote is not a sentence yet. You forgot the subject", or "Look Denise, you used the wrong preposition there; try to think of a better one".

It seems more feasible that the use of such labels and terms should be limited to those "composing" situations. As most TESL teachers are probably aware, it does not necessarily follow that ESL students who succeed in learning to identify the differences between adjective clauses, noun clauses, adverb clauses, or between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, and so on, can then automatically perform tasks such as the following:

Add words to the following fragment so as to produce a sentence which makes sense:

I know a student who _____

Live-task performance

The point is, in the first place, even if students can master being able to identify the differences listed above, what good does it do when it comes to the communicative or productive live-task? For that matter, why give primary live-task credit to those few students who are capable of loading their brain circuits with complicated terminological subtleties while punishing (i.e. giving low marks to) those who cannot memorize these differences, but who probably can do tasks similar to the one indicated above?

Furthermore, it may be helpful to reflect upon the fact that by the time students arrive in an advanced ESL class, they should know four basic types of relative clauses. (In "linguistic transformational/generative jargon" these are called SS, OS, SO, and OO relativizations.) However, under no circumstances does it seem realistic to expect students to know that: "SS type relativization is one in which the subject of the embedded sentence is identical to the subject of the main clause." That is, should it ever be expected of them to know these terms or how to speak about the target language in that manner? To clarify the point just made, the following example of an SS relativization is presented for us to consider:

The girl who speaks French is my cousin.

And here is another example of an exercise type (similar to those found in some ESL grammar books) which aims, not at getting students to produce the SS relativization, but identifying it "linguistically":

Find the relative clause in the following sentence and underline it. Then draw a line from the clause to the noun it modifies. Now identify the clause type as one of the

following: adjective, noun, or adverb. Now identify what the clause modifies: the subject, the object, the verb, (or none of these) in the sentence:

The girl who speaks French is my cousin.

The following exercise, on the other hand, helps the ESL student not only to become familiar with this structure, but also to produce it.

Using the model sentence to guide you, write other sentences with similar structures. (Incidentally, whether you know it or not, you will thereby be practising writing clauses.)

Model:

The girl who speaks French is my cousin.

Now try this one:

The student who _____ is leaving early.

And this one:

Jack and Jill _____ are our cousins.

It may be that the tendency to teach about language is a by-product of having learned to use language identification terms and labels as students of our first languages or as students of linguistics. However, this offers no good reason for extending the practice to the ESL student, whose primary goal is to produce, not label, language.

Present day research concerning adult and child language acquisition (Krashen, 1985, and Moffett, 1983) tends to indicate that the teaching of grammar rules and accompanying "labeling" may have very little to do with the development of language production skills on the part of the learner. This should lead us to carefully reconsider how much we teach "about" language in our ESL classrooms.

APPENDIX

A Recognition Task is either one of linguistic analysis:

A. Ex. *Underline the independent clause with one line; the dependent clause with two lines:*

John is a farmer who never works on Sundays.

B. Ex. *Write the name of the kind of clause in the blank: Adjective, adverb, or noun:*

1. _____ Harry, who paints barns, lives in Oka.
2. _____ What Myrna doesn't know won't hurt her.
3. _____ The windshield wipers work even if it's not raining.

or one of error analysis:

C. Ex. *Find and correct the errors in the following:*

1. I am interesting in his ideas.
2. I was very frighten. (Taken from B. Azar, "Understanding English Grammar", p. 142).

or one of matching:

D. Ex. *Put an X in the blank if the sentence is similar to the model sentence:*

Model: The man who fell in the Rideau Canal is here to see you.

- a. ____ The lady who slipped on the apple peelings is here to meet you.
- b. ____ The student from Dorval, who doesn't like prunes, is here to see you.
- c. ____ Students who have weak ankles shouldn't take part in the skating race.
- d. ____ Whoever broke his ankle should stay home.

REFERENCES

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- Moffett, James. (1983). *Teaching the universe of discourse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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