

LINGUISTIC THEORY AND TESL PRACTICE:
SOME RECENT TRENDS

by

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I would like to dedicate this Master's Report to my husband, Paul, who supported me both intellectually and emotionally throughout my entire program of study at Kansas State University. Although I truly love to research and write about areas of interest in both literature and language studies, there have been times when the pressures of academic life have muddled my mind, making clear thinking and writing impossible. Paul has been better able than anyone else to help me distinguish the essential from the nonessential obligations and, thus, has given me a fresh outlook on my degree work.

On the academic side, my most heartfelt thanks go to Professor Robert Grindell who has spurred my interest in the study of the lovely English language. His guidance has been invaluable to my experience as a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree at Kansas State University.

A functional knowledge of the English language is one of the primary requisites for communicating internationally in 1980. Foreign leaders and dignitaries must know this language to avoid being swept up into misunderstanding and conflict with the United States, Great Britain, and other English-speaking countries. A knowledge of English is also important for foreign nationals, Hispanic Americans and other minority groups entering the U.S. military and the American university system. Perhaps more crucial, and certainly more far-reaching than the language needs of dignitaries, military attachés, and college students are those needs of the many immigrants who come to the U.S. from such countries as Cuba, Vietnam, and Korea and who need to learn the fundamentals of English for simple survival in their new environment. For these people, as well as for other non-native English speakers, methods of teaching English as a second language (TESL) are continually being reviewed and revised as linguists and educators search for the most efficient and effective devices for teaching English to foreign speakers.

The purpose of this report is to look at TESL (also known as ESL) in relation to the major linguistic theories which have affected it from the early 1950's through the present. While there are approaches affecting TESL other than the ones I will

discuss, the following appear from my research to predominate in the past two or three decades.

A logical starting point in an examination of linguistic doctrines underlying TESL is a discussion of the basic differences between structural linguistics and generative-transformational grammar, the two linguistic theories most widely applied to TESL.¹ Perhaps the most useful description of those linguistic philosophies which spawn ESL methods can be accomplished by a thorough comparison and contrast of the two. Because both linguistic schools consist of scientists, it is necessary to describe first their views of science in order to understand their further developments and applications of these to ESL.

The structural linguists originally developed their procedures in an attempt to find an objective method of describing a strange language as it is spoken by native speakers. Their first concentration was primarily anthropological work in learning about the language habits of the American Indians. In the course of their studies, these linguists rejected the traditional prescriptive views of what is "right" and "wrong" in a language for the more scientific method of observing and recording language data which would form hypothetical models they would later test.² Their scientific method is Baconian; they observe a phenomenon, form a hypothesis, devise experiments to test it, revise the hypothesis accordingly, and declare its validity. In their preoccupation with observable data, structuralists break speech down into the analyzable bits of language called phonemes and morphemes which then make up words and sentences. As