The Role of Second Language Teachers

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Abstract

The goal of learning a second or foreign language nowadays is different from that of the past. The study of a second language has now focused more on the communicative function which will enable learners to use the target language effectively in real situations. The role of second or foreign language teachers, therefore, has changed. They are no longer a mere source of linguistic knowledge. Rather, they should view themselves as applied linguists and try to use the knowledge from associated fields to try to tackle language-related problems and hence make teaching/ learning more effective. Second language teachers, therefore, are expected to have more diverse knowledge and responsibilities.

The role of second language teachers nowadays is no less important than the role they played in the past. Perhaps today's second language teachers are expected to have more diverse knowledge and more extensive responsibilities than was required by the tasks that they used to carry out. The linguistic aspect is no longer an absolute factor in learning a second language and second language teachers should not view themselves as merely the source of linguistic knowledge. Teaching a second language or a foreign language is more than just transmitting linguistic knowledge to learners. Rather, second language teachers should also be concerned with language-related problems that learners have been encountering and should try to tackle those problems or minimize them in order to make second language learning more effective.

However, important as linguistics may be in studying a second or foreign language, it should no longer be regarded as an autonomous entity. Neither should applied linguistics be viewed as a mere subset of linguistics. Rather, applied linguistics should be seen as incorporating various fields such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, education, management, etc. Strevens (1989) defines applied linguistics as a "multi-disciplinary approach to the solution of language-related problems." According to him, even though linguistics is an important element, it is not the only discipline contributing to applied linguistics. He also points out that the disciplines or parts of disciplines relevant to any applied linguistics situation will be determined by the particular circumstances of that situation (Strevens, 1989). Second language teachers should regard themselves as applied linguists and try to

use the knowledge from relevant applied linguistics fields to make teaching and learning a second language more effective.

Language teachers are viewed as a major source of knowledge and this role gives them a crucial influence on learners' motivation in studying a language. What types of qualifications should second language teachers have in order to be able to make learners proficient in the target language as well as to make instruction and learning interesting and so create motivation in learners? The primary qualification one would expect from second language teachers is mastery of the target language. By this, it is meant that a second language teacher should act like a linguist, possessing knowledge of various linguistic aspects such as grammar, phonology, morphology, etc. This has long been regarded as an indispensable qualification for language teachers, and it still is. Yet, although syntactic and grammatical knowledge are important elements in studying language, one has to realize that they are not in themselves sufficient. Celce-Murcia (1985) points out that grammar is but one of many important aspects of language teaching. It should not, therefore, be treated to the exclusion of all else in the field of second language teaching.

One may recall the criticism that Hymes has made on Chomsky's grammatical competence. Although Hymes accepted Chomsky's explanatory adequacy as powerful, he pointed out that it is limited to syntax without considering sociocultural factors, which play an important role in the acquisition of the language.

We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and

to evaluate their accomplishment by others.

(Hymes, 1971:15)

Hymes has made the important statement which has become very popular that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar be useless" (1971:15). These sociocultural elements also apply to second language teachers when conducting language instruction. Hymes (1971) also states that there are some occasions that full grammatical sentences are not required and that this is perfectly appropriate. This idea of Hymes is congruent with Widdowson's idea of "usage and use." To use one of Widowson's examples to illustrate the point :

Teacher :	What is on the table?
Pupils :	There is a book on the table.
Teacher :	What is on the floor?
Pupils :	There is a bag on the floor.
Teacher :	Where is the bag?
Pupils :	The bag is on the floor.
Teacher :	Where is the book?
Pupils :	The book is on the table.

(Widdowson, 1978:5)

Widdowson points out that these questions/ answers show an example of usage because of the inappropriateness of the form of the reply in the situation, though they are grammatically correct. In normal speech or in a real situation, one would never produce such sentences. According to Widdowson (1978:18), "knowing a language is often taken to mean having a knowledge of correct usage but this knowledge is of little utility on its own : it has to be complemented by a knowledge of appropriate use." Possessing only a knowledge of syntactic structure without being able to use the language appropriately in the social context will be of little avail to learners if they are not able to handle language in real situations. This, therefore, means that second language teachers need to have some knowledge of sociolinguistics as well as pure linguistic knowledge. It is also obvious that second language teachers should consider sociolinguistics as one of the important elements in

teaching a second language, in order that learners will be able to use language communicatively and efficiently in the real world.

Apart from appropriateness, second language teachers also need to be, to some extent, sociolinguists to allow for varieties within one language so that they will not be too judgemental. An example of varieties is a term called "postvocalic /r/." A second language teacher who pronounces words such as "car, fur, acquire" without "postvocalic /r/" and teaches learners whose accents have this "postvocalic /r/", or vice versa, should accept this variety because this is but one example of variations that may occur within one language. In this situation, accents with or without "postvocalic /r/" should not be viewed as right or wrong because the judgement is based upon social value in each region. For example, accents with "postvocalic /r/" are considered more prestigious in New York City whereas in England the idea is reversed (Trudgill, 1974).

In addition to linguistics and sociolinguistics, the affective domain is another crucial factor that affects successful language learning. Brown (1987:100) explains, "Affect refers to emotion or feeling. The affective domain is the emotional side of human behaviour... ." This explains the idea that classroom atmosphere has an impact on learners' affective domain, which, in turn, has an influence upon learners' success in second language study. This view leads to another important requirement that second language teachers should be, to some extent, psycholinguists. That is to say, second language teachers need to be aware of the psychological factors which might affect students' learning ability. Considering the importance of this issue, it can be suggested that a second language teacher play the role of counselor. Two methodologies that give enormous importance to psychological factors affecting learners are the Natural Approach and Community Language Learning.

According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, three kinds of affective or attitudinal

variables related to second language acquisition are identified :

1. Motivation. Learners with high motivation generally do better.

2. Self-confidence. Learners with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to be more successful.

3. Anxiety. Low personal anxiety and low classroom anxiety are more conducive to second language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:133).

Krashen believes that the extent of the input, which is the amount of the language that learners are exposed to, can be more or less transformed into intake, depending partly on the affective filter. Learners' emotional states can be at times high or low. However, in the situation of second language study, a low affective filter is preferable since the obstruction of the input is less than with a high affective filter, and therefore could constitute a pleasant classroom atmosphere, which, in turn, could promote more successful acquisition.

Curran, an advocate of Community Language Learning, also places importance on the personal security of each learner. He explains in Richards and Rodgers (1986:122) that "explicit recognition is given to psychological problems that may arise in learning a second language." They also cite J. Hardin who stated, "Personal learning conflicts.... anger, anxiety and similar psychological disturbance--are indicators of deep personal investment" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:122).

Littlewood, an activist of Communicative Language Teaching, also points out that the atmosphere of a foreign language classroom can easily create inhibitions and anxiety in learners themselves.

The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and to relate with the people around them. It therefore requires a learning atmosphere

which gives them a sense of security and value as individuals. In turn, this atmosphere depends to a large extent on the existence of interpersonal relationships which do not create inhibitions, but are supportive and accepting.

(Littlewood, 1981:93-94)

As psycholinguists, second language teachers need to understand their learners' psychological or personal factors and be more tolerant of them. These factors include whether learners tend to be introvert or extrovert, more or less risk-taking. In addition, some may have high self-esteem, motivation, or inhibition, while others have low.

One thing that increases inhibition is excessive correction of errors. In today's second language classroom where communicative function has been realized meaningfully to make learners able to cope with the real world, the role of teacher should not be authoritarian and should be less dominant. Contrary to some formal teaching methods where errors have been regarded as extremely undesirable, today's second language teachers should be more tolerant of learners' errors, and corrections should be made in a non-threatening way in order not to create inhibition in learners. On the other hand, Richards and Rodgers (1986:123) note that "it may be undesirable to create too secure an environment for learners." They say that according to La Forge "the security of the students is never absolute : otherwise no learning would occur" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:123).

Along with the idea that second language teachers should be well-versed in psycholinguistic aspects is the idea that they should also be effective classroom managers (Celce-Murcia, 1985). This gives light to the idea that second language teachers can play various roles in the second language classroom environment; this may depend upon classroom activities. The relationship between teachers and learners can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical or both, again, de-

pending on the various activities in the classroom. Richards and Rodgers (1986) refer to Munby, who explains that, symmetrical interaction is interaction between equals whereas asymmetrical interaction is interaction between unequals. Acting as a classroom manager, second language teachers are responsible for directing classroom activities in a meaningful manner. Activities should be created to make students less dependent on teachers, more independent, and more inter-independent, These activities can lead from individual to pair and to group work. At times, a second language teacher can act like a facilitator, making activities progress more smoothly.

Using management skills, second language teachers can at times have a symmetrical interaction with learners by acting as their "co-communicator." Littlewood (1981:93-94) explains that, through this role, a second language teacher "can stimulate and present new language, without taking the main initiative for learning away from the learners themselves.... The teacher's role as "co-communicator" places him on an equal basis with the learners. This helps to break down tension and barriers between them."

As applied linguists teaching a second or foreign language, teachers are expected to have theoretical background in second language acquisition. At the same time, it is important that second language teachers decide which language methodology(ies) they prefer to use. This may depend on many factors such as school administration, availability of the teaching materials, initiative and commitment of the teachers, and learners' needs (for example, teaching English to Indochinese refugees may require a different method or approach from teaching English to intermediate university-level students).

Second language teaching/learning has taken a different role from the past which mainly focused on the linguistic aspect without considering other necessary disciplines which can help solve language-related problems learners have been facing. Learners have in the past been taught to concentrate exclusively on linguistic competence,

particularly grammar, believing this to be an absolute necessity in studying a language. However, for decades, we have seen learners with enormous knowledge of abstract grammar who cannot function communicatively and realistically in the real world. Therefore, second/foreign language teachers have taken a new role in trying to tackle problems--in the widest sense--encountered by learners in their language study. This is a very challenging task for second language teachers because they are required, in their role as applied linguists, to take a multi-disciplinary approach in order to make language teaching/learning more effective. Considering the many elements incorporated in the field of applied linguistics, second language teachers should keep in mind that the purpose of instruction is to make learners achieve linguistic competence as well as to cope in real situations.

The Author

Adisra Katib received her Bachelor's Degree in English from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. She has a Master's Degree in International Relations from the University of San Diego, California, and a second Master's Degree in The Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) from The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She returned to Thailand in October 1989 and joined Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) as an English lecturer. Recently, Adisra has been awarded the Rattanakosin Scholarship sponsored by CIDA to study in Canada for a Doctoral Degree in Applied Linguistics this coming academic year.

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