From Linguistic Theory to the Classroom

From Linguistic Theory to the Classroom:

A Practical Guide and Case Study

By

Ryan Spring

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

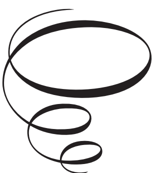

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ix

List of Tables xi

Foreword xiii

Acknowledgements xv

List of Abbreviations xvii

Chapter One 1
Introduction
What can linguistic research offer the SFL classroom? 2
Applying linguistics to other fields 6

Chapter Two 11
Linguistic Theory and Getting a Proper Framework
Why do we need to start with linguistic theory? 11
The case of event conflation 13
Event conflation 14
A typology of event conflation 16
A cognitive typology 17
Criticisms and changes to linguistic theory 19
A cline of framing typology and a new framing type 20
What motivates framing preferences? 23
Moving forward 29

Chapter Three 35
Moving from Theory to SLA
What questions can SLA answer? 35
The case of event conflation and SLA 40
The effects of language type on motion expressions 41
Factors affecting the acquisition of L2 event conflation 44
The effects of language type on change of state expressions 46
Conflicting studies and summative review 50
Moving forward 55

Chapter Four 61
Moving to Foreign Language Teaching
Why are SFL teaching studies needed? 61
The case of phrasal verb instruction and event conflation 66
The current state of phrasal verb instruction 66
How event conflation can inform phrasal verb instruction 69
Creating a list of phrasal verb particles 72
Verifying the effectiveness of the materials 76
Moving forward 83

Chapter Five 89
Adding to the Discussion
The importance of theory driven teaching 89
The case study in context 91
Finding new ways to contribute 95
Looking to other research 97
Starting from a problem 99
Sharing the load through collaborative research 101

Appendix A 103
Materials for Teaching Phrasal Verbs through Event Conflation

Bibliography 113

Index 125

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1: Cline of event conflation.. 23
Figure 4-1: Experimental design reported in Spring (2018)...................... 78
Figure 4-2: Learners' pre- and post-test scores for common PVs 79
Figure 4-3: Learners' pre- and post-test scores for novel PVs 80
Figure 4-4: Learners' overall pre- and post-test scores 80
Figure 4-5: Learners' responses to Likert-scale questions......................... 81

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1: Event conflation types and examples 15
Table 3-1: Summary of L2 framing acquisition studies 54
Table 4-1: List of most common PV particles and their meanings............ 73

FOREWORD

I have been teaching English as both a second and foreign language to Japanese students in America and Japan for many years, and have been doing linguistic research for nearly as long. During this time, I would often align my areas of interest, applying what I had learned in linguistics to the classroom and letting my teaching experiences influence what I researched and studied. However, I have noticed that there are many people who work in one field or the other who never look outside of their own area. Similarly, I have noticed others who work in both fields but keep them separate, perhaps not realizing the potential to combine their endeavours in research and education. Part way through my teaching career, I was also tasked with creating a new introductory course for graduate students that would help them to understand the basics of linguistic research methodology. Throughout my time teaching this course, I noted that many students either (a) have an acute interest in linguistic theory, but express no interest in ever going into education or academia, or (b) want to become foreign language teachers, but have little to no interest in linguistic theory and do not understand how it can be helpful in foreign language teaching. Though not every colleague or student of mine fits one of the descriptions given above, these experiences have made me feel that there is a certain degree of disconnect between linguistics and foreign language teaching. This book aims to bridge that gap by showing how linguistics research can help inform foreign language teaching and how giving proper consideration to both is necessary to achieve the best possible practical applications.

It should be stated here that I recognize that fields such as education, pedagogy, and psychology (amongst many others) are also highly beneficial to foreign language education, and this book is in no way an attempt to belittle them, detract from the contributions of these fields, or suggest that linguistics is better or more important than them. Rather, it merely takes that stance that linguistics can also provide insights into foreign language education. To that end, this book offers advice and suggestions to aspiring foreign language educators and linguistic researchers that want to utilize their knowledge practically in the classroom. It suggests that the natural process of combining linguistics and education is to apply theoretical linguistics to second language acquisition studies and then to apply these results to educational materials and

teaching studies. Chapters 2 through 4 explain each of these stages, giving reasons for each step in each respective chapter. These chapters also contain a corresponding part of an overarching case study, taken from a body of my own work, which involves applying the theory of event conflation to second language acquisition studies, and then to EFL phrasal verb instruction. Different parts of the same case study are used in each respective chapter to help illustrate how such an application can be achieved through the process described in this book. Finally, the last section of each chapter discusses the corresponding part of the case study in the context of the first section and gives guidance to readers on how to create such applications for themselves. The last chapter also offers practical advice for conducting research and educational applications and for coming up with new ideas.

I hope that this book can guide aspiring educators and researchers and help them to bridge the gap in their own work and arrive at new ideas for future endeavours

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DO	Direct object marker
ESL	English as a second language
EFL	English as a foreign language
L1	First language
L2	Second language
IO	Indirect object marker
PFV	Perfective marker
PV	Phrasal verbs (in Chapter 4)
SFL	Second/foreign language
SLA	Second language acquisition (the field)
SM	Subject marker
TM	Topic marker

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of different factors that affect second language learning and acquisition, and because of this, there are a number of fields that can offer insights and be beneficial to teaching a second or foreign language. For example, research in fields such as educational theory, educational psychology, and classroom management has certainly contributed to the improvement of educators' lessons, materials, and curricula (e.g. Celce-Murcia, 2001; Nakata, 2006; Oxford, Holloway, and Horton-Murillo, 1992; amongst many others). However, one field that provides especially useful insights specifically for teachers of second or foreign languages is linguistics.

This book aims to illustrate how linguists, current and aspiring teachers, and researchers can practically apply knowledge of linguistics to the second/foreign language classroom. It argues that linguistic research often cannot be applied directly to the classroom, and instead must be integrated through the following process: (1) consideration of linguistic theory, (2) language acquisition studies, and (3) education studies. Although linguistics is a wide field and includes a number of integrated disciplines (e.g. cognitive linguistics, neurolinguistics, and psycholinguistics), the same process should be used when applying any area of linguistics to second or foreign language teaching. This book offers guidance on how to follow this process, find new topics for research in linguistic theory, applied linguistics or foreign language education, and assess and review one's own work. Furthermore, it provides a working example of the process in the form of a case study that shows how and why the linguistic theory of *event conflation* was applied to second language acquisition studies, and then how this research was further adapted into a practical EFL application: a novel way to teach phrasal verbs to non-native English speakers. This book consists of three chapters that present one step of the process each. The case study is presented segmentally in accordance with the topic of each chapter, helping to provide a clear, overarching example of applying linguistic knowledge to the classroom from start to finish. Moreover, the case study ends in the creation of a practical teaching

resource, which EFL/ESL instructors can readily adopt, employ and modify to suit their needs.

This chapter answers two basic questions that linguistic researchers or language educators might not be able to answer individually if they only consider their own field or expertise: (1) what can linguistic research offer the foreign language classroom, and (2) how can applying linguistics to other fields help to create novel teaching materials? In answering these questions, it provides educators with a brief overview of how second/foreign language instructors can apply linguistic research to the classroom and why they may need it, and helps illustrate to linguistic researchers the importance of moving beyond purely theoretical linguistics to incorporate other fields and why this is necessary before utilizing linguistic knowledge in an educational setting.

What can linguistic research offer the SFL classroom?

Knowledge of linguistics can offer a number of benefits to a second/foreign language (SFL)[1] teacher because it is the foundation of the content that is being taught in such courses. While other fields, such as educational psychology or classroom management, may very well help with several of the practical elements of teaching in general, they cannot provide much insight into the actual content of a SFL course, such as grammar, semantics, or pronunciation. Thus, while these fields contribute to providing better students experiences, they cannot offer many insights to the core subject matter such as the intricacies of grammar rules. For example, if a learner of English wanted to know the difference between the words *that* and *which*, mastery of even the most innovative and effective pedagogical techniques cannot aid them in producing an answer. However, knowledge of syntax or generative grammar would enable a teacher to know that the word *that* is a complementizer[2], whereas *which* is

---

[1] Though there are a number of differences and distinctions between the learning and instruction of foreign and second languages, this book often refers to the teachers, education or classroom of both simultaneously, as it sometimes provides examples that are true of both. This term was thus created for this book and is referred to herein as such. Distinctions between second and foreign languages are made where appropriate in subsequent chapters. See chapters 3 and 4 or works such as Cook (2001) or Krashen (1981) for more details.

[2] *That* is argued to be able to be parsed as either a complementizer or a demonstrative pronoun by works such as Kayne (2009, 2010), but any differences here are set aside, as this example is simply brought up to illustrate a syntactic difference in the words *that* and *which*.

a true relative pronoun. Knowing this distinction would allow an instructor to explain the relative differences to the learner so that they could help impart the practical usages, limitations and functions of the two words, and create illustrative examples such as (1a-d).

(1) a. This is the pen that my mother gave to me.
b. This is the pen which my mother gave to me.
c. *This is the pen with that I wrote the note.
d. This is the pen with which I wrote the note.

While the example given in (1) is rather simplistic, it does illustrate one way that linguistic knowledge can be helpful in the SFL classroom: helping to provide explanations and point out rules and exceptions. Such insights can assist when explaining language usage to learners, making it easier for them to acquire grammar rules or decide which word or phrase to use. Helping SFL students to better grasp the rules and patterns of their target language through such examples and explanation can help give them a basic understanding of how words are used, meaning is reached, and ideas are conveyed. This example also helps to demonstrate an important difference in the way that linguistic and pedagogical theory benefit SFL teaching. Pedagogy and educational research tends to take a big-picture approach to SFL teaching, often focusing on things such as best practices and classroom management. On the other hand, linguistic applications to the SFL classroom are rather small-picture, often focusing on specifics such as content, discovering problematic areas that need improvement, and the details of individual lessons or materials.

Linguistic knowledge is also helpful because of how incredibly vast the field is. Though the example shown in (1) is a rather limited example of a syntactic rule, linguistics includes a number of subtopics from syntax (the ‘rules’ of language) and semantics (how we derive meaning from language) to phonology (how we make the sounds of language). Thus, it is not limited in its scope to simply being able to explain grammar (or syntactical) rules more precisely to learners. Rather, it can help learners to improve in every aspect of language from speaking (pronouncing words more clearly, speaking more accurately, using a wider variety of words and phrases) to reading (understanding the syntax and both basic and epistemic meanings of what is written).

Additionally, knowledge of linguistic theory and its applications enables SFL educators to find problematic areas where learners need specialized instruction. This, in turn, can guide them in creating more effective curricula, classes and coursework. For instance, an educator may choose to focus on a particularly difficult aspect of the target language if

the learners are at an appropriate level, such as in the case of epistemic modal verb meanings in English. Though modal verbs have standard meanings (e.g. *should* = better to do, *may* = permission), most of them also contain extended meanings, known as epistemic meanings, related to the degree to which the speaker believes or is asserting his or her claim (Tyler, 2008). According to this idea, the strength of the claim in (2), that he will come, gets weaker from (2a) to (2d). Tyler (2008) noted that the epistemic meanings of modal verbs are generally very difficult for non-native speakers of English to understand, but that it is nonetheless, an essential concept for ESL and EFL learners, and needs to be addressed in the classroom, specifically with more advanced learners.

(2) a. He will be coming later.
b. He should be coming later.
c. He may be coming later.
d. He could be coming later.

While the example above is a concept that is difficult for most English learners, there are many cases when certain linguistic patterns or grammar points are only problematic for particular sets of learners. Cross-linguistic knowledge of the differences between the target language and the learner's first language (L1) can help educators to pinpoint specific issues that certain groups of learners will face and provides guidance as to how to focus their instructional efforts more efficiently. For example, the relative clause is known to be especially difficult for learners when the typological word order or heading of their L1 and L2 do not match (e.g. Flynn 1983; 1987). For instance, in English, which typologically has SVO word order, the relative clause is placed after the noun that it modifies, as in (3a) and (3b). This is also true for German, which typologically also has SVO word order[3], as exemplified in (3c) and (3d). However, this differs for Japanese, which has a typological word order of SOV, as shown in (3e) and (3f). Because of this typological, syntactic difference, it is more difficult for L1 Japanese speakers to process the English relative clause than it is for L1 German speakers. Specifically, L1 Japanese learners of English have particular difficulty with relative clauses in which the subject of the ordinate clauses is modified by a subordinate clause in which the subject is the object, as in (3b), and ones where the object is modified by a

[3] Though the main verb comes at the end of the sentence in some cases in German, generally the order is SVO in main clauses and is thus typically considered to be an SVO language, and it follows typical SVO language patterns with regards to relative clause placement (e.g. Greenberg, 1963; Tsunoda 2009)

subordinate clause in which the object is the subject, as in (3g). This linguistic difference in relative clause placement makes it difficult for many beginning L1 Japanese learners of English to discern whether it was *I* or *the man* in (3b) who did the kicking, and whether it was *the man* or *the sandwich* that tasted good in (3g). However, because the relative clause comes after the noun that it modifies in both German and English, L1 German learners of English do not have the same problem understanding relative clauses such as (3b) and (3g) as L1 Japanese speakers. Thus, if a teacher is teaching English to L1 German learners, they would probably not need to make much effort, if any, helping them to understand relative clauses, whereas if they were teaching Japanese L1 learners, they might have to spend significantly more time with the issue, specifically with relative clauses such as those exemplified by (3b) and (3g).

(3) a. He is the man who I talked to.
b. The man, who I accidentally kicked, is a good dancer.
c. Er ist der Mann, mit dem ich gesprochen habe.
he is the man with who I spoke did
'He is the man with whom I spoke'
d. Der Mann, mit dem ich gesprochen habe, ist mein Kollege.
the man with who I spoke did is my colleague
'The man with whom I spoke is my colleague.'
e. Kare-ha watashi to hanashita hito da.
he TM I with spoke person is
'He is the person with whom I spoke.'
f. Issho ni hanashita hito ga omoshirokatta.
together IO spoke person SM funny.was
'The person I spoke with was funny.'
g. The man ate the sandwich that tasted good.

While there is debate in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as to the impact of *explicit instruction* (i.e. form-focused instruction of formal aspects of language such as grammar) versus *implicit instruction* (i.e. communicative-focused instruction which focuses on learner input), most studies do still recognize that the teacher plays a significant role in the SLF classroom (e.g. Littlewood 1998; Nunan 1999; Tu and Tally 2016). While both approaches, and the varying degrees in between, have their benefits and shortcomings, SFL instructors are still vital to student learning outcomes regardless of which approach is taken because it is, after all, the instructor who sets learning outcomes, devises curricula, creates lesson plans, imparts content and helps learners when they have problems. Since these areas are greatly informed by linguistic research and its applications, educators can therefore utilize these advances to aid

students in acquiring their target language(s) more effectively and efficiently, regardless of whether they lean more towards explicit or implicit instruction.

Finally, linguistic theory also helps to ensure that SFL teaching materials and lessons are grounded in a proper framework. This means that materials created from linguistic theory through the process outlined in this book will be based on other well-established research and thus more likely to be accurate and beneficial to learners. For example, if an instructor wanted to create a textbook for beginning learners of German, what vocabulary should be included or excluded? Native speakers of German might have an idea of some basic words that might be helpful, but how can we determine what words should be included? What are the most common words used in German? What order do German speakers usually acquire words in? How similar is the L1 of the learners to German, and which words will need to be studied, and which words can be guessed based on previous knowledge? Linguistic theory and applied linguistics studies help to answer these questions and can improve the quality of such materials by guiding the content, lesson structure and surrounding explanations. Thus, simply being a native speaker of a language is not enough to know how to create proper teaching materials, nor is sheer knowledge of the target language. In order to be successful in the SFL classroom, careful consideration of a number of factors, many of which are informed by linguistics, is crucial. However, knowledge of linguistic theory alone is also not enough to be successful in the SFL classroom. Theory always needs to be applied and tested, and this is no different when utilizing linguistic knowledge in SFL teaching, as outlined in the next section.

Applying linguistics to other fields

Most of the examples given in the previous section are taken from theoretical linguistics (i.e. syntax and typology). Though they may seem practical to theoretical linguistic researchers, the benefits may not be as clear to SFL instructors with no background in formal linguistics because they illustrate very specific cases that are not necessarily helpful to all SFL instructors or in a holistic sense. However, the field of linguistics, though already vast, continues to broaden its scope through integration with a number of other fields such as neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology and sociology. Such integrated research has provided a number of new insights into the subtleties of language acquisition and the various factors that influence it. These advances shed light on what and

why specific aspects of language are difficult for learners and how to improve SFL education. Accordingly, studies that combine linguistics with other fields have become increasingly important because the findings are broader and lead to more tangible ideas for practical teaching application, helping to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and the classroom.

Multi-disciplinary studies, such as psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics and social linguistics are by nature broader in content and context than single-discipline studies, such as generative grammar, and can thus provide more expansive insights into how language is used and learned. This in turn creates new opportunities both for classroom application and continued research. For example, through neuroimaging, neurolinguistics has shown that an L1 and L2 are processed differently in the brain of late bilinguals (e.g. Liu and Cao 2016). Such insights could lead to a number of new studies regarding exactly how, and in what ways, they are processed differently. As much in the field of neurolinguistics is still unknown, this could lead to new research projects, which in turn may prove beneficial to SLA and SFL teaching. For example, additional neurolinguistics studies could reveal that certain linguistic elements are more mentally taxing for L2 learners. SFL educators would then know that more time should be spent practicing or teaching these elements, or new ways of teaching them might be developed based on the results of these studies to help L2 learners obtain more native-like mental processing abilities. Therefore, even if a SFL educator or aspiring researcher is not interested in generative grammar or semantic structure or does not see how these fields can be applied to SFL teaching, there are still plenty of opportunities for them to utilize linguistic research to inform their teaching by looking to integrated research fields.

Combining linguistics with fields that are directly related to learning and teaching also allows researchers to verify their findings in new contexts. For example it has been suggested in the field of cognitive linguistics that speakers of certain languages focus less on the manner of motion (i.e. how an object moves, rather than where it is moving to) than others (Talmy 1985; 1991). For example, Japanese native speakers tend not to focus on or linguistically encode the manner of motion nearly as much as English native speakers (see Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis). Therefore, SLA researchers hypothesized that L1 Japanese learners might have trouble creating motion expressions in L2 English as they would not be used to describing the manner of motion as often, or in the same ways as English native speakers. A number of studies have since verified this notion (see Chapter 3 for a detailed analysis), and their findings not only

suggested that motion events were particularly troublesome for L1 Japanese EFL learners, but also helped to explain why (due to a difference in L1 associated focus), which in turn gave SFL teachers of those languages awareness of how to address and alleviate the problem. The outcomes of this research then resulted in SFL lessons and teaching materials that have helped make phrasal verbs easier for learners to acquire (see Chapter 4 for details).

While combining linguistics with other scientific fields can be valuable, as illustrated above, the most recognizably useful applications for bringing linguistic research to the classroom are those that relate directly to language learning and acquisition. For example, the field of SLA, which examines how second languages are acquired, provides insights into the natural acquisition order of linguistic elements such as grammar and pronunciation, the influence of the learners' L1, and what factors are most and least influential in successful L2 acquisition. Studies in this area help bring theory closer to practical classroom application by offering instructors clues as to what aspects of the L2 need to be taught more explicitly, what teaching techniques might aide students the most, and how to structure classes more efficiently. However, SLA studies do not generally confirm the best practices for teaching, nor do they necessarily provide much guidance regarding classroom management or always give proper consideration to educational theory. For these reasons, SLA studies often must then be applied to SFL teaching studies so that the insights gleaned from the field can be confirmed, put into practice, tested, and shared with other educators.

While it may not be obvious to linguistic researchers why various applications of theory are necessary, a certain amount of applied study and testing is always required to validate the practicality of any theory, and this is especially true for linguistics and SFL teaching. Some linguists may assume that simply finding difficult points for learners and then giving them detailed linguistic explanations is itself a successful application. However, as previously suggested, SFL teaching is a complex practice, with many influential factors. Thus, even if a linguist were aware of the differences between *that* and *which*, as exemplified in (1) in the previous section, a number of considerations are still necessary before teaching it to students. Do these differences cause enough of a problem to learners to justify teaching it? Are these differences difficult for all learners or just some? What are the best ways to impart this knowledge to learners? Can they learn this intrinsically through clear examples, or is explanation required? Theoretical linguistic research alone cannot answer these questions, but applied studies in SLA and SFL teaching can. Thus, though

linguistic theory can be the cornerstone for a wide variety of SFL teaching techniques and practices, it is only the starting point. This book argues that the natural progression in research from linguistic theory to the classroom is as follows:

Linguistic Theory → SLA Studies → SFL Teaching Studies

The following three chapters show why each field is important, what insights they can provide, how each field informs and drives the next, and how to move forward from each. It does this through detailed explanation and an overarching case study that exemplifies the process from start to finish, helping to put it into context for aspiring SFL education researchers who also have an interest in linguistics or who want to utilize linguistic knowledge in their teaching.

CHAPTER TWO

LINGUISTIC THEORY AND GETTING A PROPER FRAMEWORK

In using linguistic research to develop educational materials, lessons, or to otherwise guide SFL education, the first place to start is by getting a proper framework. In simpler terms, this means finding a linguistic theory on which to base the practical aspects of the educational tools that one is trying to develop. However, it should be noted that this includes not only looking at the recent advances in the theory or research, but also tracing studies back to their sources. For example, if one wishes to develop lessons for ESL education based on generative grammar, this would entail not only looking at recent advances in generative grammar, but also looking at and understanding the early works of Chomsky (1957; 1965), which are the source of generative grammar.

While the importance of this first step may seem obvious to linguistic researchers, it may not be as evident to SFL educators and practitioners. In fact, some SFL instructors may not see the merit in theoretical linguistic studies at all. This chapter aims to answer the question of why starting with linguistic theory and getting a proper framework is both important and helpful, while giving a practical example in the form of a case study of the cognitive linguistic theory of event conflation.

Why do we need to start with linguistic theory?

The previous chapter covers reasons why and examples of how various linguistic research can be beneficial to the SFL classroom, but this section focuses on why linguistic theory is important when attempting to apply research to education. If one is only interested in applied linguistic research, as many SFL educators are, why then, would they need to investigate the source linguistic theory on which such applied studies are based? In other words, why is the framework (i.e.

knowledge of the source theory) important? While the initial urge of some may be to only read the most recent studies or those of greatest interest to the researcher or educator, as they are perhaps closest to the goal of practical classroom application, it is also important to understand the source linguistic theory behind it for a number of reasons.

First, the linguistic theory will serve as the base of the ongoing research or educational practices that one will engage in. If one does not understand the base theory itself, they are at risk of creating educational tools, studies, or other work that are not theoretically sound, and can therefore crumble under criticism or closer inspection. Not knowing about or fully understanding the original theory will leave one unable to defend their claims or work, or even worse, with materials or lessons that are unfounded and/or incorrect. Thus, in utilizing any application based on any sort of linguistic theory, it is important to know the arguments for (and against) the source theories as well as any modifications or amendments to the theories themselves. For example, suppose one wants to create a list of phrasal verbs for students to learn. If one is making their list based off of a limited understanding of what constitutes a phrasal verb, or if the definition of what constitutes a phrasal verb has changed in recent times, the resulting list may wind up containing words that are not phrasal verbs, which will confuse learners or give them a misunderstanding of what phrasal verbs are or how they function.

Secondly, linguistic knowledge surrounding the source linguistic theory is generally also required to be able to apply it properly. For example, if one wants to objectively evaluate the speaking ability of students in a class, studies such as Lambert and Kormos (2014) and Skehan (2009) suggest that the fluency, complexity and accuracy of learner speech are the most important elements on which to objectively judge the speech of second language learners. However, to make such evaluations, one must be able to discern what a clause is, as most measures of accuracy call for measurements of the ratio of correct clauses to total number of clauses, and many measures of complexity call for measurements such as the number of clauses per utterance. Thus, without adequate linguistic knowledge, it would be impossible to complete such an endeavor. Much in the same way that a lack of knowledge about the criticisms or definitions of a particular linguistic theory can lead to the development of flawed research or educational materials, inadequate study of the source theory and surrounding