A passage from linguistics to English language teaching: Students' experiences and expectations

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Abstract: Linguistic courses in ELT (English Language Teaching) departments, in some ways, may create obstacles due to their firm theoretical framework. Therefore, this study is concerned with the main problems for the students taking linguistic courses in ELT Department at Trakya University in Turkey. The purpose of the study is to investigate the attitudes of the students in ELT departments towards attending linguistic courses. The survey was carried out with 21-item Likert type scale designed by the researcher. The results specify that, the students at Trakya University admit the effectiveness of linguistic courses and have found a way to applied linguistics from theoretical linguistics.

Key words: linguistics; language teaching; theoretical and applied linguistics; linguistic theories

1. Introduction

Learning a language and learning about a language are two different concepts, that is, knowing a language may not be enough to express both functional and conceptual meaning at all the levels of language skills. However, through an awareness of how a language works, the learner can continue to develop his/her personal linguistic inventory. Linguistics as a scientific study of language, which has been the base of many studies in the field of language-related disciplines in the academic realm, covers two main areas: theoretical and applied linguistics (Frawley, 2003). Theoretical linguistics puts forward theories by describing language and explores ideas on it. Applied linguistics deals with the application of linguistic theories in the areas, such as foreign language teaching, translation and literary studies. Theoretical linguistics studies language and languages with a view of constructing a theory of their structure and functions, whereas applied linguistics has its concerns on the base of application of the concepts and findings of linguistics to a variety of practical tasks, including language teaching (Lyons, 1999). Besides, theoretical linguistics deals with theoretical explorations, while applied linguistics is driven by real-world problems.

In the field of foreign language teaching, both linguistics and applied linguistics can be assumed as considerable parts of the academic studies. In this respect, applied linguistics, which is a bridge between theory and practice, is the linguistic research in language teaching. However, the role of linguistic training in language teacher education programs has long been discussed. Widdowson (1984) stated that language teachers have the responsibility to mediate changes in pedagogic practice, so as to increase the effectiveness of language learning, and that, such mediation depends on understanding the relationship between theoretical principles and practical techniques. Thus, to dismiss theory is to undermine the possibility of such understanding. In other words, the way

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a language teacher will choose to get benefit from theory in practice may be effective in the language teaching and learning processes. In this sense, while questioning the professional relevance of linguistic training, language teachers need to know about theories of language, language learning and second language acquisition, but this has not been a common assumption (Johnson, 2002; Snyder, 2002; Yates & Muchisky, 2004). Moreover, in the study by Garshick (2002), dealing with the tendencies of language teachers towards linguistic courses, it has been cited that, on the part of teachers for the pursuit of linguistic theory as an aspect of their professional development, neither teacher educators nor prospective teachers have interest in linguistics. The implication of this view regarding language teaching and learning is that, there will be hesitation in teachers' mind about what to do precisely. In general, while some are concentrating on practical aspects of teaching profession, others may perceive linguistic-oriented aspects as functional for presumed pedagogical problems. In this sense, for effective language learning and teaching, optimum conditions have to be provided by teachers, involving comprehensible input and meaningful tasks, as well as language awareness-raising activities (Corder, 1986).

Therefore, in the present paper, the issues of a designed linguistic course in teacher training departments are: (1) How theoretical linguistics can be connected to applied linguistics in the course; and (2) What benefits are gained by prospective teachers at the end of such a course, which are discussed in order to specify the attitudes of prospective teachers towards linguistic courses.

In Turkey, the foreign language teacher training departments in the body of the faculties of education follow a standard curriculum offered by Higher Education Council, YOK. In this curriculum, linguistics is taught in the interrelated courses, which are *Introduction to Linguistics I*, *Introduction to Linguistics II* and *Language Acquisition*. The contents of the courses mainly focus on the linguistic studies by creating linguistic awareness and fostering language acquisition of prospective language teachers.

Depending on the content of the courses offered by YOK, the course design of *Introduction to Linguistics I* at Trakya University is arranged in the following orders:

(1) Phonetics: The study of sound system of English;

(2) Phonology: The study of patterns of the basic sounds in English;

(3) Morphology: The study of the word structures in English;

(4) Syntax: The study of words combining to form sentences and the study of sentence structures in English.

The course design of *Introduction to Linguistics II* based on the theoretical and practical issues is arranged in the following orders:

(1) Structuralism: The study of the interrelationship between units and rules, which are determined by their place in the system, not by some outside points of reference, such as reality (Beedham, 2005);

(2) Semantics: The study of the meaning of words and the meaning of the way they are combined, which are taken together from the core of meaning, or the starting point from which the whole meaning of a particular utterance is constructed (Kearns, 2000);

(3) Semiotics: The study of not only what is referred as "sign" in everyday speech, but also of anything which stands for something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects (Chandler, 2001);

(4) Pragmatics: The study of language use within context, in other words, pragmatics is the relation between language and its context of use (Hudson, 2000). Since language is a social fact and communication takes place in society, pragmatics mainly focuses on communicative action on its socio-cultural context (Rose & Casper, 2001). Moreover, it deals with the language choice, inferences, language appropriateness, and so on;

(5) Text-linguistics: The study of texts in a scientific perspective; its subject is composed of any meaningful communicative event, which is regarded as a text; it designates any work in language science devoted to text as the primary object of inquiry (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981);

(6) Discourse analysis: The study of discourse types by examining the stretches of language in their full textual, social and psychological context and providing insights into the problems and processes of language use and language learning (Cook, 1990).

The main aim of designing linguistic courses in the mentioned order is to enable prospective teachers to get theoretical perspectives in the field of linguistics and find a way to intervene modifications in educational realm, so as to enhance the proficiency of language learning and teaching.

2. Method

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of the study was to investigate the attitudes of prospective teachers towards linguistic courses regarding their experiences and expectations about the courses. The research questions of the study are:

(1) What do the prospective teachers at ELT Department think about the linguistic courses?

(2) How do they connect theoretical linguistics to applied linguistics?

(3) Do they find linguistic courses beneficial for teaching profession?

2.2 Sample

The research study was conducted on the students attending the ELT Department at Trakya University in Turkey. Fifty-five undergraduate students attending the ELT Department at Trakya University participated in the survey. The students are the fourth year students. The aim of conducting the research on the fourth year students is that, they all completed linguistic courses.

2.3 Instruments

In the survey, a Likert type attitudes scale designed by the researcher was used. Twenty-two items with 5 options, which are "Strongly agree", "Agree", "Undecided", "Disagree", "Strongly disagree", were initially included into the scale. In consequence of reliability analysis, item 1 was excluded from the scale. Some of the items used in the scale were worded in positive manner, while some are in negative manner. The individual responses in positive manner were assigned numbers 5-1 from "strongly agree" through "strongly disagree". The ones in negative manner were assigned in numbers 1-5 from "Strongly agree" through "Strongly disagree". Of the positive statements about theoretical linguistics, the items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14, suggested the beneficial aspects of the linguistic theories regarding language teaching and learning processes. The statements about linguistic terminology, the items 6 and 7, investigated the students' attitudes towards the benefits of learning the linguistic terms while dealing with the texts and the articles on teaching profession. The statements examining the effectiveness of linguistic studies on language skills, the item 13, searched for if the students evaluate linguistic studies as a cooperation of theory and practice for the acquisition of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. On the other hand, of the negative statements about linguistic theories, the items 16, 17, 18 and 20, dealt with the obstructions of the theories. The statements about the disadvantages of linguistics and linguistic terms for teaching profession, the items 15 and 21, investigated whether the students think linguistics as resourceful for teaching profession or not. In the statement about linguistic course, the item 19, the students were questioned about the difficulty of the course.

The reliability and validity of the scale was determined, so as to evaluate if the responses were affirmed in a self-assured way. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of the scale was found out to be 0.85.

2.4 Data analysis

Carrying out in-depth statistical evaluation of data was not aimed in the study. As a substitute, the percentages of the responses given to the items in the scale were explored in order to determine the attitudes of the students attending linguistic courses. For data analysis, the statistical program, SPSS 11.0, was used (see Table 1).

Table 1   Structural validity and reliability of the scale

Items	Alpha	Factor
(1) Linguistic theories, in a holistic way, are guiding in language teaching process;	0.8452	0.567
(2) Through linguistic theories, I can easily perceive the characteristics of the target language I learn;	0.8483	0.587
(3) Linguistic theories are the passageways for applied linguistics;	0.8433	0.596
(4) Linguistic theories are beneficial in linguistic applications;	0.8540	0.475
(5) Linguistics is the base of language teaching issues;	0.8574	0.554
(6) Linguistic courses are beneficial for terminology enrichment;	0.8505	0.521
(7) I can easily understand the articles written in the field of language after the linguistic courses;	0.8476	0.679
(8) Structuralism can be used as a source in language teaching;	0.8743	0.665
(9) Semiotics is required in language teaching;	0.8594	0.618
(10) Semantics is useful in language teaching;	0.8552	0.596
(11) Pragmatics is functional in language teaching;	0.8479	0.646
(12) Textlinguistic studies are useful for differentiating text types;	0.8538	0.379
(13) Linguistic studies are helpful for acquiring language skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening skills);	0.8462	0.541
(14) Linguistics is a field in which both theoretical and practical cooperation can be provided for language acquisition and awareness;	0.8454	0.542
(15) Linguistic terms are difficult to learn;	0.8584	0.749
(16) Linguistic theories are not applicable in the field of foreign language learning and teaching;	0.8506	0.640
(17) Linguistic theories are abstract, so I cannot use them for the analysis of target language;	0.8555	0.743
(18) The paradigms of linguistic theories are complicated for me to interrelate the theories;	0.8587	0.761
(19) Linguistics is the most difficult course in foreign language teaching departments;	0.8476	0.638
(20) Linguistic theories do not offer practical ways for language acquisition;	0.8508	0.636
(21) Linguistics is not necessary for foreign language teaching profession.	0.8503	0.602

3. Findings

The items, which are worded positively and negatively, were evaluated separately and displayed in Tables 2 and 3 with the percentages so as to avoid from obscurity in the evaluation phase of the responses.

As Table 2 indicates, the students mostly think that, linguistic education is beneficial and useful. The recognized usefulness of linguistics with respect to linguistic applications item 4, learning and teaching target language item 2, teaching profession item 1, terminology enrichment item 6, and gaining language skills item 13 are predominantly the agreed points by the students. In addition, the students were questioned about usefulness of the linguistic studies in the field of language teaching (items 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). The responses for the item 8 about using structuralism as a language teaching procedure reveal that, nearly half of the students find it not useful in language teaching process, which this may signify that the students find structuralism less effective than semiotics, semantics, pragmatics and text-linguistics. On the contrary, they have a strong tendency to approve

pragmatics as the most efficient theory for language teaching environments (item 11). Besides, the responses for the items 7 and 12 demonstrate that, linguistic courses are of assistance for gaining competence for reading texts and differentiating text types. All responses, as a whole, prove that the students find linguistic studies as functional in second language learning and teaching environments.

Table 2   Items worded in positive manner

Items	Strongly agree 5 (%)	Agree 4 (%)	Undecided 3 (%)	Disagree 2 (%)	Strongly disagree 1 (%)
(1) Linguistic theories, in a holistic way, are guiding in language teaching process;	18.2	50.9	25.5	5.5	-
(2) Through linguistic theories, I can easily perceive the characteristics of the target language I learn;	20.0	60.0	14.5	5.5	-
(3) Linguistic theories are the passageways for applied linguistics;	30.9	52.7	12.7	3.6	-
(4) Linguistic theories are beneficial in linguistic applications;	21.8	56.4	21.8	-	-
(5) Linguistics helps me understand the base of language teaching issues;	29.1	45.5	21.8	3.6	-
(6) Linguistic courses are beneficial for terminology enrichment;	20.0	65.5	12.7	1.8	-
(7) I can easily understand the articles written in the field of language after the linguistic courses;	23.6	50.9	21.8	3.6	-
(8) Structuralism can be used as a source in language teaching;	-	25.5	29.1	43.6	1.8
(9) Semiotics is required in language teaching;	5.5	69.1	23.6	1.8	-
(10) Semantics is useful in language teaching;	21.8	70.9	7.3	-	-
(11) Pragmatics is functional in language teaching;	58.2	40.0	1.8	-	-
(12) Text-linguistic studies are useful for differentiating text types;	29.1	61.8	9.1	-	-
(13) Linguistic studies are helpful for acquiring language skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening skills;	18.2	69.1	9.1	3.6	-
(14) Linguistics is a field in which both theoretical and practical cooperation can be provided for language acquisition and awareness.	29.1	50.9	18.2	1.8	-

Table 3   Items worded in negative manner

Items	Strongly agree 1 (%)	Agree 2 (%)	Undecided 3 (%)	Disagree 4 (%)	Strongly disagree 5 (%)
(15) Linguistic terms are difficult to learn;	7.3	24.5	23.6	37.3	7.3
(16) Linguistic theories are not applicable in the field of foreign language learning and teaching;	-	1.8	5.5	66.4	26.4
(17) Linguistic theories are abstract, so I cannot use them for the analysis of target language;	-	1.8	12.7	56.4	29.1
(18) The paradigms of linguistic theories are complicated for me to interrelate the theories;	-	10.9	10.9	60.0	18.2
(19) Linguistics is the most difficult course in foreign language teaching departments;	-	16.4	29.1	41.8	12.7
(20) Linguistic theories do not offer practical ways for language acquisition;	-	-	14.5	56.4	29.1
(21) Linguistics is not necessary for foreign language teaching profession.	-	5.5	17.3	61.8	15.5

In Table 3, the students' responses for the items worded in negative manner are displayed, but the responses reveal that they do not have negative attitudes towards linguistic courses. They find linguistic courses in the curriculum of foreign language teacher training departments as beneficial. In this sense, the students mostly have

positive manners towards linguistic courses. Although they mostly (85.5%) think that linguistic terms learnt in the courses are functional in the field of language teaching (item 6), nearly half of the students (44.6%) find it difficult to deal with the terms—item 15.

4. Results and discussions

The survey results indicate that, the prospective teachers attending the ELT Department at Trakya University have positive attitudes towards linguistic courses in the curriculum. Depending on the results, linguistic courses in foreign language teaching departments of universities can be assumed as beneficial for raising students' awareness in the field of language learning and teaching. As Byrnes (2003) pointed out review of disciplinary knowledge in language learning and teaching points out, throughout the history of language education, essentially two academic disciplines have been in the foreground: linguistics and philosophy. In this sense, linguistics can be regarded as a component of language teaching and learning processes. Grabe, Stroller & Tardy (2000) stated that 4 disciplines: linguistics, psychology, anthropology and education, should be the foundation for teacher preparation, and argued that the demands of teaching necessitate professionals to integrate knowledge in these 4 disciplines. In this sense, linguistics among those disciplines can be employed as an agenda for prospective teachers to understand the nature of their profession.

In addition, it can be recommended that linguistic courses may be available for increasing language awareness. Therefore, by introducing linguistic theories, the application of the theories on written and oral discourse types for linguistic and contextual analysis may be beneficial for defeating firm theoretical difficulties. Thus, students can easily gain awareness about the correlation of theory and practice. Moreover, while dealing with linguistic theories in practice, various text types can be introduced in order to enhance students to comprehend how to produce and analyse different text types. Furthermore, prospective teachers need to be guided to use linguistic terms they learn (for instance, in text analysis process). Thus, they may get the opportunity to acquire linguistic terms which they will deal with in their professional lives. Such modifications, when included into teacher education curricula, can be more meaningful for those who are debating the role of linguistic knowledge in teacher education. In addition, they may obtain data to evaluate the benefits and weak points of linguistics on language teaching and learning while incorporating linguistic knowledge into teaching practice. Thus, linguistic studies can be acknowledged as channels to comprehend language related issues.

5. Conclusion

In the present paper, the fourth year students' attitudes towards linguistic courses in ELT Department at Trakya University were investigated and evaluated. The overall results indicate that the students strongly acknowledge the advantages of linguistic courses in the foreign language learning process. By taking the students' attitudes towards linguistic courses, the study focused on the assistance of linguistic studies in language learning process, the relationship between theory and practice and gaining awareness on linguistic terms. When the results are re-evaluated, it is seen that, for the students in ELT Department, linguistic courses are favourable; linguistic theories are functional for identifying the characteristics of the foreign language, terminology enrichment is provided via linguistic courses; and text production and text analysis can be comprehended consciously and efficiently.

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