

## Challenging Myths



Simplicity of English is one of the most pervasive myths about a language – that grammar is needed for writing but not for speech (1). The reality can be seen in the three kilos of paper comprising *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* written by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (2). "Flexible" is undoubtedly a better attribute for English than "simple" – though, of course, flexibility must be learnt, and rules must be observed if one wants not only to make oneself understood – that is, to express ideas, feelings and emotions – but also to impress, in contexts in which all of the cultural connotations may at any one time endanger comprehension and make us question the validity of the resulting meaning.

Quite a few concepts have been mentioned above – *grammar, flexibility, rules, express, impress* – and all of them pivot, in various ways, around the ideas of *form* and *meaning*.

Language Schools all over the world assume disparity in students' interactional competence as inherent. But there is more to it than *learning styles*, or *the multiple intelligence theory*: outstanding among various factors is the limited amount of time, which has, even in the case of a 120-hour course, a twofold impact on chances of success: on the one hand, it unavoidably conditions the choice of learning priorities; on the other hand, it is, from a psycholinguistic perspective, the only vehicle for long-term memory storage of input – always out of step with intake, and heralding every academic year as a challenge for students and teachers alike.

Every course is seen as a fresh start, yet if the teacher's clear aim is to help students extend their knowledge and skills within the 120 hours of the academic year, his or her first undertaking at the outset of the acquisition process must be how to make the correct predictions about what learners have available to them in terms of knowledge sources and learning procedures.

When it comes to considering what approach should form the basis of the language teaching curriculum, teachers need to be able to sort out the information at their disposal as they make pedagogical decisions. Contrastive analysis, so-called invariant order of acquisition of morphemes, the theory that learners should just be exposed to, rather than be taught, the language – no matter what the finding, the question arises, 'What does this mean for the classroom teacher?' Applying a theory to the classroom does not necessarily mean that earlier, now frowned upon theories are not applicable. Repetition, drills, memorization of dialogues, feedback translation – all have their potential usefulness and represent as many resources for the teacher in need to admit that what learners do naturally cannot necessarily be induced in a classroom context (3).

The language classroom has been and should continue to be the social setting for fruitful interaction, an ever-novel, enriching event for both teachers and learners in which educational theory, linguistic principle and practical intuition can intersect not only for our hypotheses to be tested and accepted, rejected or modified, but also to provide the students with the most efficient means of improvement possible and so enable them to do what they cannot do on their own – or, at least, not so efficiently.

So it is altogether legitimate to ask how much the grammar the students tailor for themselves represents an account of *the Grammar* in the picture above, since expanding their language system requires *building up a picture of the whole language while using it freely*. Freedom of choice to say what they mean to say takes for granted that learners will find a way of encoding the meanings they need and so attain *fluency*, yet in their constant attempts to make the target language an effective instrument of communication, they use strategies which they employ *in their own language* and, in so doing, they adjust the language they are learning (4). In response to the demand placed upon them, they exploit the language learning resources in a way that distorts the formal code (5), a situation which clashes systematically with the *form-focused* enterprise of the teacher in his or her endeavour to attain *accuracy* through presentation, practice, production, and exposure.

Therefore, without a genuine desire to know more, learners' stagnation in interlanguage is likely to occur, and this would simply stifle any attempts on behalf of the teacher to contribute, by his or her initiatives, to their progress.

But progress also implies taking short-term input into long-term memory. A structure that has just been drilled is undoubtedly more liable to be assimilated as sound knowledge if it is followed within less than, say, ten to thirty minutes, by a feedback translation which would readily help the learner to come to terms with his or her own perception of that particular linguistic reality and so help him or her establish active connections between the two language stretches – English (the target language, or L2) vs. the learner's mother tongue (L1) – thus aiming for bilingualism.

- Interpretability of Multi-lexical Fields. English Entries under USE and its Spanish Equivalents: A Contrastive Analysis

The translation argument opens a rather different path in this inquiry, since the very assumption of the universality of linguistic concepts as seen both from the internal and the external structure of languages is described in terms of *equivalence*. Therefore, wherever the case is purported to refer to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) initiated after puberty (6), the L2 mental lexicon will need help in order to develop, albeit in ways constantly mediated by the presence of L1, and accompanied by the inevitable phenomena of transfer.

Translation and interpretation have long become practices in their own right (7), even if violations of fidelity and transparency are readily revealed when back translation is applied for quality check:

English (1 a) It's raining cats and dogs.

French (1b) Il pleut à verse.

↓ (2 a) \* Il pleut des chiens et des chats.

↓ (2 b) \* It's raining in torrents.

↓ (3 a) Il pleut à verse.

↓ (3 b) It's raining cats and dogs.

Accurate rendering of the meaning of the source text into the target text will always yield a 'residue' in the translation, as it is assumed that 'no perfect fit is found' (8). Instead of aiming for a (literal) paraphrase with a view to establishing equivalence, obtaining a (functional) paraphrase is apparently a more realistic goal.

Intuitively, the lexicographic distribution of meanings in a bilingual English-Spanish / Spanish-English dictionary (9) should take this supposed residue into account while at the same time offering all the necessary and sufficient information for a translator – or dictionary user – to satisfactorily match the two concepts considered.

Let's take for example the expression of past habit. The moment when the learner is introduced to the use of *used to* will necessarily be one further to the acquisition of both Present Simple and Past Simple tenses. By then, the student will have practised the expression of present habits sufficiently for him or her to commonly use frequency adverbs (and, of course, observe Word Order with the simple forms of *to be* vs notional verbs) in order to produce a sentence like

(1) *I usually get up early in the morning.*

Appropriate practice in the learner's acquisition of its right equivalence in Spanish will result in

(2) *Suelo madrugar.*

whereas a literal translation – usually preferred because it observes number *and* order of words – will produce

(3) *[Yo] normalmente madrugo.*

or, more often than not,

(4) *[Yo] normalmente me levanto temprano por la mañana.*

The absence of a bilingual matching will inevitably interfere in the learner's assimilation of other expressions of the same semantic area [i.e., the verb *to use*, its simple past form (*used=did habitually*, viz., the nearest in meaning to the semi-modal *used to*), and its adjectival past participle (*used=accustomed*)] in a way that will also affect the *be/get used to doing* structure. Once accepted as the natural – and correct – translation of Spanish *solía*, *used to* will then tend to occupy the place of *usually* when the learner needs to express a present habit and so result in the common expression

(5) *\*I used to drink coffee in the morning*

when the learner actually means

(6) *I usually drink coffee in the morning.*

Although interlanguage has been defined and described in social contexts of ESL learning, the phenomenon legitimately concerns EFL groups (English as a Foreign Language) – even more so if we take into consideration the reduced amount of time devoted to contact with the target language in terms

of skills improvement. Our present considerations, therefore, obligatorily regard translation practice as one of the most useful tools against interlanguage, provided that the learner is readily willing to undergo continued self-assessment and self-brainstorming sessions as a method of expanding his or her language system. Feedback translation has proved to be useful at any level; yet the stage where it is most needed seems to be exactly the one where the student reaches a relative degree of fluency (10). At that particular stage, the teacher's intervention apparently becomes superfluous and, surprisingly enough, dictionaries *and* grammars no longer represent a faithful companion. Extreme cases – when the student fails to apply the Basic English structures, which have been duly assimilated and taken for granted – are far from being rare. What is more, there is a permanent tendency to translate literally from Spanish even when the speaker/writer is completely aware of the idiomatic characteristics of the stretch of language that he or she is about to render in English.

Until a more realistic approach gathers momentum in order to bridge the gap between *fluency* and *accuracy*, the teaching/learning process will continue to be mediated in its stages by materials as presented in existing textbooks, the vehicles for classroom interaction. Therefore, the teacher is called upon the permanent task to continuously revive not only the semantic areas but also the patterns worked upon, and constantly challenge the student to update his or her bilingual condition and so contribute to an essential, and altogether healthy, process of improvement.

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#### Notes

- (1). Crystal, D.: 2003. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Second Edition. Cambridge University Press, pp.190-196
- (2). Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., and Svartvik, J.: 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Eighth impression, Longman Group UK Limited, 1990
- (3). Larsen-Freeman, D.: 1990. *On the Need for a Theory of Language Teaching*. In '90/Linguistics, Language Teaching and Language Acquisition. The Interdependence of Theory, Practice and Research'. Georgetown University Press, pp 261-268.
- (4). Willis, D.: 1990. *The Lexical Syllabus*. A new approach to language teaching. Collins E.L.T., London and Glasgow.
- (5). Halliday, M.A.K.:1994. Chapter 3, *Language as Social Semiotic*. In *Language and Literacy in Social Practice: A Reader*, Janet Maybin (ed.), the Open University, 1994.
- (6). Larsen-Freeman, D.: id., see (3) above, p 262.
- (7). Crystal, D.: id., see (1) above, p 297.
- (8). Davidson, D.: 1967. *Truth and Meaning*. In *Synthese* 17 (1967) 304-323, D. Reidel, Publishing Co., Dordrecht-Holland, pp 114-24.
- (9). The Oxford Spanish Dictionary. Spanish-English/English-Spanish, Oxford University Press, 1994
- (10). *Fluency* is treated here in the Hallidayan sense of 'distorting the formal code' – the ever-present threat in teaching/learning classroom settings.