

Essential Linguistics

What You Need to Know to Teach Reading, ESL, Spelling, Phonics, and Grammar

David E. Freeman
Yvonne S. Freeman

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2004 by David E. Freeman and Yvonne S. Freeman

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freeman, David E.

Essential linguistics : what you need to know to teach reading, ESL,
spelling, phonics, and grammar / David E. Freeman & Yvonne S. Freeman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-325-00274-6 (alk. paper)

1. Language and languages—Study and teaching. 2. Language acquisition.
3. English language—Grammar. I. Freeman, Yvonne S. II. Title.

P51.F694 2004

418'.007—dc22

2003024626

Editor: Lois Bridges

Production: Vicki Kasabian

Cover design: Catherine Hawkes, Cat & Mouse

Typesetter: TechBooks

Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

08 07 06 05 04 RRD 1 2 3 4 5

*We would like to dedicate this book to
Maya Esmeralda, our first grandchild.
She offers living proof that people can acquire more than
one language and become proficient bilinguals.
Not only is Maya acquiring two languages,
she is also acquiring literacy.
We have enjoyed observing her language development.
The process she is going through helps
confirm the theory we present in this book.*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>ix</i>
1 First Language Acquisition	1
2 Written and Second Language Acquisition	23
3 English Phonology	49
4 Implications from Phonology for Teaching Reading and Teaching a Second Language	74
5 English Orthography	98
6 A Linguistic Perspective on Phonics	130
7 English Morphology	166
8 Implications from Morphology for Teaching Reading and Teaching a Second Language	189
9 English Syntax	216
<i>Afterword</i>	<i>251</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>253</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>259</i>

Acknowledgments

Different groups of people have made this book a reality. The most important contributions came from the many university students who have taken David's linguistics classes over the last sixteen years. Responses, questions, and suggestions from those students led David to develop and teach a linguistics course connecting linguistics to classroom practices. Through student feedback David developed explanations and assignments to help future teachers apply linguistic principles to reading, ESL, spelling, phonics, and grammar. Without the input from students, this book would never have been written.

We also wish to acknowledge the continual support and encouragement of our editor, Lois Bridges. Lois is so responsive to our needs that answers to our queries almost always come in minutes. She is unfailingly enthusiastic, even when we are not sure that what we are writing is worthwhile. In addition, Lois always makes valuable suggestions that shape the final versions of our books. We are privileged to work with such an outstanding and knowledgeable editor.

No book would see the light of day without the efforts of the production team. We were fortunate to work again with Vicki Kasabian and Abby Heim in the Heinemann office in Portsmouth. Not only are Vicki and Abby a pleasure to work with, they always make the perfect choices for the final format of the book. It is through the efforts of these two professionals that our books always receive compliments on their format and general appeal.

Finally, we want to thank our copy editor, Beth Tripp. She did an exceptional job of reading through a dense manuscript and finding many of our errors. In addition, she contributed valuable suggestions that have resulted in a much better book than would otherwise have been produced. It was a pleasure to work with her on this project.

Introduction

Linguistics is a required college course for many students, both undergraduates and graduates. Typically, these students come to the first class session feeling both apprehensive and resentful. They are nervous about having to take the class, and, at the same time, they suspect it will be of no use. No other class, with the possible exception of statistics, triggers these emotions so strongly.

Why do students feel this way? Many students connect linguistics with grammar, which, in turn, triggers thoughts of identifying parts of speech—nouns, verbs, and conjunctions. If these students were not particularly successful at determining whether a word was an adjective or an adverb in the past, they figure that now it will get even harder. They begin the class convinced that they never were very good at grammar and that this class will further expose that weakness.

Other students associate linguistics with activities like diagramming sentences. They are convinced that sentences must be hard to diagram. They aren't sure what a tree diagram is. Or perhaps they have heard from other students that they will need to learn a new writing system called *phonemic transcription*. This system uses unfamiliar symbols to represent sounds. All this can be intimidating. In addition, for students who are studying to be teachers and for those already working in schools, tree diagrams and phonemic transcriptions appear to have little connection to their classrooms. They ask themselves and their instructors questions like “How will this knowledge help me be a better teacher?” and “How will this class give me any practical ideas I can use with my own students?”

We have written this book to help dispel these fears about linguistics. In the chapters that follow, we present the basic concepts of linguistics in everyday language. We focus on aspects of linguistics that have clear classroom connections. We provide examples and suggest activities to help educators apply concepts from linguistics to their own teaching. Our primary goal is to turn key insights from linguistics into what Krashen (1982) calls *comprehensible input*. We hope to provide teachers with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions as they help

their students, both native English speakers and students learning English as an additional language, develop literacy.

Why Study Linguistics?

One very good reason for studying linguistics is that language is what makes us distinctly human. Lederer (1991) puts it in the strongest terms: “The birth of language is the dawn of humanity . . . before we had words, we were not human beings” (p. 3). Pinker (1994) writes that humans have a language instinct. Chomsky (1975) argues that language is innate, that it grows in the human mind the same way hair grows on our heads. Other linguists such as Halliday (1975) would debate whether or not language is innate and attribute a greater role to social forces in shaping language. But most linguists agree that language is uniquely human; it is what distinguishes us from other living creatures.

Human communication is qualitatively different from animal communication. A dog might be able to communicate to its owner (or to another dog) that she is hungry, but she can’t tell her master what she did yesterday or what she hopes to do tomorrow. However, the claim that only humans have language is debatable. It’s a topic students might want to investigate. Do dolphins or apes have language? How is their communication different from communication among humans? Is language what distinguishes humans from other creatures? Linguistics is the scientific study of language, and the study of linguistics gives teachers and students the tools to investigate questions like these.

A second reason for teachers to study linguistics is that the more they know about how language works, the more effectively they can use language to help their students learn. As Halliday (1981) writes, “A child doesn’t need to know any linguistics to use language to learn; but a teacher needs to know some linguistics if he wants to understand how the process takes place—or what is going wrong when it doesn’t” (p. 9). The greater a teacher’s understanding of basic language structures and processes, the easier it is for that teacher to make good decisions on tough topics like phonics, spelling, and grammar. A teacher with an active interest in language will arouse a similar interest in students, who may be surprised to find that *hippopotamus* means “river horse,” that the reason commas and periods go inside quotation marks is that typesetters didn’t want to lose those little pieces of punctuation as they laid out type for printing, and that the rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition was created in a period of history when teachers decided to try to base English grammar rules on Latin rules. The more teachers understand language, the more effectively they can help their students develop their knowledge of language.

A third reason to study linguistics is that language study is interesting. Students are fascinated to discover that sandwiches got their name from the fourth earl of Sandwich, who spent his days (and nights) playing cards. He also loved to eat meat, but he didn't want to get grease on the cards, so he wrapped the meat in bread, and the sandwich was born! Newspaper columns, radio shows, books, and Internet websites feature information about language. Richard Lederer's books on language are best-sellers. Many of his lines (Why do we park in the driveway and drive on the parkway?) make their rounds on the Internet as friends forward emails with lists of interesting language tidbits. However, even though language is a fascinating topic, the only exposure many students get to language study during their elementary and secondary years is worksheets and exercises that bore them to tears and serve little practical purpose in improving their reading or writing. What students need is a new approach, and teachers who study linguistics can awaken students' interest in language and engage them in linguistic investigations.

A fourth reason for studying linguistics is that a well-educated person should know something about language. Unfortunately, it is usually only when students study foreign languages that they begin to learn how their own language works. Language study should be introduced early in school, and the approach to language study should be scientific. This book is designed to help teachers build the knowledge they need to provide a scientific approach to language study for their students.

A final reason to study linguistics is that "the study of language is ultimately the study of the human mind" (Akmajian, Demers, et al. 1979, p. 5). Although linguists are interested in the structure and function of language, their goal in trying to understand how language works is to gain insights into how the human mind works. Even though scientists cannot examine the workings of the mind directly, they can study language, the unique product of human minds. Language reflects the inner workings of the mind. As Chomsky (1975) puts it, "language is a mirror of mind in a deep and significant sense. It is a product of human intelligence, created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness" (p. 4).

Three Aspects of Language Development

Halliday (1984) argues that we learn language, we learn through language, and we learn about language. Teachers armed with linguistics knowledge can help all their students *learn language*. Whether her students are six years old or twenty-six, whether they speak English as the native language or are learning English as an

additional language, a teacher is responsible to help all students develop their language abilities. A first-grade teacher expands his students' language knowledge by representing their experiences in writing during a language experience activity. A middle school language arts teacher helps her students discover the organizational structure of the short stories they read. A high school biology teacher shows her students how to use contextual clues to understand new science vocabulary. Teaching any subject involves teaching the language—the vocabulary and the organizational structures—common to that content area.

The second aspect of language development is *learning through language*. Go into any classroom and what do you hear? The teacher is talking, the students are talking, the room is full of talk. Why is this? It's because one way that humans learn is through oral language. If you look around the classroom, you will also see written language. There are books, lists on the board, student papers on the wall, and words on the computer monitors. Everywhere you look, there is written language. Students constantly learn through language, both oral and written, inside and outside classrooms. And teachers constantly teach their students through language.

Students also *learn about language*. Sometimes they learn that the language they came to school speaking is not valued in the school setting. Sometimes they learn how to make subjects and verbs agree. Or they may learn that when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking. Every day, students learn about language. In classrooms this language study should be scientific. For example, students might work together to discover why many English words end in a silent *e* and then develop a rule for keeping or dropping the *e* before adding a suffix. This approach to language study is most common in classes where the teacher has studied linguistics. Such a teacher has his students engage in linguistic investigations following the same approach that linguists use. A useful resource for teachers who want to involve their students in language study is Goodman and Helper's book, *Valuing Language Study: Inquiry into Language for Elementary and Middle Schools* (2003).

How Do Linguists Study Language?

We have said that linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists study language in the same way that other scientists study their fields. Science always starts with a question. For example, a linguist studying a new language might ask, "What are the meaningful sounds in this language?" or "How do speakers of this language structure sentences?" To investigate a question, a scientist forms a hypothesis and collects data to test the hypothesis. The linguist's goal is to describe the new language.

Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish (1979) explain how a linguist studies language scientifically. Several steps are involved in building a theory to describe a

language. When a linguist attempts to describe a new language, the first step is to break the speech stream up into units. It's not hard for people to listen to another person who speaks their language and write down the words that person utters. The language is perceived as being divided into discrete units. But when one tries to determine the units in a language one doesn't speak or understand, the job of picking out meaningful units is a challenge. When we lived in Lithuania, we wanted to learn a few words of the language. However, as we listened to people speak, we had a very hard time deciding where one word ended and the next one began. We invite you to try this yourself with a language you don't speak. See if you can divide the language up into words. It's not easy because the physical speech stream is continuous. Speakers don't pause between words.

Let's imagine that the linguist has collected some data, and when she looks at her field notes, this is what she finds:

Doesyournewhusbandcookwell

First, the linguist must decide how to divide up the stream into discrete units that occur in a sequential order. She might do this by trying to find repeated sequences. After considerable work, the linguist might hypothesize that in this language, the units are these:

Does your new husband cook well

The second task in describing a language is to figure out the differences among the units of speech. They don't all seem to be alike. This leads to forming a hypothesis about categories of words in the language. For example, in English words may be classified as nouns, verbs, conjunctions, and so on. Each of these labels represents a category. Working with this sentence, the linguist might categorize the units this way:

Does your new husband cook well
AUX DET ADJ N V ADV

She uses AUX for an auxiliary or helping verb and DET for a determiner, such as an article or a possessive pronoun.

The third step in describing a language is to decide how the speech units can be grouped together. For example, in this sentence, *your new husband* might be one group and *does cook well* might be another. The groups of words each play a specific role, so the fourth step would be to determine the function of each group. Here, *your new husband* serves as the subject of the sentence, and "does cook well" is the predicate.

The final step in describing this language would be to find what linguists call *dependencies*. In this sentence, *does* depends on *your new husband*. The subject and verb have to agree in number. If the subject were *your new husbands*, then the auxiliary verb would be *do*, the form used with plural subjects.

Readers shouldn't be worried if they are rusty on their auxiliary verbs, subjects, and predicates. This book doesn't include a test on parts of speech or the parts of a sentence. This example simply illustrates how linguists go about the scientific study of a language. They collect data and form hypotheses about the linguistic units, categories, groupings, functions, and dependencies. They use scientific methods to describe various aspects of a language. Of course, languages are very complex, and no linguist would claim to have described any language completely. Science is always work in progress.

How Do Schools Teach Students About Language?

In most elementary and secondary schools, language study is not approached from a scientific perspective. Linguists work to describe language so that they can study it. However, historically, grammar teachers have prescribed, not described. They have laid down the rules for students to learn and to follow. Teachers have told their classes that subjects and verbs must agree, and they have given students worksheets to practice this skill. Many students have learned that a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing, and they have underlined nouns in a set of sentences. Teachers of grammar, from the earliest days, have been prescriptive, not descriptive.

We want to encourage teachers to take a descriptive approach to language study because prescriptive approaches to natural phenomena like language simply don't work. The laws of physics ensure that if someone drops a pencil, it will fall to the ground, not fly up into the sky. This will occur no matter what rules about gravity great physicists proclaim. In the same way, prescriptive teachers can tell students not to split infinitives, but that won't inhibit a writer who wants "to boldly go" where no person has gone before. In fact, great writers seldom follow the rules in grammar books. In response to a critic who suggested that he rewrite a sentence to avoid ending it with a preposition, Winston Churchill is reputed to have commented, "This is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put!"

An alternative to the teaching of grammar rules, one a teacher with some linguistic knowledge might choose, would be to involve students in linguistic investigations. For example, students might examine books written by well-known writers to see if they ever end sentences with prepositions. Students could collect examples of such sentences and discuss how each sentence would sound if it were

rewritten so that the preposition came earlier. In the course of this investigation, students would need to learn to distinguish between a preposition (He ran *up* a big hill) and a particle (He ran *up* a big bill). They might even discover that what Churchill's critic objected to was a final particle, not a preposition after all.

When teachers understand basic linguistic concepts, they can make informed decisions about how to teach language to their students. Knowledgeable teachers can teach their students about language using a descriptive approach. They also have the knowledge base to determine how to approach topics like phonics, vocabulary, and spelling. We encourage teachers to explore topics in linguistics with their students. We have organized this book to provide the essential linguistics teachers need to boldly go where many teachers have not gone before.

Organization of This Book

One goal for this book is to provide teachers with the linguistics concepts they need to help their students become more proficient in their use of both oral and written language. A second goal is to suggest ways that teachers can help their students to take a scientific approach to learning about language, to conduct linguistic inquiry. The two goals are related. Students who investigate how language works can apply insights from their study to their own reading, writing, and oral language development.

To help teachers apply what they are learning about linguistics to their classroom practice, we begin this book with a chapter on first language acquisition. In Chapter 1 we consider how researchers from different fields of study have approached the topic of language acquisition. Chapter 2 extends the discussion to the acquisition of second and written languages. We argue that people acquire a second language or written language in the same way that they acquire a first language. The following chapters examine different aspects of language.

Chapter 3 looks at the sound system of English. We explain what phonemes are and describe the English phonological system. With the increased emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, it is important for teachers to develop a thorough understanding of English phonology in order to make informed decisions about the best way to teach reading. For that reason, in Chapter 4 we consider the implications from phonology for teaching reading and teaching a second language.

Chapter 5 traces the history of writing development and describes the system of English orthography. Teachers with a good knowledge of orthography can better decide how to help their students with spelling. Chapter 6 examines phonics and graphophonics. Phonics rules attempt to state the relationships between

phonology and orthography. Graphophonics is the acquired knowledge of these relationships.

Chapter 7 focuses on morphology, the word system of English. We consider how words are structured and how new words are formed. In Chapter 8 we explore the implications from morphology for teaching reading or a second language. In this chapter we discuss vocabulary development and vocabulary teaching. Chapter 9 deals with the structure of sentences. We describe how a linguist develops a theory of syntax. We also consider how syntactic knowledge applies in teaching reading, grammar, or a second language.

Our hope is that readers of this book will keep asking, “How can this knowledge from linguistics inform my teaching?” Teachers are constantly teaching language, teaching through language, and teaching about language. The better they understand English phonology, orthography, morphology, and syntax, the easier they will find it to make good choices about how to structure lessons to enable their students to become proficient language users.