TEACHING LING101

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1. Introduction

Almost everyone who has written for *Te Reo* in its 50 year history has begun their personal relationship with linguistics with LING101 or its equivalent. But for every linguist who passes through LING101 and its successors: courses on syntax, sociolinguistics, semantics, morphology and mathematical linguistics, there are hundreds for whom LING101 is terminal. They are on their way somewhere else to become ESOL teachers, computer programmers, bureaucrats and real estate salespeople. So one question for anyone who teaches LING101 is what should such a heterogeneously motivated class know and how are they to learn it?

As with every other introductory course, this raises issues of what is core to the subject and what can be done without. Is the fact that bees dance to tell other bees where the honey is core knowledge that everyone who is interested in human language(s) should know? Do we need to think hard about whales and dolphins? Is Whorfian theory sexy or just seductive? In other words what can and should be crammed into a one-semester course?

Then there are other choices. There are so many interesting languages on the planet, a few of which students and teacher know, most of which they don't. Some have exotic properties such as having very few verbs. Some have their verbs at the end of the clause. Others have lots of juicy paradigms. Some have tones. Some have voiceless vowels and clicks. Some place stress on the

last syllable. Does one present students with the rich mix of all that or limit oneself to the mundane (but fascinating), the language inside the students' and one's own head; seeing the whole LING101 exercise as a way of getting students to look at their unconscious without lying on a psychiatrist's couch?

How much should be devoted to exposition and how much to analysis, to problem–based learning? Can a whole course be problem-based, building knowledge inductively or is there a place for telling students some things before they start their own explorations?

What place should the acquisition of terminology have and what terminology is necessary or desirable? One can hardly get away without nouns and verbs. Calling them Form Class 1 and Form Class 2 as C.C. Fries did is not going to work as well.

And then there are the students collectively and severally. LING101 may be taught to large classes of several hundred or to smaller groups in liberal arts colleges, or the large class may be split into sections and be taught by TAs. What do these students already know when they enter LING101? Those lucky enough to have had an old-fashioned elementary school teacher somewhere along their past progress (I think of her as James Thurber's Miss Groby who hunted figures of speech 'as Palomides hunted the questing beast') may already know about nouns and verbs as may those who have studied a foreign language. Others may know nothing of the mysteries of nouns and verbs.

Linguistics also has many theoretical approaches (not quite as many as there are human languages but impressive numbers nevertheless). Does one teach Cognitive Grammar, Principles and Parameters, Lexical Functional Grammar, or bits of all of these in LING101?

2. Curriculum development for LING101

Scott Allan and I faced these issues in thinking of our respective LING101 courses over many years and we reached similar conclusions about what kind of LING101 we thought would work best for our students. After 50 years of *Te Reo* and thousands of years of te reo reflecting on those decisions is a pleasure.

2.1 Content

When you get a group of linguists together there is remarkable agreement about the domains that are central to linguistics. We agree that phonetics,

phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics are core sub-disciplines without which one cannot proceed further. The reason there is agreement is that these *are* the central subsystems of all human languages. That kind of agreement does not exist in many humanities disciplines. So linguists are lucky. LING101 needs to build a foundational knowledge of those central areas. That is what one gets in almost all LING101s and in the texts which are used in LING101. There is often more besides but, in a one-semester course, the choice is to devote more time to the core and so less to bees and dolphins, or more to bees and dolphins and consequently less to the core. The choice is not only made easier on the grounds of limitation of time but also on the basis of one of the oldest distinctions in the linguistics book: competence and performance. To offer a principled account of language use one needs at least a basic background in what is being used. So teaching knowledge of competence is pedagogically prior to teaching other more applied areas of linguistics such as socio-linguistics and psycholinguistics. That is not to say that the one cannot illuminate the other. Once students have a rough idea of free variation in phonology, the fact that free variation is not as free as all that in the social world is illuminating and helps the concept to stick. Department stores in New York can be useful here even if one has not been to Sax Fifth Avenue, Macy's and Kleins.

2.2 Prior knowledge

One basic curriculum decision that must be made is what to assume students already know. In New Zealand it is best to assume that students have no background knowledge at all, or if they do that it will enhance their learning one way or another. Given that the High School English curriculum in New Zealand has not taught the fundamentals of English structure for at least thirty years, the assumption that it is better to start from scratch is safe. The good news is that if one decides that the main language of exemplification is to be English, then one can assume that a great deal of tacit knowledge exists which can magically be conjured forth.

2.3 The language(s) of exemplification

The choice of the language(s) of exemplification has traditionally been influenced by the academic roots of linguistics. In North America, linguistics usually grew out of anthropology and the study of indigenous languages of the Americas. The SIL manuals of Pike, Nida and Elsdon and Picket are still wonderful treasure troves of exercises. In the UK linguistics more often

grew out of English Language programmes within English Departments and thus they had a philological background. It is easy to take such traditions on trust. But they should be uncovered and then one can see that each has its advantages. Those LING101s which draw on a wide range of languages of exemplification make students aware of just how various languages can be and can make them less linguo-centric in their judgements. On the other hand there are some things missing in the study of languages one does not know oneself, namely native intuitions. Looking at one's own language is already an imaginative leap that some students find hard. For example, when students are learning to transcribe their own speech into phonetics, many resist the idea that they elide perfectly respectable vowels and consonants. They have been taught that sloppy speech is bad and the moral opprobrium that attaches to normal connected speech is just as alienating and thus hard to overcome as the alienation effects of looking at exotic paradigms. Both have to do with becoming consciously aware of what is unconscious. But in the case of a native language, the speaker can at least recognise minimal pairs and (less happily) complementary distribution because it comes naturally. One can point out that knowledge of where syllable boundaries are in one's own language is unerring, and yet there is nothing in the speech signal which indicates where they are. Focussing on English does not, of course, preclude the occasional foray into other languages by way of comparison. How can one teach syllable timing in contrast to stress timing without putting on a French accent and repeating stretches of *'Allo 'Allo* or Maurice Chevalier songs?

3. Curriculum delivery

As Sandy Chung shows in her chapter on syntax teaching in this volume and as Wray and Bloomer's problem-based text (Wray and Bloomer, 2006) shows, a large amount can be taught with carefully selected problem sets. This is particularly so with smaller classes where the instructor can provide constant feedback. But where a big first year class is taught not in sections but in large lectures and small tutorials, exposition must play a part.

3.1 Lectures

It is tempting to think that a lecture is just a form of information transfer. But linguists know this isn't the case. Speech simply does not come out of a lecturer's mouth and find its way into a student's ear without a great deal

more going on before the signal gets into a form where it involves learning. So the question has to be asked, what is the difference between exposition in a textbook and exposition in a lecture? Well, sometimes not much. Effective lectures, however, have an interactive and affective dimension that is harder to get from a text. Students signal how a lecture is going by various kinds of silence and various kinds of back channelling. There is the silence of incomprehension, a kind of sullen thing linked to staring down at the notes, up at the overhead waiting for enlightenment. There is the silence of intense concentration when something is interesting and worth attending to. Books can't hear these silences, nor can they respond to a question from someone or catch the satisfaction murmur when a third analogy makes the penny to drop. Are phonemes really like werewolves with different manifestations appearing in different environments? Is a wolf manifestation morphologically enough like the were manifestation for them to be recognisably forms of the same individual? What about the butler and the murderer? Are they in complementary distribution and if they are, are they one and the same person? Primarily lectures are about affect. Exposition is the vehicle but unless attitudes and feelings are uppermost, the lecture will fail since it is affect which motivates learning. Straight exposition is better done by a textbook (but it can't recognise the person reading it).

There is a consequence to being a stand-up comic, actor, producing affect. It's tiring. Professional actors are on stage for a maximum of two hours a night. They have to learn their lines by day and sleep in during the morning. Lecturing to a big LING101 has a major difference, no sleeping in and the script is extempore.

3.2 Problem-based learning

But lecturing to a big LING101 does not preclude analysis, discovery learning and problem sets. In lectures when things get difficult, a short exercise with feedback from the audience works wonders for keeping those who have had a hard night the day before awake. Also with a big lecture class in linguistics it is essential to have small group practical work. Here the problem sets prevail and student homework can be checked, small workgroups can get established and feedback is readily to hand. So the practical classes provide the balance necessary to put into practice what is provided with exposition in the lectures and text.

Some students need more practice and more problem sets than can be provided in a single practical session. Here learning management systems

come into their own. Blackboard, for example, allows for numerous ways to present quizzes to students so that they can gain mastery through repeated attempts at the same conceptual or analytical material but with new stimuli. Derivational morphology can be got across by asking for the grammatical category of the base to which an affix attaches and what the grammatical category of the stem plus affix is. After 20 or 30 of such questions, students get the idea that derivational affixes are part of the word formation system and many, but not all, create a different category of word from that of their base. LING101 at the University of Canterbury now has almost forty of these quizzes. They took time to create but have proved very useful, particularly for the not-so-able student.

3.3 Theory

When you get a group of linguists together, although there is considerable agreement about the central sub-disciplines of the subject, how the facts are to be accounted for and what some of the facts are can get mightily contentious. It can lead to screaming matches on the platform at the Linguistic Society of America. However interesting such an event would be for the students in LING101 to witness, it creates a problem for curriculum development. Should a syllabus be theoretically consistent throughout an undergraduate linguistics programme or eclectic? The premise which seems to work best is to suppose that, until a student is familiar with one way of seeing things, providing multiple perspectives can be confusing. Also it is better to move from a simple to a complex view of phenomena than present all the complexities at an early stage. For LING101, therefore, Scott and I kept it simple (for the most part). We also kept it theory neutral (for the most part; although philosophers of science say that is just cheating. There is no theory neutral.) But cheating a bit seems better than presenting Derrida, Kristeva and Barth to a first year literature class when students have read only two novels.

Much of the conceptual material and attendant terminology that seems central for LING101 is assumed by most linguistic theories. Without knowing what a subordinate clause is and the distinction between lexical and auxiliary verbs one can't get very far in any syntactic theory. In the first year textbook Scott and I wrote, there are about a hundred terms in the three glossaries. Most of these would not be contested or, if they are, it is just that some other theory uses a different word for the same thing. Pronouns have antecedents. Inflectional morphemes form up into paradigms on the basis of their morphosyntactic properties and so forth. In a sense, the conceptual and

terminological choices are made by asking what areas of understanding all linguistic theories presuppose. These are the ones to teach in LING101.

3.4 Languages of exemplification

There is a problem with the interaction between the selection of a single language of exemplification and this latter desideratum. Some languages are better at illustrating some linguistic phenomena than others. Chinese languages are not as good for illustrating inflectional morphology since they have none. English and German are not good at illustrating tone. Short excursions into foreign parts are therefore necessary.

3.5 Learning management systems

I have suggested that learning management systems can have a significant place in curriculum delivery. Here are a few more uses that can be made of them. Lectures can be recorded and played out to the campus network on a streaming video server. I have been doing that for three years by recording the powerpoint presentation of lectures with a voiceover of the lecture, providing quicktime movies for anyone who wasn't at the lecture because their children were sick, they were at a sports tournament or they didn't get up on time. They are popular with international students who need to hear it all again to make it make sense. Next year I will also load a large number of mp3s to be downloaded for use in mp3 players so that a small topic like the difference between inflection and derivation can be heard while riding your bike to work. (It's not the latest pop track but the idea of being listed on iTunes and playing on an iPod is tempting. Classification in iTunes? Heavy metal.)

The availability of such learning avenues raises the issue of LING101 being offered by distance. If the lectures are available in video form, the quizzes can be accessed at any time, the textbook is assigned, what remains unavailable to the distance student is the face-to-face tutorial. Well, not necessarily. Skype and iChat can provide one-on-one and group tutoring opportunities (so long as everyone has done the homework). I am going to try it next year.

4. Conclusion

The careful reader will have noticed that there is the odd *should* lurking in the foregoing. Choices always involve preferred ways of doing things. These tend to have a moral aspect to them. I guess these are my imperatives and every

teacher has their own. What is important to me (as it was to Scott) is to find as many ways as I can of enthusing students, fascinating them in the intricacies of one of the most intricate systems humans develop. That doesn't always succeed. Let's face it, parts of speech are not all that riveting. But maybe the excuse for colonising a piece of the mind of another person, in the case where the coloniser is a linguist, is that the language(s) has/ve already done it before ever you came along.

Reference

Wray, Alison and Aileen Bloomer. 2006. *Projects in Linguistics: A Practical Guide to Researching Language*. (2nd ed) London: Hodder Educational.