

# Theoretical linguistics in secondary education

Workshop proposal for SLE 2018, Tallinn, Estonia (29 Aug-1 Sept 2018)

Convenors: Alice Corr & Anna Pineda

Research and understanding from the language sciences has traditionally found its way into the secondary education context as a means to promote literary, literacy and communicative skills in students. The natural ‘home’ of linguistics in the secondary context has therefore been within the study of the official language(s) of the country/region, and modern foreign language instruction. As such, the promotion of linguistics in schools tends to be associated with applied, rather than theoretical, approaches and their practitioners.

However, the recent push to introduce theoretical linguistics into the secondary curriculum rejects this instrumental deployment of linguistic understanding in the classroom, promoting instead a more reflexive treatment of how language, and the human mind, works, and how this is reflected in linguistic diversity. For example, the initiative Grammar Oriented toward Competences (GrOC, [www.groc.info](http://www.groc.info)) has put forward a new typology of exercises to replace those typically found in the Catalan secondary classroom; thus students analyse minimal pairs (e.g. Cat. *És professor* (\**intransigent*) ‘(lit.) He is (inflexible) teacher’ vs. *És un professor (intransigent)* ‘He is a(n) (inflexible) teacher’; *quasi infinit* ‘almost infinite’ vs. *\*molt infinit* ‘very infinite’) with the aim of developing their ability to observe, argue, reflect on and understand grammatical structures (Bosque & Gallego 2016).

This workshop will discuss, and seek to clarify, the motivation and evidence for such initiatives aiming to incorporate theoretical linguistics into secondary-level teaching and learning (T&L), and the benefits for students and schools. Key questions that arise are the following:

- What is the purpose of incorporating theoretical linguistics into secondary-level T&L? To shift focus from a prescriptive approach to a descriptive, or even explanatory, approach, whilst nonetheless retaining an overall ‘instrumental’ pedagogy? Or to promote a more reflexive understanding of how language, the human mind, and science works, *instead of* communicative and literacy skills (cf. Chomsky 1984)?
- To what extent are all areas of theoretical linguistics suitable for incorporation into secondary-level T&L? Should some areas be targeted for (initial) roll-out above others? What evidence is there for this? How can these areas of study be adapted for promotion at the school level? Which curricular competences and learning outcomes will be targeted in each case?
- How can comparative linguistics at an introductory level help students understand language variation and reflect on how grammar works?

As is well known amongst language scientists, the study of linguistics could find a home beyond the languages curriculum in subjects (e.g. psychology) with an emphasis on empirical investigation and scientific theory formation. Moreover, given its affinity with disciplines across the humanities, and

social and natural sciences, linguistics is ideally placed to develop transversal skills and cross-curricular learning, a priority in many education systems. Issues to be discussed therefore include:

- How might theoretical linguistics be *incorporated* into cross-curricular approaches, or in other disciplines altogether?
- How might its place in other educational contexts be *promoted* and *justified to a non-specialist audience* (including teachers, students, school management, and parents/guardians), given the resistance to recognising linguistics as a science and the absence, or inaccuracy, of linguistics in the media and public consciousness (as encountered by those involved in previous attempts to introduce linguistics into the curriculum, cf. Denham & Lobeck 2010)?
- How might (theoretical) linguistics link with the study of language at other educational levels (primary, tertiary etc.)?
- What have been the (unanticipated) benefits and challenges of existing initiatives? What has been the feedback? What recommendations and solutions, or areas of further investigation, might be proposed?

Another consideration is the form in which intervention by theoretical linguists should take place. For example, would its introduction be favoured by ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’ approaches? On the one hand, linguistics education in schools has largely been implemented by ‘grassroots’ approaches by individuals in the classroom, or extra-curricular initiatives which provide a link between the classroom and drives on a regional, national or international level (notably, Linguistics Olympiads). On the other hand, it has been argued that policy change is still achieved on the level of the individual, requiring only a few individuals to effect policy change (Hudson 2007: 239). Indeed, the roll-out of GrOC across the Basque Country and other parts of Spain in addition to Catalonia is evidence of the efficacy of individual ventures to effect change beyond their original scope.

We therefore seek proposals which tackle the following questions:

- How might existing and/or future ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches be built on and connected in order to effect systemic and policy change on a wider scale?
- What insight can be borrowed from other types of educational initiative undertaken by higher education institutions which offer tasters of the discipline, disseminate knowledge to wider audiences, or promote student intake? Do exams boards, where these play a role in the education system, have any power to promote a new way of teaching language?
- What will the interaction with educational practitioners be? Given many lack a background in linguistics, how might the issue of teacher training be tackled? How much input will researchers have into modifying/(re-)designing curricula and pedagogical materials?
- Would any major change to T&L have a relevant and proportional impact? Moreover, would these changes offer a more attractive view of language classes among young students, and eventually lead to an increase of interest in linguistics as a scientific discipline?

Crucially, the introduction of theoretical linguistics into the secondary environment will need to be *context-sensitive* (from one country, region or school to another), taking into account attitudes

towards linguistics/language, and the T&L of language-related issues, in a given setting, and how linguistic understanding and reflection is already implemented in curricula. Differences in educational systems and assessment practices will also require consideration: for example, schools enjoy differing levels of autonomy, with varying degrees of adherence to national or regional curricula; methods of assessment may be internal, or conducted via formal qualification or university entrance exams at the regional or national level.

The workshop welcomes proposals for papers on any of the above areas. With a view to bridging theory and practice, case studies from existing initiatives are especially welcomed.

## References

- Bosque, Ignacio & Ángel J. Gallego. 2016. “La aplicación de la gramática en el aula. Recursos didácticos clásicos y modernos para la enseñanza de la gramática”. *Revista de Lingüística Teórica y Aplicada* 54(2): 63-83.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1984. “Noam Chomsky writes to Mrs. Davis about grammar and education”. *English Education* 16(3): 165-166.
- Denham, Kristin & Anne Lobeck (eds.). 2010. *Linguistics at school: Language awareness in primary and secondary education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hudson, Richard. 2007. “How Linguistics Has Influenced Schools in England.” *Language and Linguistic Compass* 1(4), 227–242.