

Educational Linguistics: An Emerging Field of Study

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Abstract:

Educational linguistics is a relatively new linguistics sub-discipline concerning the full range of questions of the relation between language and education. It is considered as a problem- and practice-based field whose research questions, theoretical structures, and contributions are focused on issues and concerns in education. This paper attempts to give an overview of the richness, diversity and interdisciplinary topics involved in the field of educational linguistics. Also, this work importantly endeavours to shed light on the interface between educational linguistics and applied linguistics, and how both subfields overlap in their implications and implementations. Equally important, this study highlights the importance of the educational linguistics in language classrooms. So, this paper showcases and opens new avenues for the sub-discipline “Educational Linguistics” and draw educationalists attention to the interpretation and implementation of such a topic.

Key Terms: language, education, educational linguistics: EL, applied linguistics: AL, teaching, learning.

Introduction

Language is recognized as an essential ingredient of the educational process, particularly in classroom situations and society at large; thus, educational linguistics (EL) mainly concentrates on relating linguistics and its subfields (e.g. sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics) to relevant teaching and learning. That is, it takes the practice of language education as a starting point and to draw from pertinent disciplines the needed principles to guide this practice.

As an articulated field of study, EL is relatively new, as its foundation only dates back to more than 40 years. It was first named, defined and described by Bernard Spolsky in the 1970s and this field continued to be established in the 21st century. What is probably obvious to someone who has never heard of ‘educational linguistics’ as a discipline is that it can be situated somewhere at the intersection of educational and linguistic concerns.

So, what exactly is educational linguistics (EL)? To explore the notion of EL, we will first take a brief look at possible definitions, history, and developments besides to its relationship to applied linguistics (AL). This leads us to the second point, i.e. the scope of EL and its main role. Finally, there would be a discussion of the usually raised question; why education needs linguistic theory? The paper, then, ends up with a short conclusion.

What is Meant by Educational Linguistics?

Spolsky (1991) (as cited in Davies, 2007, p.90) states that:

EL is a term modeled on educational psychology and educational sociology. It describes the commingling of an academic discipline (linguistics) with a practical academic profession (education). While it maintains the higher status for the academic field through using it as the head of the noun clause, it rejects the notion that linguistics is just waiting to be applied, as a hammer is waiting for a nail to drive it in.

EL is also defined in Johnson and Johnson (1999, p.114) as:

Educational linguistics is a relatively new linguistics sub-discipline concerning the full range of questions of the relation between language and education. Language is recognized as an essential ingredient of the education process in the classroom and society at large. Thus, educationalists' explicit knowledge about specific aspects of language such as first and second language acquisition, structure, historical development, and usage is advantageous

in teaching, from early literacy skills to language planning in multilingual communities.

Moreover, Hult (2008) cited in Brato, Götz, Brand, and Dose (2015, p. 1) emphasized that EL is “an area of study that integrates the research tools of linguistics and other related disciplines of the social sciences in order to investigate holistically the broad range of issues related to language and education”.

At first sight, these definitions seem to hold true for applied linguistics. However, researchers suggest that educational linguistics is to be separated from AL. In other words, the use of the term asserts the need for a careful consideration to the educational side, producing a responsible new field. Its task is to define the set of knowledge from the varied branches of the scientific study of language that may be relevant to formal or informal education. Davies (2007, p. 91) demonstrated that Educational linguistics, accordingly, appears to limit both the source (anything linguistic) and the target (various branches of language education), and he also suggested that the term educational linguistics is best seen as a reduced version of applied linguistics.

The History and Development of Educational Linguistics

Hult (2008, p.15) clarified that Educational linguistics is an area of study that integrates the research tools of linguistics and other related disciplines of the social sciences in order to investigate a broad range of issues related to language and education. As an area of study, educational linguistics is young, it was first named in the early 1970s in the work of Bernard Spolsky and then his students like Hult and Stubbs started to write in this field.

In addition, Hult (2008, p. 15) pointed out that, "The history of educational linguistics is inextricably linked to applied linguistics, with which it continues to have a symbiotic relationship. At the same time, educational linguistics has developed a unique niche in its directed focus on language and education."

Spolsky elaborated his previous conception of EL over the years in so far and EL's core task is viewed as “providing the instruments for designing

language policy and for implementing language education management” (Spolsky, 2008, p. 3). EL is continually expanding as an independent area of study all over the globe, which is also indicated by the growing number of publications and university programs in this field. Yet, EL is still in its infancy in some educationally developed countries, one of which is Europe.

Educational Linguistics vs. Applied Linguistics

Both applied linguistics and educational linguistics are almost the same but they are actually different. By having knowledge about them, one can differentiate and make a relationship between them. Firstly, the definitions of linguistics, applied linguistics, and educational linguistics will be clarified, besides to the relationship, the similarity and the difference between them.

Linguistics is the field of the study concerning the language. In other words, linguistics is the scientific study of the language; therefore, the objects of the study will be anything related to the language, such as sound system, sentence structure, meaning, and the other language components. Khafidhoh (2015: 33) demonstrates that applied linguistics is the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue. AL is the study of language and linguistics in relation to practical problems, such as lexicography, translation, speech pathology, etc. In other words, AL manipulates information from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and information theory as well as from linguistics in order to develop its own theoretical models of language and language use, and then uses this information and theory in practical areas such as syllabus design, speech therapy, language planning, stylistics, etc.

Educational linguistics is concerned with the study of language in teaching and learning, as it has interests in the nature of the linguistic system and its role in learning. From previous definitions, one may say that educational linguistics is the application of linguistics to solve the problems in education. Similarly, educational linguistics is the use of linguistics to solve practical problems in education.

The relationship between applied linguistics and educational linguistics, similarities and differences

From the definitions of applied linguistics and educational linguistics above, one may underline that the relationship between applied linguistics and educational linguistics lies in the fact that applied linguistics is wider than the educational linguistics. Khafidhoh (2015, p. 34) emphasizes that “AL is the precursor or the umbrella of the EL”.

Furthermore, when looking at the similarity between applied linguistics and educational linguistics, it could be noticed that this kind of similarity may lie in the fact that both AL and EL concern with linguistics in relation to practical problems or real-life issues. However, EL is narrower because it only deals with the study of language in relation to teaching and learning, whereas AL may include other things besides teaching and learning matters.

Thus, the inquiry that may be raised here is to what extent EL is different from AL. In this regard, some researchers suggest that educational linguistics is to be separated from applied linguistics. Particularly, not all interests in applied linguistics are thus necessarily tied to educational issues, which is why Spolsky defined a new field that could be considered a subfield within the larger discipline of applied linguistics. Khafidhoh (2015, p. 35) commented on that and added that the issues of EL ranging from topics such as, ‘vernacular dialect use at school’ to ‘second language acquisition’ and ‘teacher training in linguistics’.

In a nutshell, the emerged notion of EL is exclusively concerned with the teaching of foreign languages. Spolsky (2008) put it in its wider sense as “It was the very lack of a core in applied linguistics that led me to propose educational linguistics. On the analogy of educational psychology, I hoped it would be possible to define a field relevant to education but based on linguistics” (p.2). However, the focus of AL is on trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world, whether they are learners, teachers, supervisors, academics, lawyer, and service provider. This may also be related to test takers, policy developers, dictionary makers, translators, or a whole range of business clients (Davies, 2007).

The Scope of Educational Linguistics

The following are some explanations of the scope of educational linguistics proposed by some experts.

Spolsky (1974) stated that educational linguistics is a discipline whose primary task would be to offer information relevant to the formulation of language education policy and to its implementation. He affirmed that “EL should be a problem-oriented discipline, focusing on the needs of the practice and drawing from available theories and principles of many relevant fields including many of the subfields of linguistics” (cited in Khafidhoh 2015, p. 36).

Hornberger (2001) showed that educational linguistics specializes itself on issues in linguistic and cultural diversity and approaches to language learning and teaching that embraces local, national, and international interests. Then, he also said that educational linguistics include second language acquisition, language choice, maintenance and shift, language and ethnicity, descriptive analysis of speech acts and discourse, educational implications of linguistic diversity, language planning, bilingual education, spoken interaction in a professional setting, and illiteracy. Furthermore, he concludes that this field will begin to work with teachers and it will look at how language works in an education environment, besides to how people acquire the language of the disciplines and other things in education.

The Role of Educational Linguistics

In 1972, Bernard Spolsky proposed the title “educational linguistics” for a discipline whose primary task would be “to offer information relevant to the formulation of language education policy and to its implementation”. (cited in Hornberger, 2001, p. 5)

Uccelli and Snow (2008, p. 628) discussed the scope of EL and identified the following domains:

- Using language in classrooms,
- Literacy development,
- Language learning,

- Planning language use in educational settings,
- Assessing language knowledge.

Clearly, the role of educational linguistics in each of these domains is somewhat different. Uccelli and Snow (2008, p. 629) explained that in the first three domains, the primary customer for linguistic insight is the classroom teacher. These domains, as underlined by the authors, would benefit from different linguistically educational resources. These, according to the two authors may include:

Benefit from knowing how his/her [teacher's] own language use facilities or interferes with student learning, from understanding the linguistic challenges inherent in texts and classroom discourse, from valuing (while also decreasing) the linguistic variability displayed by student language users, from understanding how to shape classroom discourse to promote active engagement, critical thinking, and rapid learning, and from specific techniques to promote language and literacy" (269).

Moreover, according to Uccelli & Snow (2008, p. 629), certain fundamental questions are raised while discussing the scope of EL:

1. What should we be teaching our students about language to prepare them for academic success, for professional success, for their broader intellectual challenges in adult life?
2. What do teachers need to know about language in order to be effective in promoting the desired linguistic outcomes with the full range of students in their classes?
3. Once we have identified the desired linguistic outcomes of education and the required teacher knowledge, how do we go about fostering them?

Uccelli and Snow (2008) pointed out that EL lies at the intersection of research on education and research on applied linguistics. They underscored that while AL is the branch of linguistics that uses linguistic theory to address

real-world problems, EL is the branch of Applied Linguistics that addresses real-world problems in education.

The largest subfield within educational linguistics has always been the study of second language acquisition and second language teaching. However, educational linguistics is much broader in scope than just second/foreign language teaching. In fact, Uccelli & Snow (2008, p. 640) argued that

EL should encompass all academic learning mediated by language in one form or another. Moreover, educational linguistics needs, on the one hand, to narrow its focus to pay particular attention to the most pressing real-world educational problems, and on the other hand to expand its focus beyond language teaching/learning to an understanding of how language mediates all educational encounters.

Furthermore, in studying the role of language in all learning and teaching, it is extremely helpful to remember the continuum proposed by Bailey, Burkett, and Freeman (cited in Spolsky 2008, p. 43):

From learning situations in which the language used is transparent to all concerned (teacher and students share a language and students control the academic language of the classroom) to situations where language use is opaque (students are still learning the basics of the classroom language, even as learning through that language is expected). Intermediate points on that continuum, where most students and teachers probably find themselves, represent differing degrees of translucency.

Uccelli and Snow (2008) clarified this by saying that students and teachers share a language but not necessarily all the specific linguistic features that characterize disciplinarily, or classroom language use. "Identifying the situations where lack of shared language knowledge interferes with learning, and characterizing helpful approaches to those situations, in the form of pedagogical strategies, curricular adjustments,

student commitments, or reorganization of learning settings, is the common and urgent challenge for educational linguists" (p. 641).

Why Education Needs Linguistics Theory?

Spolsky and Hult (2008, p. 35) stated that there are two main arguments for teaching

KAL (knowledge about language). They are as follows:

1. A deeper understanding of language deserves a place in any liberal curriculum because of its long-term intellectual benefits; if it is important for children to understand their bodies and their social environment, it is at least as important for them to understand the faculty which makes social life possible.
2. KAL improves the language skills of writing, reading, speaking and listening.
3. Language is mostly learned from the experience of usage rather than inherited genetically.
4. Language is fundamental to every subject, not just to those subjects where it is the primary object of study.

Next, Brumfit (2001) (cited in Khafidhoh 2015, p. 34) discussed that the individual contribution that linguists can make to educational work is twofold. First, they can provide technical understanding deriving from linguistic, psycho- or socio-linguistic research to address educational problems, or enable educational practitioners to become more proficient in addressing them themselves. Second, they can contribute by collaborating with colleagues, or by themselves operating both as linguistic and as educational researchers and teachers, understanding the inevitable "messiness" of the classroom and broader educational practice, in which so many agendas are competing for attention in limited space. Khafidhoh (2015) supported this and explained that it is important to teach language since it is the vehicle of the knowledge in general.

Conclusion

This paper endeavoured to emphasize the value of greater clarity about the definition of educational linguistics, its scope, goals, and the fundamental questions with which it should grapple. Education naturally interacts with language in numerous ways. Therefore, educational linguistics is concerned with the study of language in teaching and learning, as it has interests in the nature of the linguistic system and its role in learning. From previous definitions mentioned earlier in this paper, one may say that educational linguistics is the application of linguistics to solve the practical problems in education.

As a consequence, the scope of EL under previous definitions is fairly wide and is continually expanding as an independent area of study all over the globe, which is also indicated by the growing number of publications and university programs in this field. Besides, with its roots in the controversies of applied linguistics, educational linguistics has grown into a thriving field of inquiry focused on language and education; its nature has allowed it to flourish in a wide range of disciplinary climates. While this wide range has resulted in an impressively diverse body of knowledge with great potential to influence educational practice, it has also made it challenging to develop the educational linguistics as a whole. As stated by Spolsky, the father of EL, now is the time for educational linguists to take stock of the field, develop a mutual understanding for each other's' work, and consider how the current body of knowledge can be put to use strategically.

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