Teachers' Knowledge of the Linguistic and Psychological Principles of Language in Teaching English at the Intermediate Level

Abstract

English language teachers' knowledge of "what to teach" forms the core of the present research which aims to probe such knowledge, including that of language as a system, so as to be applied in everyday teaching. As such, this research further aims to validate the following hypotheses:

- Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not familiar with the psychological and linguistic principles of language?
- Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not familiar with the pedagogical implications of the linguistic and psychological principles of language.

To bring about the aims and validate the hypotheses, a questionnaire (See Appendix) has been administered to (52) teachers of English at the intermediate level. Results show that almost all EFL teachers at the level in question are not

familiar with the linguistic and psychological principles of language, and the implications of such principles for teaching English. The research ends with some concluding points and recommendations.

معرفة مدرسي اللغة الإنكليزية في المرحلة المتوسطة

بالمبادئ اللغوية والنفسية للغة

تعد معرفة مدرسي اللغة الإنكليزية بمادة الدرس جوهر البحث الحالي الذي يهدف إلى تقصّي هذه المعرفة بما فيها تلك باللغة كنظام بغية تطبيقها في التدريس اليومي للغة. وعليه، يهدف البحث الحالي إلى أثبات صحة الفرضيات التالية:

– لا يمتلك مدرسو اللغة الإنكليزية في المرحلة المتوسطة المعرفة بالمبادئ اللغوية والنفسية للغة.

– لا يمتلك مدرسو اللغة الإنكليزية في المرحلة المتوسطة المعرفة بالمضامين التعليمية للمبادئ اللغوية والنفسية للغة.

ولتحقيق هدف البحث وإثبات صحة الفرضيات، تم توزيع أستبانة (أنظر الملحق) على عينة من (٥٢) مدرسا و مدرسة للغة الإنكليزية في المرحلة المتوسطة. تظهر نتائج البحث بأنّ كل أفراد العينة تقريبا يفتقرون إلى المعرفة بوجود نوعين من المبادئ الخاصة باللغة، و كذلك بالمضامين التعليمية للمبادئ موضوع البحث. ينتهي البحث ببعض الأستنتاجات ومجموعة من التوصيات.

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I. Introduction:

Academic requirements, side by side with other requirements, do not leave the doors of teaching widely open all the time. This is so because teaching profession at large, and that of foreign languages (henceforth FLs) in particular, demand the availability of a plethora of properties, of various kinds, in those intending to take over the profession. According to Morrison and McIntyre (1984: 63), the professional component of teacher education courses includes both the theoretical study of education and preparation for the practical work as teachers. In other words, teachers of FLs, as educated persons, are supposed to have some understanding of themselves, of learners, and of the foreign culture as well as their own. It is through good training and duly derived education that teachers can acquire such understanding. Yet, as Lado (1964: 59) states, noticeable variations exist among language teachers with regard to their qualifications. Such variations cover a wide range of academic and educational issues, namely teachers' management of the various linguistic skills, academic background, classroom management, effective impartment of the teaching material, etc.

Concerning **the problem** of the research, many teachers of English as an FL lack knowledge about what they teach, i.e. the content of the language they are teaching, and what can be derived from such knowledge. They are further not familiar with the implications that such knowledge provides for teaching. Put it differently, a noticeable number of teachers just have mere knowledge of grammatical and pronunciation rules and vocabulary, and in such a way that makes them helpless to develop themselves in the first place, and to teach efficiently. Such defects and shortcomings usually have negative repercussions on the quality of teaching and on learners' hoped-for achievement.

As for the **aims**, the current research aims at surveying English language teachers' knowledge of the psychological and linguistic principles of language. It further aims at pinpointing the extent of teachers' knowledge of the pedagogical implications that can be derived from these principles.

The current research **hypothesizes** that:

1. Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not familiar with the psychological and linguistic principles of language.

2. Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not familiar with the pedagogical implications of the linguistic and psychological principles of language.

The current research is expected to be of some **value** to teachers of English at all educational levels since it will highlight the crucial role of the knowledge that they are supposed to have of the various psychological and linguistic aspects of language and the implications to be derived from such knowledge. It is also expected to be of benefit to educational authorities as they will identify the area of deficiency in teachers' education and will duly incorporate certain linguistic and psychological topics of much relevance into the training courses which are regularly run all over the country.

Finally, this research is **limited to** two sets of principles that usually form the premise for teachers' better understanding of the language they teach, namely the psychological and linguistic principles of language. The choice of these two sets of principles of language stems from the fact that they subsume pedagogical implications that can contribute to the achievement of the objectives behind teaching an FL, whatever the type of recommended or adopted teaching method or approach is. It is

also limited to a group of Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level.

II. The Importance of Teachers' Knowledge of Language:

According to Scrivener (2005: 10), the job of teaching involves a constant processing of choices available to the teacher at every point in each lesson in terms of doing something, doing something else, or doing nothing at all. A competent teacher is the one who is aware of as many options as possible since such a skill may enable him to generate his own rules and guidelines with regard to what is workable and what is not.

Additionally, Borg (2006: 3) specifies 'the nature of the subject matter itself' as a crucial factor that distinguishes the experience of FL teachers from that of teachers of other subjects, by stating that "FL teaching is the only subject where effective instruction requires the teacher to use a medium the students do not yet understand". Likewise, Karpacz (2003: 112) pinpoints '[a teacher's] knowledge of subject matter' as a point of much importance. According to him, the teacher should understand the central concepts, tools of inquiry and structures of the disciplines he teaches and makes these aspects

of subject meaningful to students. This is so due to the fact that teachers' knowledge about 'language as content" and "language as a system", in terms of linguistics and psychology, forms solid bases for the success of any teaching-learning process.

On his part, Brown (2000: 6) states that "the language teacher needs to know something about this system of communication that we call language". He further poses the following question: Can FL teachers effectively teach a language if they do not know, even in general, something about the relationship between language and cognition, writing systems, nonverbal communication, sociolinguistics and first language acquisition?

Our answer to the question posed by Brown is that, unfortunately, teachers everywhere find in their job as a tool of achievement, i.e. to bring about success on the part of the learners by any means, rather than a tool of development. In other words, FL teachers do not make what is known about language and language development play a role in determining the form and content of their teaching. By so doing, they minimize the chance to let the developments in linguistics and (learning) psychology, and any progress made in both disciplines be reflected in foreign language teaching

(henceforth, FLT). This has been, as Mackey (1965: 139) points out, the most important cause of the lack of progress in FLT through the years.

To sum up, FL teachers' good knowledge about language enables them to be efficient and innovative in their teaching FLs as it provides them with what is required to come out with on-the-spot solutions for the problems that may arise in the classroom. It further enables them to predict and duly overcome the varied problems they may encounter in the teaching experience.

III. Language:

According to Al-Hamash and Younis (1985), (Also see Lado, 1964, Brown, 2000, and Richards and Rodgers, 2001 for relevant information) language has a set of principles that should be reflected through their pedagogical implications in language teaching, and as follows:

A. The Linguistic Principles of Language:

(1) Language is oral in essence:

The precedence of the oral linguistic skills over the written ones is based on the fact that sounds form the essence of language, and letters are used to represent these sounds. As

such, oral skills, i.e. listening and speaking, should be heavily heeded in the initial stages of FLT, followed by the written skills, i.e. reading and writing.

(2) Language is systematic and learnable:

Since every language has its own discoverable grammar, and since the mastery of the sound system and the grammatical system should be the focal point of learning during the early stages of learning, learners, after acquiring the system and duly internalizing it, should be able to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences.

(3) Language is the best means for communication:

Language at large, and spoken language in particular, is said to be the most efficient means for communication. Accordingly, for communication to be effective, learners should be familiar with the symbols that refer to things independent of and outside themselves. They should also be acquainted with the cultural factors that are associated with these symbols.

(4) Language is not static but changeable:

Languages develop almost all the time with changes taking place in their semantic, phonological and grammatical aspects so as to match the changes in learners needs. As such,

teachers' should be aware of such changes and follow them up at all relevant levels.

(5) Language is arbitrary:

It is essential to study each language according to its own logic due to the fact that there is no universal logic that can be applied to all languages. This principle implies the uselessness of reasoning about language, avoidance of the question "Why is this so" as far as language forms are concerned, discarding translation in teaching FLs, and adopting constant practice and intensive work to master the new language.

(6) Language has form and meaning:

The form of a language can be described accurately, while the meaning is often a subjective matter that is often decided by the situation in which language is used. Accordingly, teachers of EFL should attend to both form and meaning in teaching, though to varied degrees, depending on the teaching approach, adopted by teachers.

(7) Languages are systems of contrast:

Languages distinguish different meanings at their lexical, grammatical, and phonological levels, i.e. they are systems of contrasts. As such, minimal pairs (two items that are the same in everything except one point) which form a prominent feature

of structural language teaching, can be used to highlight such contrasts.

(8) Language has usage and use:

It is necessary for Fl teachers to be knowledgeable about language Use, i.e. grammatical rules, and language Usage, the way such rules are realized in normal communicative purposes, since both aspects are complementary to one another and the knowledge of just one of them is of little utility on its own. The implication of this principle is that an FL programme should teach both use and usage, i.e. a balance between the two should be developed in any realistic FL teaching situation.

B. The Psychological Principles of Language:

Psychology plays a crucial role in the process of learning, including that of language. Hence, EFL teachers, in their attempt to bring about effective learning on the part of learners, are supposed to be knowledgeable about the following psychological principles of language:

(1) Language learning is habit formation:

Automatic linguistic habits that result from constant practice assist learners in having more control over the

language they are learning. Accordingly, FL learners are recommended to have constant practice and repetition over a relatively long period of time so as to internalize the patterns of linguistic behaviour rather than the mere memorization of words.

(2) Language comprises both oral and written skills:

Listening, speaking, reading and writing represent the main linguistic skills, and FL learners should be taught how to develop these skills. The primacy of the oral skills, listening and speaking, over the written skills, reading and writing, necessitates initial training of learners to listen before they write or speak due to the recognition precedence and ease to control it in comparison with production.

(3) Transfer by learners' native language:

Learners' native language forms a source of facilitation or interference while learning an FL. The absolute or relative similarity or difference between the native language and the FL result in different degrees of difficulty encountered by teachers in the attempt to impart knowledge of the FL. As such, FL teachers can largely benefit from contrastive studies that highlight similar, partly similar or different aspects in the native and the foreign languages.

(4) Language can better be learned by imitating a model:

An FL teacher is the best model to be imitated by learners. This indicates the importance of teacher's education, efficiency in the language skills, and native-like efficiency in the FL.

(5) Language learning is enjoyable:

To attract learners to the FL classroom environment and make them enjoy the ongoing activities are prerequisites for effective learning. Hence, FL learning should be made as pleasant as possible through the intensive use of songs, colourful pictures, games, acting, interesting stories and narratives in FL teaching programs.

(6) Language is individual and social:

Language is used as a means either for the expression of one's ideas and feelings, or for enabling a group of individuals to get along and interact with each other. This principle implies enabling FL learners to communicate on matters that are meaningful to them, and providing them with the opportunity to work and use the language together in realistic and meaningful situations.

IV. Methodology:

- Population and Sample of the Study:

Teachers of English in male and female intermediate schools for boys and girls in the city of Mosul/ Iraq, formed the population of the current study. Fifty-two teachers (26 males and 26 females), graduates of Colleges of Arts and Education and taught teaching English more than 10 years, were selected to represent the sample of the research.

- Research Instrument:

To investigate teachers' knowledge of the linguistic and psychological principles of language, a test that subsumed some information questions and fourteen multiple-choice ones had been prepared (see the attached Appendix). The test was administered to the sample of teachers during the second term of the academic year 2012-2013.

VI. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results:

To shed light on teachers' knowledge of the linguistic and psychological principles of language and the pedagogical implications of such principles while teaching English as an FL, their responses to the items of the administered test had been realized and the following results were arrived at:

Concerning Q.1 which states: "What are the Two Main Sets of Principles of Language that Every Teacher of English as a FL is Supposed to Know"? No one in the sample of 52 teachers of English who were asked this question could identify the two sets of principles, namely the psychological and/or linguistic ones.

It should be noted that the sample was presented with the part of the questionnaire that subsumed questions 2 and 3 only after giving answers to question no.1 and collecting their responses since the answer to Q.1 could possibly be taken from the contents of questions 2 and 3.

As for Q.2, which was also posed to validate the first hypothesis, asked the sample of English language teachers to classify the fourteen principles of language into either linguistic or psychological categories, the following table shows the percentages of teachers' responses to this question:

Table (1): Percentages of Teachers' Correct Responses in terms of Classifying Language Principles into either Linguistic or Psychological

SN	Principles	Percentage of Correct Answers
	Psychological	

1	Language learning is a habit formation process.	**58%**
2	Language learning is the acquisition of a set of skills.	**36%**
3	The learning of an FL involves some interference exerted by the native language.	**54%**
4	Language learning is accomplished through exposing the learner to a model.	**52%**
5	Language use is basically enjoyable.	**84%**
6	Language use is both an individual and a social process.	**44%**
	Linguistic	
1	Language is basically oral.	**70%**
2	Language is systematic and learnable.	**76%**
3	Language is a means of communication.	**54%**
4	Languages change.	**58%**
5	Language is essentially arbitrary.	**30%**
6	Language has form and meaning.	**88%**
7	Language is a system of contrasts.	**62%**
8	It is necessary to distinguish between language usage and language use.	**78%**

It should be noted that the percentages in the preceding table show that teachers, when presented with the principles and asked to assign them to either linguistic or psychological sources, could, to some extent, manage what was required from them. But teachers' assigning of the linguistic principles is quite distinct from that of the psychological principles. It can be noticed that most percentages concerning the linguistic principles go well beyond the mid degree 50% except the principle "Language is essentially arbitrary". From the researchers' viewpoint, teachers' failure to assign this principle

to its linguistic source is due to their ignorance of what the word "arbitrary" means.

Added to that, on comparing between the percentages for the linguistic principles and those for the psychological ones, there is anoticeable difference in favour of the former. Again the researchers think that teachers' failure to assign the principles to their psychological source is due to the fact that many teachers, constituting the sample of the study, are graduates of the Colleges of Arts and they do not study courses in Methods of Teaching during their studying at the colleges in question. They are more familiar with the linguistic principles of language as they study the subject "Linguistics" during the last two studying years at the college.

On the contrary, teachers graduates of the Colleges of Education have courses in both "Linguistics" and "Methods of Teaching"; a point that has contributed to the differences between the assigning of the principles to their linguistic and psychological sources. Accordingly, and in the light of teachers' answers to Qs 1 and 2, the first hypothesis which states that Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not familiar with the psychological and linguistic principles of language, is fully accepted in terms of Q.1 but it is partially accepted in terms of Q.2.

Concerning Q.3 which required the sample of teachers of English to state the implications that the linguistic and psychological principles of language have for FL teaching, the whole sample of teachers failed to state any of the implications required.

Regarding Q.4 which was also posed to validate hypothesis no.2 by asking the sample of teachers to choose the right pedagogical implication, from among four options, (a, b, c, or d) given for the linguistic and/or psychological principle of language, Table (2) below shows the percentages of teachers' correct answers to this question.

Table (2): The Percentages of Teachers' Knowledge of the Pedagogical implication of Both Linguistic and Psychological Principles of Language

SN	Principles	Percentage of Correct Answers
Psychological		
1	Language learning is a habit formation process.	**48%**
2	Language learning is the acquisition of a set of skills.	**84%**
3	The learning of an FL involves some interference exerted by the native language.	**76%**
4	Language learning is accomplished through exposing the learner to a model.	**76%**
5	Language use is basically enjoyable.	**44%**
6	Language use is both an individual and a social process.	**88%**
Linguistic		
1	Language is basically oral.	**82%**

2	Language is systematic and learnable.	**62%**
3	Language is a means of communication.	**44%**
4	Languages change.	**62%**
5	Language is essentially arbitrary.	**66%**
6	Language has form and meaning.	**42%**
7	Language is a system of contrasts.	**84%**
8	It is necessary to distinguish between language usage and language use.	**66%**

It is evident from table (2) that in spite of the existence of some variation between the percentages of teachers' responses concerning the choice of the right pedagogical implication from among four options, i.e. implications, given for each linguistic or psychological principle, the percentages listed in Table (2) denote teachers' ability, to an acceptable extent, to choose the right pedagogical implication for each psychological or linguistic principles when opted to choose from among a number of options. For instance, with regard to the six psychological principles, the percentages of teachers responses range from high on 4 principles (88%, 84%, 76%, and 76% for the principles 6, 2, 3, and 4) to low on 2 principles (48% and 44% for the principles 1 and 5) as listed in Table 2 (The part concerning the Psychological principles). Also, the percentages of teachers' responses concerning the linguistic principles show high percentages (84% and 82% for principles no. 7 and 1), moderate percentages (66 % for principles no. 5 and 8 and 62% for principles no. 2 and 4) and

low percentages (44% and (42% for principles no.3 and 6) as listed in Table 2 (The part concerning the Linguistic Principles). As such the second hypothesis which states that Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not familiar with the pedagogical implications of the linguistic and psychological principles of language is accepted in terms of Q.3, but it is rejected as far as Q.4 is concerned.

Finally, it is worth noting that the sample of teachers was a total failure on the two information questions, namely Q.1 (Asking for the identification of the types of Language Principles) and Q.3 (asking for the pedagogical implication(s) of any linguistic or psychological principle of language). But Teachers convincing percentages of responses concerning Qs.2 and 4 may be due to the fact that they can choose or guess rightly when given options and asked to select the right one. It is also possible that presenting items and posing questions about them have made the sample of teachers retrieve their linguistic knowledge on one hand, and make utmost benefit from the content of every question which may lead to the right guessing or option.

VII. Conclusion:

Results indicate that Iraqi teachers of English at the intermediate level are not aware of the two sets of language principles, namely linguistic and psychological. Teachers also showed total ignorance when presented with the two sets of principles and asked to identify the pedagogical implication(s) of each principle. When presented with the principles and asked first to assign them to either linguistic or psychological sources, and then to choose the right pedagogical implication from among four options, teachers' could manage answers to these questions to an acceptable extent. Accordingly, the researchers recommended the following:

1. Since the shortage in the number of teachers of English necessitates the recruitment of those graduates of Colleges of Arts, the syllabus of these colleges should not be limited to subjects on theoretical linguistics, but rather include subjects on methods of teaching EFL and educational psychology.
2. Although the current methods of teaching are EFL mostly communicative in nature, this does not deny the importance of teachers' familiarity with and knowledge of the psychological aspects of the teaching-learning process due to the positive role of such aspects in motivating both

teachers and learners and bringing about the set objectives within less time and with less effort. Hence, educational authorities are required to run in-service training courses that enhance teachers' knowledge of language as a discipline and its relevant aspects side by side with familiarity with the developing methods of teaching.

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APPENDIX

TEST

Dear Teacher of English:

The researchers are investigating your awareness of two sets of principles of Language which can be of much help to you in teaching English as a Foreign Language. Would you please state your frank and sincere answers to what you are going to be asked about in the following pages.

There is no need to mention your name. Answers will be used for research purposes only.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Dr. Hussein Ali Ahmed **Miss. Wasan A. Rasheed**

College of Arts **College of Basic Education**

Q1. <u>What are the Two Main Sets of Principles of Language that</u>

<u>Every Teacher of English as an FL is supposed to Know</u>?

1. …… principles.

2. …… principles.

Q2. <u>Please state whether the following are linguistic or psychological</u>

<u>principles of language</u> ?

Please tick in the square opposite to each principle:

SN	Principles	Type of Principle	
		Linguistic	Psychological
1.	Language use is both an individual and a social process.		
2.	Language is a system of contrasts.		
3.	Language is essentially arbitrary.		
4.	Language learning is a habit formation process.		
5.	Language is basically oral.		
6.	Language has form and meaning.		
7.	Language learning is the acquisition of a set of skills.		
8.	The learning of an FL involves some interference exerted by the native language.		

9.	Language is systematic and learnable.		
10.	Language learning is accomplished through exposing the learner to a model.		
11.	Languages change.		
12.	Language is a means of communication.		
13.	It is necessary to distinguish between language usage and language use.		
14.	Language use is basically enjoyable.		

3. <u>Would you please state the pedagogical implications of the principles of language stated in the table of Q.2?</u>

NOTE: By pedagogical implication we mean what a teacher of English is supposed to do when s/he knows the principles of language?

Q4. <u>For each of the (14) psychological and linguistic principles of language, we have stated (4) pedagogical implications listed as a., b., c., and d.. Would you please encircle the letter of the pedagogical implication derived from the principle in question</u>?

1. Language is basically oral implies a teacher should teach first

a. reading then listening.
b. speaking then writing.
c. reading then writing
d. listening then speaking.

2. Language learning is enjoyable implies a teacher should

a. use a lot of reading and writing tasks.
b. make the learning task a fear task.

c. use a lot of interesting stories and narratives.
d. not use any competition or games.

3. **The learning of an L2 involves interference by the pupils' L1 implies that**
a. everything in the two languages are the same.
b. everything in the two languages are totally different.
c. there are things which are: similar, different and partially similar.
d. that a teacher should heed the similar aspects a lot.

4. **Language learning is accomplished through exposing the learner to a model implies that**
a. the teacher is the best model to be imitated by the pupils.
b. the textbook is the best model to be followed by the pupils.
c. other pupils are the best model to be imitated by the pupils.
d. None of the preceding options.

5. **Language use is both an individual and a social process implies that**
a. the speaker or writer should reflect himself as a distinct person in what he says or writes.
b. learners should be provided with enough opportunity to work and use the language together.
c. learners should be enabled to get with others smoothly and effectively.
d. All the preceding alternatives.

6. **Language learning is the acquisition of some skills implies acquiring**
a. writing only.
b. listening and reading only.
c. speaking only.
d. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

7. **Language learning is habit-formation implies that**
a. no constant practice or repetition is needed.

b. the learning of the FL can be done in a matter of days or months.

c. the learning of the FL involves the mere accumulation of facts.

d. the learning of the FL involves the assimilation of patterns of bahaviour..

8. **Language is systematic and learnable implies that**

a. the mastery of only the sound system should be emphasized in the early stages of learning.

b. the mastery of only the grammatical system should be emphasized in the early stages of learning.

c. the user of the language should be enabled to generate an infinite number of grammatically corrected sentences,

d. all the preceding options.

9. **Language is a means of communication implies that**

a. there are superior languages.

b. a certain language is better suited to express the needs of its speakers than any other language.

c. language symbols are not understood in their cultural contexts.

d. terms are not necessarily presented in meaningful situations.

10. **Languages change implies that**

a. lexical or vocabulary changes should be heeded.

b. grammatical changes should be heeded.

c. phonological changes should be heeded.

d. all the preceding options.

11. **Language is essentially arbitrary implies that**

a. explanations about language are very helpful for learners of different levels.

b. learners can pose the question "why is this so"? concerning language forms.

c. translation should better be avoided.

d. constant practice and intensive work are often the only way to master language.

12. Language has form and meaning implies that

a. the sound system is what matters in foreign language learning.

b. the features of arrangements are what matter in FL learning.

c. the meanings of words are what matter in FL learning.

d. all the preceding options.

13. **Languages are systems of contrasts implies that**

a. language sounds should be taught in contrastive pairs.

b. the distinctive features of such pairs should be concentrated on.

c. grammatical elements should be taught in contrastive pairs.

d. all the preceding options.

14. It is necessary to distinguish between the use of language system (USE) and the use of grammatical rules (USAGE) implies that

a. only use should be taught.

b. only usage should be taught.

c. usage should be taught first then use.

d. use should be taught first then usage.

Syntactic Development