

Three theoretical approaches to L2/FL teaching put into practice

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ABSTRACT

Applied Linguistics -AL- has been gathering momentum since its origins in the 1950's and ever since has been contributing with practical solutions to second language -L2- and foreign language -FL- teaching and learning with such a prolific body of knowledge that is an intellectual feat to keep up to date with it. From AL corpus three theoretical models were selected: Innatist, Sociolinguistic and Neurolinguistic as a proposal for addressing language teaching based on AL theoretical underpinnings. Departing from the chosen methods, simple and easy-to-apply classroom practices are suggested and explained. They are meant for classroom settings conformed by adolescents and young adults whose L2/FL language is beginners or false beginners and whose objective is that of learning English for general purposes.

Keywords: innatist; sociolinguistic; neurolinguistics; teaching practice; theoretical underpinnings

RESUMEN

La Lingüística Aplicada -LA- ha venido creciendo desde la década del 1950 y desde ese momento ha contribuido con soluciones prácticas para la enseñanza y aprendizaje de segundas lenguas -L2- o lenguas extranjeras -LE- con un cuerpo de conocimiento tal que es un desafío intelectual mantenerse a la vanguardia. Del corpus de la LA se seleccionaron tres enfoques metodológicos: Innatista, Sociolingüístico y Neurolingüístico como propuesta para abordar la enseñanza de las L2/LE basada en sustentos teóricos. Partiendo de los enfoques elegidos, se sugieren y explican prácticas docente simples y fáciles de implementar, pensadas para contextos áulicos conformados por adolescentes y adultos jóvenes con un nivel L2/LE principiante cuyo objetivo es aprender inglés para fines generales.

Palabras clave: innatista; sociolingüístico; neurolingüístico; prácticas docente; sustentos teóricos

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APPLIED LINGUISTICS, the science that provides second language - L2- and foreign language -FL- teachers with practical solutions is a new discipline, yet it is also, and furthermore, an extremely prolific one. Since the 1950's its scope has covered the topics of L2/ FL acquisition and instruction from the precursor Behaviourist approach to the most recent Neurolinguistic perspective. Making an oversimplification, those methods have either built on previous scholarly works and contributed with further developments or, opposingly, have undermined other theories by claiming that only theirs is the appropriate path to language acquisition. As L2/FL teachers we should consciously select from the available approaches a mix of practices that are suitable for our learners and that are in accordance with our work style and context. This article will dwell on simple teaching practice suggestions based on three different theoretical models: Innatist, Sociolinguistic and Neurolinguistic, and will explain the rationale for such choices and a way of implementing them in the context of classroom settings meant for beginners and false beginners between the ages of 14 and 25. While the approach is that of communicative English for general purposes, it can also be applied to other L2/FL languages as well.

The ultimate intention is to offer a proposal to address L2/FL teaching from a professional strand which is based on theoretical underpinnings contributed by AL.

The Innatist Approach

Firstly, innatist models coincide with the assumption that human beings are endowed with a specific module to acquire language, namely the Language Acquisition Device. Krashen (1981), who draws on Noam Chomsky's seminal work, states that language acquisition occurs effortlessly when people are exposed to abundant, appealing and comprehensible input which is a little bit above their current language level. Following this approach students have to be offered varied input other than textbooks such as songs, information about famous people, TV/Netflix series, reading books, to mention a few, according to their interests and language level. To exemplify, for A1 students a full series episode may be hard to follow and, consequently, generate frustration. However, using the names of popular TV/Netflix series can function as a great authentic input provider for vocabulary and good pronunciation models; after all, even beginner students are acquainted with the intermediate level phrase to *break bad* because of the series *Breaking bad*. Similarly, they are likely to do well in not pronouncing the silent /l/ in *walking* because of *The walking dead* series, making it a great opportunity to introduce similar cases of silent /l/ occurrence such as *talk*.

As frequently as possible realia should be used in relaxed interactions since being able to understand non-adapted material in a friendly atmosphere not only enhances students' self-confidence and motivation but also reduces anxiety which cooperates with low levels of the affective filter. The affective filter is Krashen's explanation for the way anxiety, motivation, self-confidence and attitude affect students' variability regarding L2/FL performance. It is acknowledged that the lower the affective filter, the higher level of intake. One form of

creating a friendly class setting is to offer learners possibilities for peer-assessment and by explaining to them that making mistakes is part of the learning process. This feat is better achieved if corrective feedback is given face to face. A written comment, useful as it may be, will unlikely replace reassuring and encouraging words uttered by the teacher.

Despite many undissolved disputes amongst innatist, psychological and sociological L2/FL learning models, all of them coincide with the belief that there is a predictable route of language acquisition which is hardly ever altered. Keeping on a par with the idea that language learning follows predictable steps of complexity, presenting too demanding language would be a methodological mistake. A proper diagnostic test which includes all four skills reading, writing, speaking and listening is a must in every course of study. Without consuming much preparation time, an online diagnostic test may be emailed to the learners who, after resolving it, can send a picture with its result to the teacher. A variant would be taking learners to the computer lab, in case there is one, and have them take the test there. After collecting all these data, the language instructor will have a clearer comprehension of his/her students' interlanguage level which will allow for a well-founded curriculum planning.

While Krashen contends that no grammar instruction is necessary, many theorists have challenged his position. Being EFL teachers, we can argue that some students do seem to need it. The other side of the coin is many others find grammar activities extremely tedious. As practitioners we should cater for all learning styles alike, thus a possible resolution of the dilemma is offering an optional extra grammar aid which could be prepared either in the form of the traditional grammar booster booklet, or in the form of grammar explanation videos on YouTube, which may be uploaded into a social media or e-learning platform, together with self-correction online exercises to practise after viewing. The web is packed with helpful videos produced by English native teachers which provide the double benefit of being ready to use and presenting a reliable language model.

The Sociolinguistic Approach

Secondly, sociolinguistic models (Ellis, 1997; Gass, 2005; Swain, 2000; Tarone, 2000) advance that context is a crucial factor that influences language acquisition. Within this approach the Interaction Hypothesis developed by Long (1998) maintains that three steps account for language learning: positive evidence (or input), negative evidence (or feedback) and output. The importance of this contribution mainly resides in recognising feedback and students' output as aspects that the teaching practice should and must incorporate. It must be pointed that for innatists output is a factor of minor significance whose main purpose is that of being a channel to obtain more input; and feedback, in the sense of the linguistic advice teachers give to students, is out of their scope.

Depending on the case, either implicit or explicit correction techniques are advisable to ensure a good language model is acquired. However, feedback should not finish after the correction but must ensure students' production of the correct version of the chunk that con-

fused them, i.e. feedback must also encourage further output. In this sense, feedback converts into a two-way road travelled by the teacher and the student as well.

Students output must always be taken into consideration both for planning and deciding if remedial teaching is necessary. What is more Swain (2000) posits that output is not only a way to practise but a mandatory path to language learning. This means that without output there is no meaningful learning. Students' interlanguage externalisation can be encouraged and exercised variedly, yet the challenge may reside in coping with all the data teachers obtain. Recording a class, or part of it, at regular time intervals, for example every 2 months or by the end of a term, may provide additional information to the one obtained through exams. The data collected can be systematised into categories such as pronunciation, amount of time learners use the L2/FL (instead of the L1), range of vocabulary, etc. These categories can be used as indicators to periodically assess. In addition to allowing practitioners to thoughtfully plan their next pedagogical moves, having accurate data can also result in a powerful incentive for students. By midterm learners can be shown, in the form of a graph or chart, how much they have progressed and how much more they are expected to advance.

Meaning negotiation is one other aspect of practical significance from a sociolinguistic perspective, so role-playing exercises, discussions and problem-solving activities are recommended ways to foster it (Ellis, 1997). What can be challenging, however, is to devote the necessary time to hearing those exchanges, giving feedback and encouraging learners to expand their output afterwards. Technology is, once again, a great ally to overcome class time constraints. Stronger students may be paired up with weaker ones to roleplay, for example, a conversation in a clothes shop whose audio will be recorded using students' mobile devices. The stronger participants will be asked to expand the assigned model for the interchange and try to elicit further output from their partners so that meaning negotiation can effectively take place. Once rehearsed, the dialogue should be recorded and sent to the teacher for being added up to his/her output data register.

In line with sociolinguistic accounts, a revealing insight was contributed by The Variationist approach in the view of Tarone (2000) who expands other L2/FL acquisition theories by considering social setting and the impacts it may have. For this model, learners will apprehend (or not) corrective feedback based on whether they recognise the interlocutor as someone to be trusted or someone to feel identified with. Thus, besides teachers, students who are recognised as *linguistically reliable* by their peers can effectively function as feedback givers.

Communicative pressure, i.e. the burning need humans have to communicate with others, is thought by Long (1998) to significantly foster L2/FL language development. In the case of L2 learners the communicative pressure is imminent since it is the surrounding context which exerts it. FL learners, however, under very few circumstances experience real communicative pressure. Such is the case, for example, of South American learning scenarios where learners are far from English speaking countries. Interchange programmes

have gained popularity in the last years, taking people from all over the world for a sojourn in another spot in the globe. Taking advantage of this practice, language teachers can contact interchange programmes organisers to invite FL native speakers to actively take part during class time. Ideally, FL learners should be told the guest hardly speaks their L1 in order to maximise the communicative pressure. Not surprisingly, when these experiences are carried out, FL learners find them both motivating and fruitful. They gain confidence from being able to understand and communicate with a native speaker. At the same time, students make the most of the colloquial vocabulary and expressions that non-native teachers are often unacquainted with.

The Neurolinguistic Approach

Thirdly, in the last two decades Paradis' (1994, 2004, 2009) disruptive experiments seem to have demonstrated that explicit knowledge (vocabulary, verb forms, grammar rules, i.e. the arena of declarative memory), does not transform into implicit competence (the ability to communicate spontaneously, i.e. the scope of procedural memory) by means of practice, and argues that both mechanisms should be worked simultaneously. This finding is in direct opposition to *traditional teaching approaches* which claim that, to automatise an L2/FL structure, first language forms need to be rehearsed in the declarative memory and only then used in communicative activities. In Netten and Germain (2012, p. 88) words:

According to this [traditional] paradigm, explicit knowledge about the language, through use in exercises, becomes so well-established in the mind that it can eventually be used automatically, or non-consciously, to communicate spontaneously: that is, knowledge, through practice, is transformed into an ability, or a habit.

Traditional teaching methods spend a huge amount of time dealing almost exclusively with language forms obtaining poor communicative results, as reported by Hart and Scane (2004); and Netten and Germain (2007). The pertinent question to ask is: How can explicit and implicit knowledge be worked at the same time? Neurolinguistic approaches -NLA- recommend (Netten & Germain, 2012):

- Start with the oral use of a structure since oral acquisition precedes explicit learning.
- Use and reuse the same structure many times, since new neural pathways need to be built to generate automaticity.
- Language structures must be learnt in context since the brain retrieves information from the setting in which it occurs.

In accordance with this model, a substantial portion of the class has to be dedicated to the development of implicit competence by means of numerous oral interactions both with class peers or the teacher, and grammatical or vocabulary boosting activities may be assigned as

homework. According to Ellis (2011), extensive oral practice should be performed using first a limited number of newly introduced items until spontaneous production occurs and allows for increasing complexity. Due to the fact that class time is always scarce, the possibility of expanding an oral interchange can also be part of a home activity. For example, the dialogue at the clothes shop proposed before can be expanded with new structures and vocabulary to be presented the next class. Furthermore, for the sake of this new presentation students can be randomly paired up with a different partner from the one they initially worked with thus fostering a fully communicative situation to take place.

Since in the view of Netten and Germain (2012) cognitive neuroscience “has indicated that the use of authentic language in real communication is essential to acquire the internal grammar necessary for spontaneous communication”, most classroom practices need to be led to meaningful experiences. This can be achieved by making every class interaction personal, even textbook suggested exercises can be transformed into a realistic situation. If the clothes shopping dialogue is carried out choosing as an imaginary setting one of the shops where learners usually attend, vocabulary relates to clothes they often buy, and prices expressed are the real ones in the market, all the interaction becomes a shopping experience rather than a class activity. Similarly, the broadening of vocabulary items can be turned into an oral contest between teams which compete for memorising and saying aloud with correct pronunciation the greatest number of clothing items. As a preparation for the competition a list of wearing apparel should be built up by learners according to clothes they often wear or like. It is advisable to have students start from scratch telling the list either when they forget a word or mispronounce. Through this activity real, authentic and experiential communication is happening in context, i.e. the neurolinguistic approach is being applied.

Concluding Remarks

As accredited by most teachers, no L2/FL theory by itself is the unique path to successful teaching. That is the reason why they adopt and implement an eclectic work style. Applied Linguistics -AL- is the field of study which assists language teaching with practical applications of linguistic theories, however, it provides such an enormous body of knowledge that is almost impossible to stay abreast of it and, additionally, quite often newest models pretend to rebut older ones. This is the case when language practitioners may find themselves at loss.

This article has offered simple-to-implement teaching practices based on three theoretical positions, namely Innatist, Sociolinguistic and Neurolinguistic not with the purpose of asserting that the selected models are the most advantageous, but with the intention of sharing a possible approach to the application of Linguistics to classroom settings, also meaning that teaching practices must be deep-rooted in theoretical background. The recommendation is to select from AL rich corpus those methods that better suit our learners' interests and learning style, our work context and our teaching style, and to devote time to the study of

those methods so as to make informed and thoughtful teaching decisions which should be implemented, assessed, adapted, reimplemented and re-assessed continuously.

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