

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Linguistics for TESOL: Theory and Practice*, by Hannah Valenzuela (2020).
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A little over four years ago, the director of a language institute in Peru showed a shocking lapse of judgment: he hired me as co-instructor of an existing certification course for prospective teachers of English to speakers of other languages. I was brand new to TESOL, having just completed a certification course myself—in fact, the very course I was hired to lead. I knew much less than I know now, but it was still obvious to me that the program needed an overhaul. The module about the English language itself, based on a manual that was written in house, was deficient. Its take on linguistics was largely confined to syntax, and its take on syntax was largely confined to conjugation of verbs. The approach was a strictly prescriptive one that included words like *never* and *must*, failing to acknowledge the complexity of language as it is actually used. There were few ideas offered about how to incorporate the material into the language learning classroom, nor were there resources to consult so that students of the course could learn on their own. My colleague and I decided to scrap the manual and start over. In the following months and years, we endeavoured to create a program that was thorough in its approach to language awareness, developing teacher knowledge and skills. We also intended to make it practical, providing guidance on how to use the information effectively in helping language learners to become proficient. We offered advice about where to dig into specific topics. And throughout the course we balanced acknowledgement of the rules and patterns of English with respect for the amazing creativity of users of the language.

It was a major effort. What would have aided us then was access to a book tackling linguistics for English language teachers in a way that linked theory and practice. That book didn't exist then, but it seems to now. It is Hannah Valenzuela's aptly titled *Linguistics for TESOL: Theory and practice*. Better late than never.

Valenzuela came to write *Linguistics for TESOL* because, like my colleague and me, she was creating

a course. Valenzuela had long experience teaching English and training teachers of English in her native UK and abroad before eventually landing at the University of Derby, where she is now Senior Lecturer in Education Studies. Around the time we began revising our program in Peru, she undertook the task of writing a module for the TESOL pathway of her school's undergraduate program. Like me, she discovered that there were few volumes about linguistics that were both rigorous and applicable to TESOL training. So, she wrote one herself, as a guide for new teachers and a refresher for experienced ones—which describes me, now. Unlike me, Valenzuela has had her work published. Her book appeared in March, 2020. I am not at all envious.

Valenzuela sensibly decided that she would open the book by defining what she is writing about. Chapter 1 is called 'What is language?'—a straightforward question that the author points out does not have a simple answer. There are several directions from which to approach the subject. We can come at language as a system of words and rules, or as an enabler of thought (or is it the reverse?—does thought enable language?), or as a tool for social interaction, or as the product of the electrical activity of the neuron bundles in our heads. Valenzuela notes that the perspective we adopt has implications for our teaching. For instance, should we concentrate on strict grammar rules and assess mastery of these narrowly and repeatedly until students get them right? Or should we reject explicit attention to structure and instead present learners with interactive tasks—directing them, say, to give each other instructions in English about how to do the breaststroke and then throwing them into a pool to literally sink or swim? In practice, the choice between a focus on forms (attention solely to the structure) versus a focus on meaning (attention solely to the message) is not bipolar, rather they are endpoints on a continuum (Long, 1991). Where we land on that continuum is determined to a great extent by how we think about

the nature of language. (Practically, it may also be determined for us, by the institutions with which we are affiliated. As my colleague in Peru and I pointed out to our certification candidates, many schools have curricula that are tied directly to textbook series, and those series are created more or less explicitly according to theories about what language is and how it is best learned. As a teacher, you either go along or you move along. More rarely, you may be able to advocate for change where you are at.)

Having considered what language is generally, in Chapter 2 Valenzuela addresses what English is specifically. As the title ‘Variation’ suggests, this is also a complicated question. There are lots of flavours of English out there, with different patterns of pronunciation and lexicons and even different grammars: English may have conquered the world, but the people of the world are getting their revenge by taking ownership and forcing it to adapt to their local experiences and goals. Think Singlish, in Singapore, and Nigerian Pidgin, and Multicultural London English, or MLE. As Valenzuela says, how comfortable we teachers are with the existence of these varieties impacts what input we provide in our classes, and also what output we will accept. (And, of course, there is also the matter of what others will accept. For example, *ain’t* as a general-purpose negator is common in world Englishes, featuring in London Cockney, African-American English, and Australian English, among others. But it ain’t considered standard, and its appearance in this sentence has been flagged by my word processing program and tagged ‘Not in Dictionary’ (a very unhelpful designation for English language learners, who likely encounter the word often enough to conclude that it does in fact exist!). Talking about why certain language features are stigmatized, and whether they should be, is a fruitful topic in ESL teacher education, I have discovered.)

These important preliminaries dealt with, Valenzuela devotes the rest of the book to the subsystems of the English language. She works, as she says, from small to big, starting with the simple building blocks of meaningful noises and their associated graphemes, and ending with complex constructions of text, written and spoken.

Chapter 3 is about ‘Phonemes’, the smallest units of sound that make a difference in meaning. Valenzuela here looks at topics such as consonants and vowels and their multiple pronunciations and spellings. She also attends to changes in the sounds that are deployed as you move around the English-speaking world. You don’t have to go far to hear these changes! I am writing this part of the review in my home state of Connecticut in the United

States, and I hit the *r* in *car* every time, but on either side of me are Bostonians or New Yorkers who routinely drop it. Which begs the question: If I were to take a job as an instructor in south Boston, should I teach a rhotic accent? After all, it is the version of English I speak. What is more, that version, sometimes known as General American, is regarded by most of my compatriots as not accented at all. This is laughable—all speech is accented in some way to someone!—but detection of an accent sometimes invites negative judgments, and the perception among many people in the U.S. that my way of speaking is correct frees me from judgment and prejudice. On the other hand, the prestige attached to GA is illegitimate in that it has nothing to do with its innate qualities, rather it is a social construct. And a non-rhotic *r* is what my learners would encounter upon leaving the classroom, or the Zoom session; speaking that way would signal belonging in their immediate geographic community. Further, non-rhoticity is usually perfectly intelligible among English speakers. So, as a teacher, what to do? Valenzuela gently suggests that, when we teachers tie ourselves into knots over such matters, we do so unnecessarily. In most situations, it is best to keep things simple: acknowledge to our students the vast universe of English pronunciation, teach as we talk to target not correctness but consistency, accept pronunciation that is effective in that it is comprehensible—and move on. (Of course, there is also the matter of what students want, as Valenzuela acknowledges. But her overall stance seems sensible.)

Chapter 4 is also about sounds but deals specifically with ‘Pronunciation beyond phonemes’, or suprasegmentals. What happens when individual sound segments are strung together in stretches? There are effects like elision, intrusion, catenation, and the schwa, which, as the old saw goes, is regarded with envy because, unlike us humans, it is never stressed. How much time should be spent in the language classroom on these and other suprasegmentals, like intonation, is a matter of debate. Valenzuela advocates for attention to features that impact intelligibility. Consider this situation, which I presented to students in our certification course: You are the instructor of an English language class, overseeing some activity or other, and one of your students, whose first language happens to be Dutch, says to you ‘Please give me the blue VUN’ (the capitalization here indicates the prominence of the word in their utterance). Because in English prominence signals important information, you focus on the word *vun* and stand there confused because you don’t know

what the heck a *vun* is. The student now repeats their request but shifts the sentence stress: ‘Please give me the BLUE *vun*’. Again, the prominent word strikes you as important, and your immediate understanding is that there is an object of that colour nearby. You look around and notice felt tip pens on a desk close to you. You pick up the blue ‘one’ and hand it to the student. They thank you. Their appropriate use of a suprasegmental feature has allowed you to decode the message despite an error in pronunciation at the segmental level (a common one among Dutch speakers).

In ‘Morphology’, Chapter 5, Valenzuela covers words and their formation. The author describes phenomena like borrowing, compounding, clipping, eponyms, abbreviations, and so on. (As Valenzuela surveys the stock of words in English, she seems to me to be taking a step toward the area of lexis. Curiously, however, while the word *lexis* crops up in a dozen places in the book, it does not appear here, and nowhere is it explained. Similarly, although the term *lexicon* is used a few times in the volume, Valenzuela inadequately defines it as ‘all the words a person knows in a language’ (p. 5). So, while the author does not ignore lexis, her treatment of the topic seems insufficient; this is surprising as it is widely identified as one of the subsystems of language, and certainly an area that teachers need to know about.) At the close of the chapter, we get to key concepts in morphology: units of meaning such as free morphemes, including lexical and functional ones, and bound morphemes, which are derivational or inflectional. Among Valenzuela’s observations is that the set of inflectional morphemes in English is small compared to some languages. As an illustration, consider the cloze sentence _____ *jump*. The pronouns that can be used to complete it are *I*, *You*, both singular and plural, *We*, and *They*. The null morpheme at the end of the verb (which looks like the absence of a morpheme) serves for all of these persons; only third person singular gets something different: *-s*. In Spanish, which I attempted to learn in South America, the equivalent verb has conjugations that make distinctions between participants in the event: *salto*, *saltas*, *salta*, *saltamos*, *saltan*. Little wonder that dropping the pronoun entirely is an option for Spanish speakers whereas for users of English it is not. Word formation, then, may impact sentence structure. In other words, morphology is an aspect of grammar, as Valenzuela rightly underscores.

The other aspect of grammar is syntax, and the rules that govern how words are put together to make utterances are the focus of Chapter 6. (Her point about morphology notwithstanding,

Valenzuela entitles this chapter ‘Grammar’; she is no doubt bowing to popular usage of the term, which equates it with syntax.) An important aspect of syntax is word class, which gets the lion’s share of Valenzuela’s attention. Her handling of the subject resembles my own, so it is perhaps not surprising that I approve of it. The author states, as we said in our Peruvian training course, that notional definitions of parts of speech will get you only so far in understanding how language works. ‘A noun is a person, place, or thing’, we teachers explain. But what about *happiness*? The word is a noun, but it is not a person or a place, and it is a thing only according to the loosest definition of the term, having no physical properties. However, the composition of the word verifies its class: *-ness* is a sure-fire nominalizing suffix. Affixation is not always reliable in itself as a marker of word class, however. For example, I used the word *physical* a couple of sentences ago; it ends with *-al*, a suffix that often flags an adjective, and the word is in fact an adjective there. But look at this sentence: *My annual physical is on Thursday*. Here, *physical* is a noun. How do we know? There are clues in its neighbourhood. The word is in a cluster positioned to the left of the verb; in canonical declarative sentences in English, that is where subjects go. Subjects consist of noun phrases, so there must be a noun or pronoun in there somewhere. Noun phrases have optional slots for determiners and adjectives, in that order and in front of the head. Such an analysis quickly makes clear what the nature of *physical* is, its ending notwithstanding. Valenzuela is correct in highlighting the importance of helping language teachers, and learners too, to bring all of these considerations to bear—notional definitions, word structure, position, functional roles—when they grapple with syntax.

If morphology is mostly to do with the composition of units of meaning, ‘Semantics’, the focus of Chapter 7, is concerned with the encoding of meaning itself. The range of topics treated here is wide: semiotics; conceptual and associative meaning; semantic analysis; collocations and semantic preferences; prosody; a host of semantic relations such as synonymy, hyponymy, and polysemy; and semantic roles. Like Valenzuela, I have discovered that explicit explanations of aspects of semantics can facilitate language learning. For example, how do we make the sentence *John kicked the ball* passive? A typical procedure asks you to take the direct object and make it the subject while the subject becomes the object of a preposition; the constituents then get rotated around a form of the verb that has been modified and expanded to include an auxiliary in

the original tense-aspect, and the presence of one of the constituents in the resulting sentence now becomes optional. What is lost in this mess is the fact of the preservation of the proposition: *John kicked the ball* and *The ball was kicked by John* are two ways of conveying the same message. The underlying meaning remains clear if we refer to semantic roles: John is the agent in both cases, the ball is the instrument. In trying to figure out how English works, language teachers and learners benefit from talking about the stories that sentences tell, and semantic roles give them the terminology to do just that.

Semantics treats meaning as it is encoded in the words that we use. In Chapter 8, 'Pragmatics', Valenzuela looks at meaning in terms of intentions and inferences. 'Would you like a mint?' someone asks me, but what I hear is 'Your breath stinks', and I do not answer the question at all but instead cuss the person out for an insult that has not been openly expressed. The author explores context, presupposition, theories of politeness and positioning, identity, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, accommodation, and more. Because pragmatics is important in intercultural communication, Valenzuela says it deserves classroom time. I agree. For example, my experience of Latino cultures indicates that an acceptable way to order food at a cafe is 'Dame un sándwich'. Translated into English, this is 'Give me a sandwich', which conveys the message but may sound brusque to some audiences. Directness can be misinterpreted as discourtesy in certain contexts. And, in fact, I have occasionally overheard non-Latinos in the United States call Latinos rude as a rule, for this reason and for others that are ridiculously insensitive. However, I wonder who should actually get schooled here. Is it a matter of teaching immigrants in English-dominant countries how to make requests in conventionally polite ways? Or should people whose first language is English learn tolerance for other modes of communicating? My own inclination is to answer yes and have it both ways.

Chapter 9, the last in the book, is 'Discourse' and covers language beyond the sentence. Valenzuela touches on a number of topics that are important in addressing the quality of learners' written and spoken output: cohesive devices like reference and conjunctions; coherence; register and genre; conversational features such as turn-taking and adjacency pairs; and more. The author also astutely observes that discourse patterns play out in the classroom itself and we teachers would do well to pay attention so that we can improve the experience of our learners. For

example, a common form of interaction in learning situations is referred to as Initiation-Response-Feedback, or IRF. In such a three-turn sequence, you as a teacher ask a question with an answer that you already know, you invite a student to reply, and then you indicate whether the reply is correct or not. My colleague and I told the candidates in our certification course that exchanges like this in language learning are detrimental because they limit vital student production by reducing the number of possible participants as well as restricting the length and range of contributions. Far better to ask questions that are open-ended and invite discussion. This challenges students to code their thoughts in English, to express themselves orally, to listen to others, to process—in short, to actually communicate.

You will have noticed in this review how often I have written comments such as 'Valenzuela is correct' and 'I agree with the author'. In my opinion, she has created a fine book. However, I do have some quibbles. Rarely, her explanations lack nuance and come close to being misleading. For example, while acknowledging complications, she suggests that most nouns can be classified as either countable or uncountable. This is the usual line in TESOL. But putting words into buckets can be a dicey affair. According to the rules of English as they are typically taught, *egg* is a countable noun, and as such you would not find it in the singular without a determiner in front of it. And yet I have complained more than once after an overenthusiastic breakfast 'I have egg on my shirt'. When I say that, I am not thinking of a bounded object; my conception is not of a unit but of a substance. *Egg*, then, is a countable noun unless it isn't. Other nouns are like this, too. Perhaps you are afraid to challenge orthodoxy. Categories clarify, you may insist, and telling learners 'it depends' will confuse them. Quite the reverse, in my experience. An explanation of countability based on conceptualization seems to make not less but more sense to people, usually. It reflects how we humans actually think about the world.

But this is an unusual and small misstep. Valenzuela's book is strong in almost every way. You will have already gathered that it is stuffed with information. It is also well-informed: in a perusal of Valenzuela's sources, and in the text itself, you will encounter classic and recent works by philosophers, linguists, psychologists, educators, and other authorities with important things to say about the field. And yet, despite how packed and intelligent the volume is, it is very readable. The author avoids dense stacking of nouns and other features of academic writing, and she includes

personal stories and flashes of humour. The book is therefore light in tone, accessible, even engaging. All of these qualities would make it an effective text for teacher educators as a basis for training, and a good resource for those teachers themselves wanting a comprehensible treatment of key concepts.

There is more. The work is current. Translanguaging, teacher identity, and the impact of technology on the emergence of new genres of writing: these are notable topics in teaching English today, and Valenzuela raises them all. She also points readers toward resources like TED talks and YouTube videos and corpora. She includes many suggestions for classroom activities during teacher training and language learning, with not a clunker in the bunch. And the text is sprinkled with questions that invite readers to reflect on their own present or future practice.

Valenzuela herself supplies criteria for judging her work. Early on, she informs us that her purpose is to explore applied linguistics for TESOL by focusing on three problems: ‘what to teach, how to teach it, and why’ (p. 3). She addresses all three problems successfully. In many ways, *Linguistics for TESOL: Theory and practice* is the book on the topic that I would like to have written. But Valenzuela got there first. Darn.

Reference

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