GENERAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN ACTION

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Abstract:

The paper aims to provide an introduction to language awareness, focusing on defining the concept of language awareness and culture awareness for native and foreign teachers and learners of English, and showing the means which could help raise and develop language awareness in the foreign teachers and learners of English.

Keywords: *awareness, language awareness, culture awareness, grammar awareness, awareness-raising techniques*.

Introduction

In the past years, there has been an increase of interest in language awareness, which is important to consider in language learning contexts since it underlines the importance of focusing on the learners while trying to answer questions like: *What is language? How does it function? What role does it play in people's lives?*, that is **what**, **why** and **how** we learn. My paper, therefore, is concerned with the importance of language awareness in foreign language acquisition, with teacher's understanding of the concept of language awareness, and the study of students' awareness in language learning.

The paper begins with a brief historical background, dealing with the two movements which have recently tried to relate language awareness to educational policies: the Language Awareness Movement in the United Kingdom and the Whole Language Movement in the United States. Then it goes on to discuss what language awareness is, examining old and new definitions and clarifications, without forgetting to underline what are the aims of developing language awareness for foreign teachers and learners of English.

The paper further outlines some means of developing language awareness, considering a new way of looking at grammar instruction, that is, grammar awareness, a very controversial area because it raises the difficult problem of teaching grammar. This part summarizes the differences between language awareness and traditional grammar, focusing on the importance of having grammatical awareness, plus referring to another means of developing language awareness, that is, cultural awareness.

The latter part of the paper details key features of awareness-raising techniques and introduces a few of the language awareness techniques that teachers can use to raise learners' consciousness of the form and function of targeted grammatical items.

One of the main goals of teachers of English as a foreign language is to teach students how to study English for themselves and to train them to become self-aware, without forgetting that, in order to be successful, special efforts and approaches are needed. That is why the present paper has to do with the study of learners' awareness in language learning, ways of developing their self-awareness, and the impact language awareness has upon language learning efficiency.

The conclusion underlines the requirement of developing language awareness in schools so as to foster better understanding and improve the teaching and learning situation.

I. General language awareness

I.1 From language and cultural awareness for native teachers and students of English to language awareness for foreign teachers of English - historical background

As Kumaravadivelu explained in his book "Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching", "educational philosophers all over the world have long emphasized the role of general language awareness in human development. However, it is only recently that concerted efforts have been made in educational circles to relate language awareness directly to educational policies. Two prominent movements that have recently contributed to such efforts in the West are the Language Awareness Movement in the United Kingdom and the Whole Language Movement in the United States" (2003: 156-157).

I.1.1 The British movement

The anxieties about language education of children in Great Britain are traced back to the late 60s and early 70s. These worries led to the establishment of the Bullock Committee in 1972, set up by Margaret Thatcher (then Minister of Education) in response to growing anxiety regarding standards of "literacy" in English schools (Hawkins, 1999: 126). The report was entitled "A Language for Life" and questioned the place of language in education, making a powerful theoretical case for language across the curriculum. The NCLE (National Congress on Languages in Education) arose out of concerned expressed in the Bullock Report, and it sought to "co-ordinate the interests and needs of all language areas with the language awareness framework" (Donmall, 1984, apud Ellis, 2012: 3). These language areas included mother tongue teaching of English and other foreign languages.

Following the generally agreed-upon definition of language awareness - that is, *"a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life"* (Donmall, 1985, apud Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 157), educationists and language teachers in Britain attempted to develop pedagogic principles and practices with a view to promoting language awareness among school children.

I.1.2 The American movement
As the language awareness movement was spreading in Britain, a similar effort was undertaken in the US under the label Whole Language Movement, as pointed out by Kumaravadivelu (2003: 158). This was aimed at providing rich language experience for school children by integrating the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and by introducing language related activities in content areas across the school curriculum. Supporters of the movement argued that various components of language such as sounds, words, phrases and sentences should be taught holistically using authentic materials and meaningful activities.

Ken Goodman (1986, apud Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 158), one of the leading supporters of the Whole Language Movement, explained that: "Whole language is whole. It does not exclude some languages, some dialects, or some registers because their speakers lack status in a particular society. Every language form constitutes a precious linguistic resource for its users. This does not mean that whole language teachers are not aware of the social values assigned to different language varieties and how these affect people who use them. But they can put these social values in proper perspective".

I. 2 What is language awareness?
If, as previously mentioned, The National Council for Language in Education Working Party on Language Awareness declared in 1985 that *"language awareness is a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life"* (Donmall, 1985, apud Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 157), the ALA (the Association of Language Awareness, founded in 1994 by for example Garrett and van Lier, an organization that aims at supporting and promoting activities and research on language awareness) website currently provides the following definition,*"Language Awareness can be defined as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use"* (Svalberg, 2007: 28).

As since the early 1980s language awareness has become a major concern in language education, the followers of the Language Awareness movement, have tried to find ways of improving the language awareness of students and of their teachers as well. Andrews (2007: 10) explains that, initially, the focus of the Language Awareness movement was specifically on the

language awareness of learners. It is believed that students who are able to analyze and describe language accurately are likely to be more effective users of the language and there is a close relationship between explicit knowledge of formal aspects of language and performance in using the language. The same applies to teachers, as it is assumed that an understanding of the language they teach and the ability to analyze it will contribute directly to teaching effectiveness.

Eric Hawkins, who is regarded as the founder of the theory of Language Awareness, explains in "Awareness of Language: An Introduction" (1984, apud Prtic Soons, 2008: 8) that the focus must be shifted from the teacher to the "child's eye" and one of his aims was that pupils in their foreign language learning should be stimulated to ask questions about language, how it functions and what role it plays in people's lives; in other words, to have an explicit approach to different phenomena of language.

In summary, as Bourke concluded (2008: 20), language awareness has to do with the raising of learners' awareness of features of the target language, its point of departure being input processing, exploring examples of language in context, noticing salient points and patterns, inferring a rule and testing it against further data. But it is also important to allow and require learners to outperform their newly acquired grammar, or as Nunan (1998, apud Bourke, 2008: 20) says, "for learners to press their grammatical resources into communicative use".

II. Means of developing language awareness-grammar and cultural awareness

As Dorobăţ (1993: 71) mentioned, function of the literature that has been published so far, the foreign teacher of English may tackle the main issues raised by the process of creating and developing the concept of language from several directions.

II.1.1 Grammar awareness - differences between language awareness and traditional grammar

Language awareness does not use the same traditional techniques used to teach grammar that one finds in structural grammar books. The differences between language awareness and traditional grammar teaching were summarized by Bourke (2008: 14-15) as follows:

- LA differs fundamentally from the repertoire of structures and functions found in an itemized syllabus. LA is the sum of the enabling strategies one uses to get a handle on the language system. It employs cognitive strategies, such as noticing, hypothesis testing, problem-solving, and restructuring.
- LA is not the same thing as practice. It is about input processing, noticing certain patterns or relationships, discovering rules and noticing

the differences between one's current interlanguage and the target language system and as a result subconsciously restructuring one's still evolving grammar system. As Schmidt (1993: 4) says, noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake.

- Whereas traditional grammar was a group of classes, LA is a grammar of meanings, functions, and form-function mapping.
- LA is multi-faceted. It goes beyond the raising of grammatical consciousness to include all linguistic components - vocabulary, morphology, phonology, and discourse.
- The aim of LA is to develop in learners an awareness of and sensitivity to form, and not just to learn a long list of grammatical items. According to Schmidt (1995), there can be learning without intention, but there can be no learning without attention.
- LA is data-driven. Learners are not told the rule, but are given a set of data from which they infer the rule or generalization on their own way. They check their tentative rule against other sets of data and then see if it still holds in a number of contexts of use.

II.1.2 Means of developing language awareness
Language awareness is a methodology with which to explore language and language use, which has many implications for classroom practice. According to Dorobăţ (1993: 72), it is not enough to study and teach the language systems (grammar, phonology, reading, writing) and language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and lately discourse analysis. These components form the teacher's basic knowledge about language and how to teach it. Language awareness activities also deal with attitudes, feelings, choice of structure or vocabulary, body language, and not only. Language awareness embraces the idea that language is rich, complex and diverse and it does affect the teacher's perception of language, the way he/she describes it.

An interesting activity, a critical thinking exercise which could raise our students' awareness, is the one presented by Bolitho and Tomlinson in "Discover English" (apud Oreto, 2009: 2).

Why do language learners make errors? Correct the errors in the following sentences and write down what you think might have caused each of the following errors.
1. My father is a cooker.
2. I am seeing a lion in that cage.
3. He like football.
4. He leaves in a large house.
5. When I will go there tomorrow I will visit Mary.

As teachers of English, we often ask ourselves why learners make errors. In the activity above we could have our students answer this question. It is obvious that the objective is for the students to correct the mistakes and then, with the teacher, think about *why* a learner might make such an error. This would lead to a greater awareness of types of errors learners make, and of the patterns of grammar and grammar errors.

II.2 Cultural awareness

Robinson (1985, apud, Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 270) is one of the first in the field of L2 education who argued that culture should be viewed as a process, that is a way of perceiving, interpreting, feeling, understanding. This perspective views culture as part of a process of living and being in the world, the part that is necessary for making us understand meaning.

The truth is that there is no one culture that embodies all and only the best of human experience, and there is no one culture that embodies all and only the worst of human experience. Every cultural community has virtues to be proud of, and every cultural community has vices to be ashamed of. That is why we should develop critical cultural consciousness which enables one to learn and grow, to change and evolve so as to meet the challenges of today's emerging global reality.

A question one would ask is "What is the relationship between language and cultural awareness?". Understanding a language involves not only knowledge or grammar, phonology, and lexis, but also certain features and characteristics of the culture. A language is part of a culture and culture is part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 1994, apud Cakir, 2006: 154-155). According to Brown, culture is a deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being, but language - the means for communication among members of a culture - is the most visible and available expression of that culture. In other words, culture is a way of life, a blueprint that guides the behavior of people in community. Cultural awareness aims at offering insights into the culture and civilization of a foreign speaking country, language and culture awareness aiming at encouraging positive attitudes to foreign language learning and to speakers of foreign languages and indirectly, to other cultures and civilizations. If we teach cultural awareness and language awareness we can say that the language learning process is supported and the general understanding of the foreign culture is extended. This is the way we can have learners who know how to act in a foreign culture.

Language teaching does not mean teaching a language only, but also involves cultural, political, economical and social aspects of the country whose language one wants to learn. A high level of fluency can exist without a high level of cultural understanding, but this leads to an inability to behave and act

according to cultural patterns, in other words, a lack of cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

To sum up, we can refer to Tang's (1999, apud Hassanzadeh & Nabifar, 2011: 13) point of view: "culture is language and language is culture. To speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful."

III. Awareness of classroom English

The main focus of language awareness is individual exploration of language. Language awareness is created when learners are guided to focusing on a certain aspect of language and when they are encouraged to explore for themselves how language works, that is why learners should be given time for personal reflection and opinion forming, which helps increase their motivation to explore different aspects of language. Under no circumstance should the teacher's perspective be the only valid perspective in the classroom.

Dufva (1994: 26-27) tries to answer the question "How to become aware?": "As the needs of teachers, learners and groups differ, there is hardly a set of common activities to increase awareness. Beginners are different from advanced students, children need different input than adults do, and, in addition, there are huge individual differences between learners. Some will learn by reading books, others will learn only by trying something themselves, some are reflective observers by nature, while others like to act.

Also, things to be taught and learned differ. The students need to assume both theoretical knowledge and pragmatic skills. They need passive recognition skills as well as active, well-rehearsed routines. They need to be able to articulate well enough, but also to write comprehensible sentences. Some of the things may be of crucial importance, while others might be trivial. Learning how to make a plural from may require a dramatically different approach than learning how to articulate a sound foreign to one's mother tongue".

Implementing language awareness techniques

As the needs of teachers, learners and groups differ, there is hardly a set of common activities to increase language awareness, especially as things to be taught and learn differ. It is the teacher who should also try to motivate the students to make their own suggestions before introducing a new topic. One example would be pre-reading activities when dealing with any kind of text. If the teacher shows the title of a text to the students and asks them what they think the text is going to be about, students become quite keen to read the text in order to find out whether their suggestions came close to the real content or not.

In his article "A rough guide to language awareness", Bourke, (2008: 15-19) presents a number of ten techniques that could be used in the classroom to raise learners' language awareness.

Technique 1: Linguistic problem-solving

The task is presented by means of "perceptual frames", i.e., a short dialogue, narrative, or expository text. The **a** versus **an** problem might be presented as follows:

Problem: Why are some nouns preceded by **a** and others by **an**?

Instructions: Read the passage below and underline all nouns preceded by **a** or **an**. Enter the underlined nouns in the correct column.

Passage: *"Molly is an awful cat. She sleeps on a mat and never catches a mouse. She eats five times a day. She often sits in an armchair for an hour or more without making a sound. Some people say she's a horrid cat, but I think she's an old rascal."*

Technique 2: Error detection and correction

Noticing is also a key process in analyzing input and is essential for error detection and correction. An exercise which could be used with students is the one below, taken from "A handbook of classroom English" (Hughes, 1989: 112), where students correct the wrong sentences - spelling and grammatical errors.

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*1. He is **hopeing** to become a reporter.*
*2. They depend very much **from** the price.*
*3. If you **would have come**, you would have enjoyed it.*
*4. This is the book **which I buyed**.*
*5. We started reading it **for three weeks ago**.*

Technique 3: Restoring C-texts

The standard C-text consists of four to six short texts which have been altered by deleting the second half of every second word and replacing it with a blank. The task is to restore the missing pieces by using a variety of conscious strategies, such as contextual inferencing and analogy, among others.

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e.g. *One o__ the argum____ for a__ approach t_ testing thro___ teaching an__ learning i__ that th__ teac____ is i__ the bes__ position t__ know whi___ tests ar__ appropriate fo__ her cla___.*

Technique 4: Cloze procedure

The basic fixed-ratio cloze procedure involves the deletion of words from a text (such as every 5th or 7th word) for students to fill in. In order to make it easier for our students, depending on their level of English, we could also provide the words to be used in the gaps.

> *Ours was the marsh (1) _____ , down by the river, (2)_____ , as the river wound, (3)_____ miles of the sea. (4)_____ first most vivid and (5)_____ impression of the identity (6)_____ things, seems to me (7)_____ have been gained on (8)_____ memorable raw afternoon towards (9)_____ .*

Technique 5: Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is a very powerful pedagogical tool for syntactic and lexical exploitation. For example, having analyzed the form and function of the present perfect tense in English, one might devise various stimulus sentences related to a current task to elicit this tense, as in this example:

> Instruction: Rewrite each sentence so that it means the same, or nearly the same, as the given sentence.
> *Tom no longer lives in Kuching.*
> *He_____*
> [Answer: He has left Kuching.]
> *There isn't any food left.*
> *Abu_____*
> [Answer: Abu has eaten it all.]

Technique 6: Propositionl cluster

Rutherford (1987, apud Bourke, 2008: 18) defines a "propositional cluster" as a skeletal sentence consisting of an unmarked verb and its associated noun phrases. The learner is given the discourse setting, and the task is to arrange the cluster into a well-formed sentence and to do so within the context indicated. For example:

> *Round the corner came a boy.*
> *ride – he (boy) – bicycle*
> The most natural realization of this cluster would be:
> *He was riding a bicycle.*

Technique 7: Sentence combining

Sentence combining has been and still is extensively used as a pre-writing task. It is a very effective way of raising students' consciousness of cohesion. Some learners tend to write a string of loosely-connected sentences. For instance, in

lower primary grades, one often finds a lot of redundancy in composition writing, as in the following example:

I have a cat. My cat is black. She has white paws. My cat has green eyes.

These four sentences can be more economically expressed in a single sentence:

I have a black cat with white paws and green eyes.

Technique 8: Grammaring

Teachers teach grammar, but learners need *grammaring*, which is the ability to access and use grammatical devices to make meaning. Thornbury (2001, apud Bourke, 2008:18) offers a selection of photocopiable grammaring materials. Many of these are lexical clusters to which grammar has to be added.

> For example:
> *boy blue suit Carlos*
> One possible way of grammaring this set of lexical items is as follows:
> *The boy in the blue suit is Carlos.*

Technique 9: Dictogloss

Dictogloss or Grammar Dictation is, according to Bourke (2008:19), a technique that involves the teacher and students in communicative interaction, text reconstruction, and error analysis. There are four stages in the procedure:

1. Preparation—the learner finds out about the topic of the text and is prepared for some of the vocabulary.

2. Dictation—the learner hears the text and takes fragmentary notes. The text is dictated at a speed which allows only key words to be noted.

3. Reconstruction—students in pairs or small groups pool their resources to reconstruct their own version of the original text.

4. Analysis and correction—learners analyze and correct their texts.

> e.g. Joke
> *A penguin walks into a bar, looking worried. He goes up to the bar and asks the barman: "Have you seen my brother?". The barman asks: "What does he look like?"* (Thornbury, "Uncovering Grammar", 2001: 121)

Technique 10: Language games

One can easily devise game-like activities to elicit and use a particular pattern. For instance, the pair work games such as *Describe and Draw, Spot the Difference, and Board Rush* are popular with young learners, while older learners seem to enjoy word games, puzzles, and problem-solving scenarios. One can find many stimulating games that focus on the language system, for

instance, the discovery activities in Hall and Shepheard's "The Anti-grammar Grammar Book" (1991: 116).

Fruit machine: Is it a mistake?- JACKPOT	
1 London's population not increased from 1955 to 1988.	*The population no increased.*
2 It did not happen.	*It didn't happen.*
3 She didn't liked it.	*She didn't likes it.*
4 Why did they bought it?	*Why they bought it?*

As the authors explain, this game contains eighteen sentences; some pairs consist of two correct sentences, some consist of two incorrect sentences, some consist of a correct and an incorrect sentence. Students, in pairs or in small groups, identify combinations of correct/correct, incorrect/incorrect, correct/incorrect and incorrect/correct pair of sentences.

Conclusion

Language awareness is an area of concern to language educators and that is why, in this paper, an attempt has been made to present an overall picture of what language awareness is, investigating the role of language awareness from a teacher's perspective and why it is important to give more attention to language awareness as a concept in order to enhance language acquisition. Teachers of English need to know how language works, as being able to understand and speak the language they are teaching is not enough. They can gain this kind of knowledge through analysis of samples of the language, and the tasks presented in this paper can be used to promote teachers' and learners' language awareness.

In summary, language awareness has to do with the raising of learners' awareness of features of the target language. The teacher is seen as a guide and a facilitator who helps learners deal with an unknown cognitive area, build their own knowledge of the new language system, then analyze any linguistic phenomena they may have observed and encountered. This way, learners become naturally involved in talking about the language, sharing their beliefs and expressing their conclusions. In other words, through language awareness work, such as discovery-oriented tasks, learners' explicit understanding of language and an awareness of their own learning are developed in a motivating way.

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