The impact on language teachers of trends in the literature on language teaching and learning: A questionnaire-based study involving teachers of English as an additional language

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Abstract

I report here on specific aspects of a survey of a sample of 93 teachers of English as an additional language from five different countries who completed a questionnaire that included questions relating to objectives specification and the inclusion of coherence, cohesion and genre in their teaching. The data collected suggest that although literature on language teaching and learning appears to have had some impact on the beliefs and practices of these language teachers, that impact has, in general, been a superficial one.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing emphasis in the literature on the teaching and learning of additional languages and on the relevance of research on discourse analysis, including research on coherence, cohesion and genre. There has also been increasing emphasis on the specification of achievement objectives/ expected course outcomes in terms of what learners can be expected to be able to do at particular stages in their learning. In an attempt to determine the extent to which this literature has impacted on the attitudes and practices of teachers, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted. A draft questionnaire was trialled by three language teachers and then adapted in line with their recommendations. The final version of the questionnaire, along with the procedures associated with it, was approved by the appropriate research ethics committee.[1] It was then distributed to 220 full-time and part-time teachers of English as an additional language in both ESL and EFL environments. Of the 220 questionnaires distributed, 93 either fully or partially completed questionnaires were returned (a 42% response rate). Each of the returned questionnaires was allocated a number for convenience in relation to data entry and analysis. Only those aspects of the questionnaire that relate to coherence and cohesion, genre and objectives specification are reported here.

Review of selected literature on the teaching and learning of additional languages

There have been a number of major changes and developments in the teaching of additional languages since the mid-1970s. At the core of many of these changes and developments has been the impact of the challenge to behaviourism and linguistic structuralism that began to gain ground from the late 1950s onward and that, by the 1970s, had led to serious questioning of the structural approach to language syllabus design and the impact on language teaching of audio-lingual habit theory. Within this context, developments in discourse analysis played a major role in directing the attention of language teachers to the importance of supra-sentential considerations. Two major, inter-acting strands of research in the area of discourse analysis that have impacted on the teaching of additional languages are (a) research on semantic relations and their realization and (b) research on genre. These, along with a range of other developments, have led to new ways of thinking about the linguistic content of language courses and, associated with them, to new ways of conceptualizing the

achievement objectives associated with the teaching and learning of additional languages.

The concept of 'communicative competence' which emerged in the 1970s (see, for example, Campbell & Wales (1970); Habermas (1970); Hymes (1971); Jakobovits (1970)), was extended and developed by, among others, Bachman and Palmer (1996), Canale (1983), Canale and Swain (1980) and Oller (1983). In one of its most widely known articulations (Council of Europe, 2001), it includes linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences, the last of which includes 'discourse competence', that is "the ability of a user/learner to arrange sentences in sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language" (p. 123). Fundamental to this are the concepts of coherence and cohesion. A text is *coherent* to the extent that it makes sense to us. A text is *cohesive* to the extent that it includes *cohesive devices*, that is, words, phrases, etc. that function to link its various parts together. Fundamental to both coherence and cohesion are inter-propositional semantic relations (that is, relationships of meaning that link propositions and groups of propositions together) and the ways in which these relationships may be signalled or signposted. As Crombie (1985a, pp. 21 & 5) observes:

> Underlying the theory of semantic relations is the observation that when we communicate with one another through language, we do not do so simply by means of individual words or clauses or even individual sentences. We communicate by means of coherent stretches of interrelated clauses and sentences, the meaning of each of which can be fully understood only in relation to the context (both linguistic and non-linguistic in which it occurs. . .

> Every language has a large number of words and expressions part of whose function is to make explicit the semantic relationships between units in a discourse. These words and expressions act as signals of those relationships between units which are the basis of the realization of active contextual meanings. . . . Words and expressions of this type are semantically important in that they act as signals of discourse value. They are also syntactically important in terms of the types of linkage that they make between propositions.

There is a very considerable literature on semantic relations (see Whaanga, 2006 for an overview) and these relations have been grouped and defined in different ways by different researchers: "There is no general agreement amongst linguists in terms of the specific groupings which would best reflect the significant shared features of the different relations. Indeed, any grouping which is proposed (as in the case of any type of classification) will to a certain extent reflect the individual preoccupation of the taxonomist" (Crombie, 1985b, p. 17). What is important to bear in mind here is not any particular classificatory system but simply the fact that these relations are fundamental to human communication and, therefore, of fundamental importance in the teaching and learning of languages.

Genre is another area of research in the area of discourse analysis that has had an impact of the teaching of additional languages, particularly in relation to the teaching of writing. Some research on genre focuses primarily on text types such as research articles or literature reviews (see, for example, Swales, 1981; 1990; Swales & Najjar, 1987); other research on genre focuses primarily on discourse modes such as

explanation and recount (see, for example, Bruce, 2003). Similarly, some of the textbooks that relate to the teaching of writing focus primarily on text types (see, for example, Swales & Feak, 1994; 2000); others focus primarily on discourse modes (see, for example, Johnson & Crombie, 2010). In the latter case, semantic relations generally play a critical role since, as Bruce (2003, p. 246) observes, certain semantic relations are more typically associated with certain discourse modes (which he refers to as 'cognitive genres') than others.

In the heyday of linguistic structuralism, the achievement objectives associated with courses in additional languages tended to be expressed in terms of 'knowledge of' particular lexical items and structures. More recently, they have often tended to be articulated in terms of 'can do' statements that indicate "in concrete terms . . . what . . . learners [are expected] . . . to be able to do with . . . language" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 43). Some examples of objectives of this type that appear in New Zealand Ministry of Education curriculum documents and include indirect or indirect reference to reference to semantic relations and/ or genre (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2002, pp. 36 & 78) are:

- communicate about likes and dislikes, giving reasons where appropriate;
- *recount* a series of events to inform, persuade or entertain.

A critical aspect of the questionnaire-based survey reported on here was an attempt to determine whether literature on the teaching of additional languages that has appeared since the mid 1970s, particularly literature in the area of semantic relations, genre and the specification of achievement objectives has had any real impact on language teachers.

Data and data analysis
The respondents
Of the 93 questionnaire respondents, 55(59%) were teaching in an ESL context and 38 (41%) in an EFL context. They included teachers of English who were working in Japan (18), Taiwan (23), Syria (4), Australia (12) and New Zealand (36). These teachers had taught English as an additional language for between one and twenty years.

The content of courses at different levels
Survey participants were asked which of a list of types of possible content they would include at different levels (beginner, elementary, intermediate, advanced). The responses are summarized in *Figures 1 - 4* below:
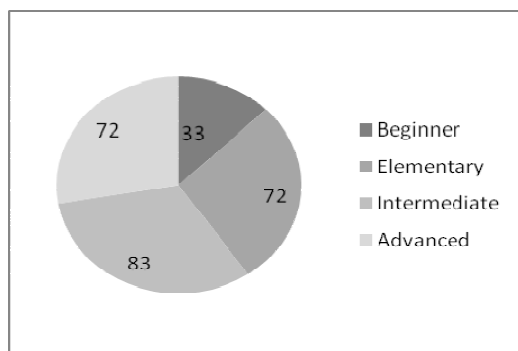
*Figure 1: Number of respondents who would include **vocabulary** at different levels*
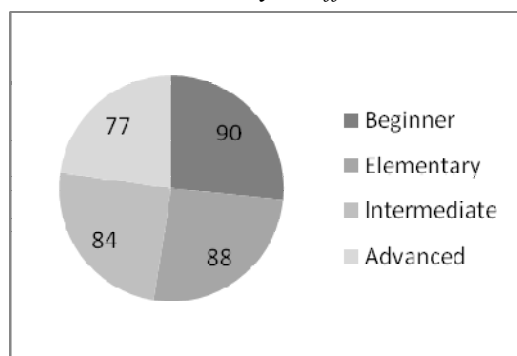
*Figure 2: Number of respondents who would include **language structures** at different levels*
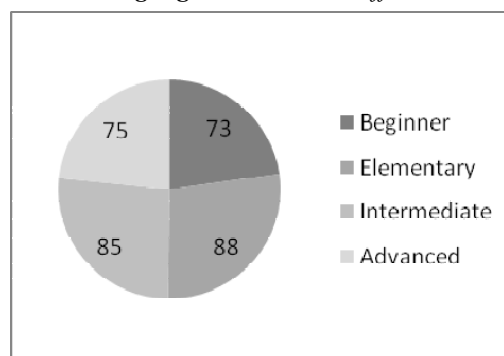
Figure 3: *Number of respondents who would include **cohesive devices** (e.g. because) at different levels*

Figure 4: *Number of respondents who would include types of link between clauses and sentences (e.g. comparison, contrast, example) at different levels*
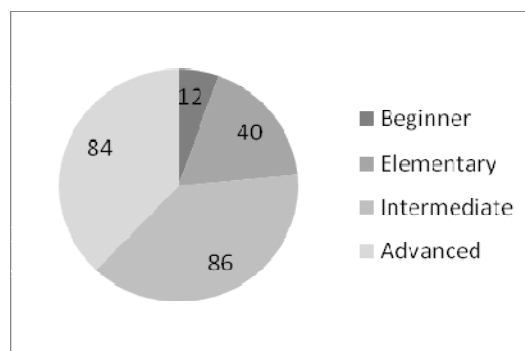

Although there are differences in terms of the number of teachers who indicated that they would introduce each of the areas of content listed in the earlier stages of learning, the number/ percentage who would do so in the later stages (intermediate and advanced) is almost the same in all cases.

When asked whether they would include cohesive devices such as the coordinating conjunction 'because' in their language courses, 33 (35%) indicated that they would do so at beginner level, 72 (77%) at elementary level, 83 (89%) at intermediate level and 72 (77%) at advanced level.

However, when asked whether they would include types of link between clauses and sentences (e.g., comparison, contrast, example), the number of affirmative responses was different in all cases, with as few as 12 (13%) indicating that they would do so at beginner level and 40 (43%) at elementary level. This suggests that respondents may not be fully aware of the link between certain types of cohesive device and coherence and, in particular between certain cohesive devices and the semantic relations that underpin them. In focusing on cohesive devices, they would appear to be indicating a preference for a structure-based rather than meaning-centred approach. Furthermore, the fact that considerably less than half of the respondents indicated that they would introduce links between clauses and sentences at beginner and elementary level suggests that their overall approach at these levels is essentially clause- and sentence-based.

Respondents were then asked when, if at all, they would introduce ellipsis and substitution into their language courses. The responses are summarized in *Figures 5 & 6* below.

Figure 5: *Number of respondents who would include **ellipsis** (e.g. He wandered in, /| picked up a book and /| sat down) at different levels*
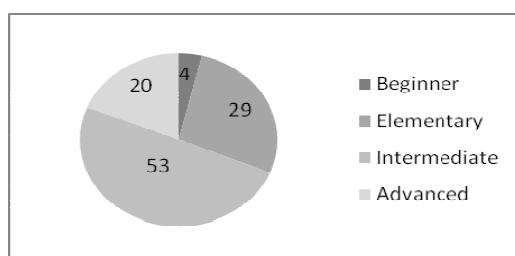
Figure 6: *Number of respondents who would include **substitution** (e.g. She. . . and **so am I**) at different levels*
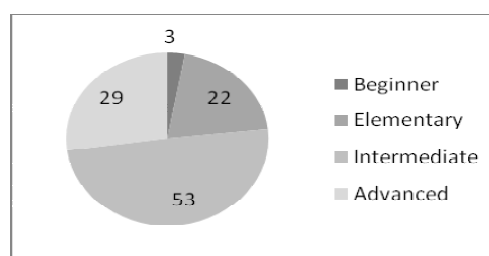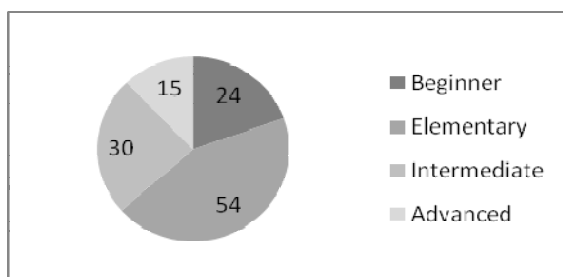
They were then asked which of the following they would introduce at different levels:
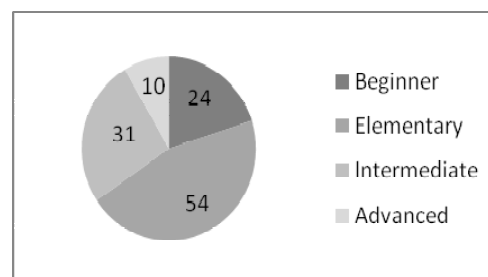
- comparing and contrasting (e.g., *He's . . . and/but she's . . .*);
- temporal sequence (e.g. *He . . . (then) he . . .*);

The responses are summarized in *Figures 7 & 8* below.

*Figure 7: Number of respondents who would include **comparison and contrast** at different levels*

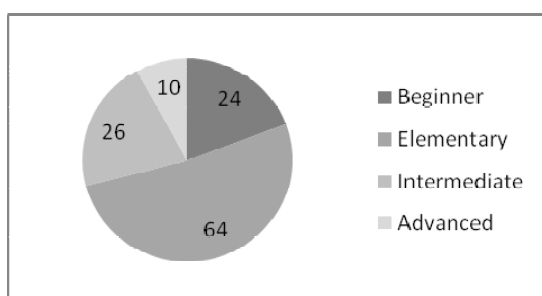*Figure 8: Number of respondents who would include **temporal sequence** at different levels*

The fact that such a small proportion of respondents indicate that they would include ellipsis, substitution, comparison and contrast and temporal sequence at intermediate and advanced levels suggests that they may be unaware of the fact that these may, in all cases, be associated with considerable complexity in terms of possible realizations in particular instances.

Respondents were also asked which of the following they would introduce at different levels:
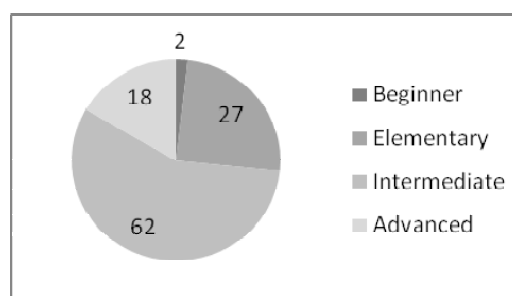
- reasons signalled by 'because';
- reasons signalled by 'because of";
- results signalled by 'so';
- results signalled by 'therefore';
- reasons that are not explicitly signalled (e.g. *He took an umbrella. It was wet.*)

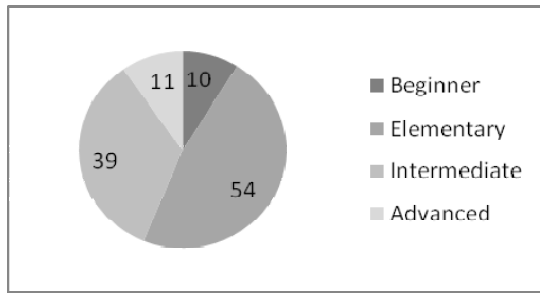Responses are outlined in *Figures 9-13* below.

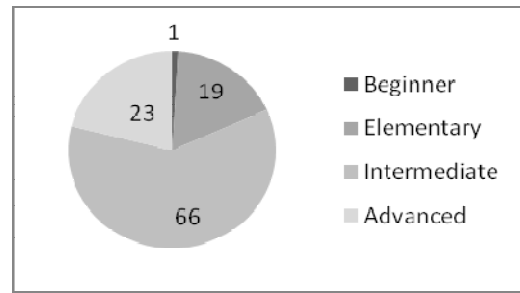*Figure 9: Number of respondents who would include **reasons signalled by 'because'** at different levels*

*Figure 10: Number of respondents who would include **reasons signalled by 'because of'** at different levels*

Figure 11: *Number of respondents who would include* **results signalled by 'so'** *at different levels*

Figure 12: *Number of respondents who would include* **results signalled by 'therefore'** *at different levels*
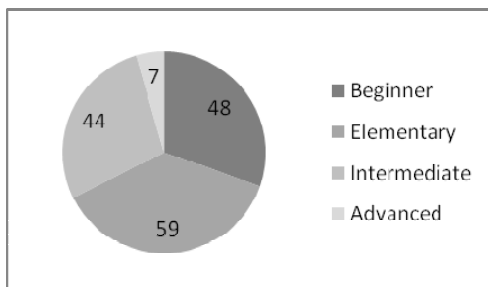

Figure 13: *Number of respondents who would include* **reasons that are not explicitly signalled** *at different levels*
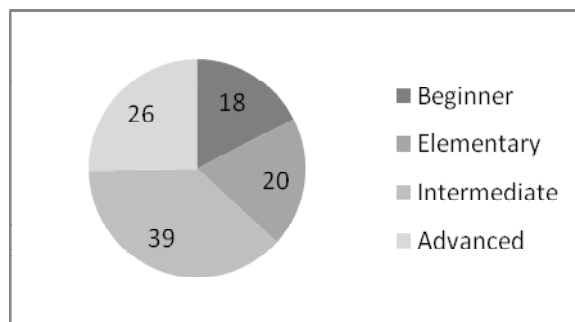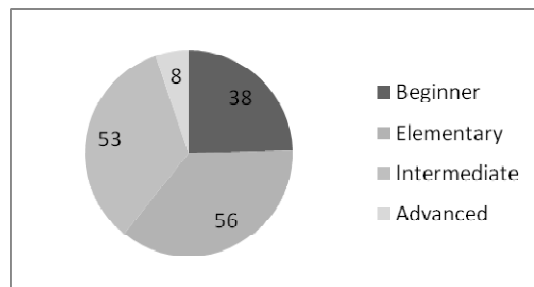

It is interesting to note how few of the respondents would introduce reasons that are not explicitly signalled at each level: 19 (10%) at beginner level; 20 (21.5%) at elementary level; 39 (42%) at intermediate level; and 26 (28%) at advanced level. This, combined with the considerably higher number indicating that they would introduce signals of reason and result suggests that these teachers are much more aware of grammatical signals and of their significance than they are of the semantic relations that underlie and motivate that grammatical signalling.

Participants were also asked which of a range of genres they would introduce at different levels. The responses are indicated in *Figures 14 – 17* below.
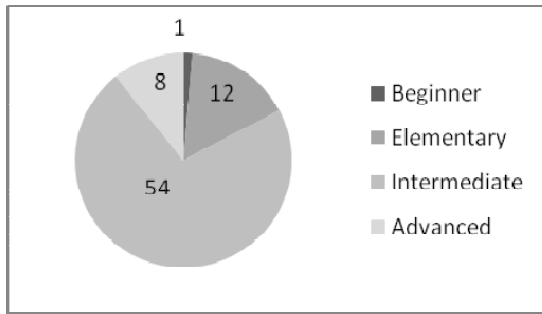
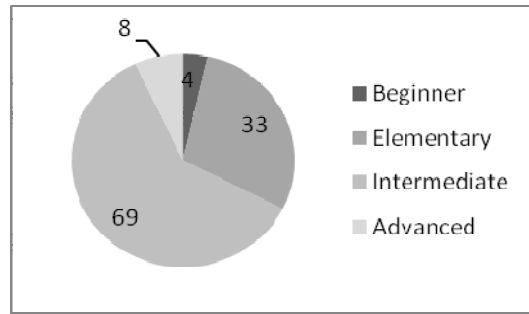**Figure 14**: *Number of respondents who would include* **the recount genre** *at different levels*

Figure 15: *Number of respondents who would include* **the instruction** *at different levels*

*Figure 16: Number of respondents who would include **the argument genre** at different levels*

*Figure 17: Number of respondents who would include **the explanation genre** at different levels*

It is interesting to note that 48 (52%) respondents indicated that they would include the recount genre in their teaching at beginner level. This presupposes the inclusion of the past simple tense, something that is often not introduced in beginner level textbooks in spite of the fact that use of regular past tense constructions need not necessarily present learners with any major difficulty. It is also interesting to note that although, at intermediate level, 69 (74%) respondents would include the explanation genre, 59 respondents (63%) would include the recount genre, 54 (58%) would include that argument genre, and 53 (57%) would include the instruction genre, the percentage who would do so at advanced level is, in no case, higher than 8% in spite of the fact that genre-based research has indicated just how complex the language and structuring of texts associated with each of these genres can be.

Survey participants were also asked whether they would be able to provide a list of the expected *specific outcomes* of each of their English courses (that is, a list of what students can do in English as a result of the course). Three of the participants did not respond to this question and 17 indicated that they could not do so or did not know whether they could do so. Those who indicated that they could (73/ 78%) were asked to provide one specific outcome relating to one course, specifying the year and type of the course. Only 62 attempted to do so. Of the 62 examples provided, only 15 were potentially measurable and linguistically grounded and some of these, as indicated in the comments included in the following Table (in which examples are provided) are problematic in some way.

Table 1: *Examples of course outcomes provided by respondents*

Response types	Examples	Discussion
Responses that specify course outcomes in terms of measurable 'can do' statements that are linguistically grounded (total number = 15)	• Students will be able to ask for directions (Year 2- English conversation & writing) • Recognition of conjunctions showing similarity, contrast and alternative (Year 2 – reading). • Can use the present simple to talk about daily routines (Level 1). • Will be able to accurately select between 'will' and 'going to' for expressing predictions (General English Intermediate). • Students should be able to make polite requests (Elementary General English). • Increase confidence (Year 1 English conversation).	Although 15 examples are listed in this category, several of them are problematic in some respects. Thus, the first example below makes no reference to the meaning/s of past tense that are in focus and the second example below makes reference to a general area of vocabulary (food) but does not indicate whether money/ weight etc. are to be considered. *Master simple past tense forms* (Reading & Writing elementary level) *Hold a basic conversation in English relating to shopping for food* (Year 1- general English).
Responses that lack language indicators and are too general to be measurable (total number = 47)	• Literacy in reading & writing (Year 12 & 13 International English). • Understanding a written text with increased understanding & critical awareness (Upper intermediate –reading & writing). • Students are able to communicate adequately on general topics (Yr 2 – general communicative English). • Write a letter of complaint to a company for dissatisfaction (Intermediate level 4 – English communication). • By the end of this course students should have shown in their writing that they have converted data into oral & written reports (Year 1: EAP). • Students will be able to conduct research on a topic of their choice (related to the subject matter), present a 5 minute report to the class, and write a 500 word summary synthesizing their research (Upper level/ content course).	The last two examples here are indicative of a very common approach among respondents to the specification of course outcomes, one that is superficially more specific than the other examples in this section but provides very little real indication of what is expected in terms of overall structuring, internal organization or linguistic realization. Examples such as these refer, in general terms, to activities that will be included in a course (e.g. giving presentations, writing letters and reports) but lack language indicators.

What the examples of course outcome statements provided by the survey participants suggests is that the majority of them have difficulty in clearly specifying what they expect the outcomes of their courses to be. This suggests that the literature on learning outcomes has had little impact on the majority of these language teachers.

Conclusion

Literature in the area of the teaching of additional languages that has appeared since the 1970s and that has focused on semantic relations, genre and objectives specification appears to have had little impact on the attitudes and reported practices of most of those language teachers involved in the questionnaire-based survey reported here. Although it is not possible to infer from this either (a) that this is true in the case of language teachers in general or (b) that literature on other areas of the teaching and learning of additional languages has had an equally small impact, this study does indicate that these are possibilities worth pursuing. It may be that there is a major disconnect between the teaching of English as an additional language teaching and research on teaching English as an additional language. If this is the case, it seems likely that research on the teaching of additional languages, much of which relates directly to the teaching of English, is having even less impact on the teaching of other languages.

Endnotes

1. The Human Research Ethics Committee of the School of Māori and Pacific Development of the University of Waikato in New Zealand.

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