



UNPACKING LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: ROLES AND CHALLENGES

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| Abstract

This study explores Language Awareness (LA) and its significance in language teaching. LA, a concept developed since the 1990s, plays a vital role in language learning and teaching. It involves recognizing language's nature, cultural ties, forms, and ideological implications. Teaching Language Awareness (TLA) is crucial for educators, especially within different teaching methods like "focus-on-form," "focus-on-forms," and "focus-on-meaning." Challenges for educators in diverse contexts are discussed. The study addresses issues like the importance of subject-matter knowledge and educators' sensitivity to learner development. It emphasizes observation to identify language-related difficulties. Additionally, it highlights the gap between teacher education and classroom application, influenced by educator motivation and perceptions. In conclusion, this study advocates TLA's importance, identifies common challenges, and calls for further research on integrating LA into diverse teaching approaches.

| Keywords

Language Awareness, Teaching Language Awareness, Language Teaching, Language Learning, Pedagogical Challenges

| Article Information:

Accepted: 20 June 2023

Published: 30 August 2023

DOI:10.60087/jklst.vol2.n2.p.80

1. Introduction

1.1. *Language awareness (LA)*

The term "language awareness" (LA) has been emerged since the 1990s. Its important role in human consciousness is noted overtime in terms of supporting language teaching and language learning (Lier, 1996).

Hawkins (1984) defined language awareness as a sensitivity of an individual and how a person is aware the nature of a language and its impacts on human life. It is similar to the claim that "Language awareness" is seen as the ability to notice the specific rules and structures of the language they are learning

(Kumaravadivelu, 1994). It assists these rules in getting more clear and explicit, which in turn could help improve their L2 learning.

Lier (1996) mentioned the definition of Language Awareness agreed by the Language Awareness Working Party in 1982 – ‘Language Awareness is a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life (Donmall, 1985, p.7)’

According to Carter (1994), language awareness meets at least four qualities below:

- (a) awareness of certain language properties; creativity and playfulness; its multiple interpretations.
- (b) awareness of how language is tied in different culture. Learning to understand the language means learning about the cultural aspects of the language. E.g. idioms and metaphor closely relate to the culture.
- (c) great consciousness of a person about using the forms of the language. We should realize that connections between language forms and meanings can be random at times, but language follows patterns as a system.
- (d) awareness of the strong connection between the language and ideology. That means how to understand the underlying implications through the language.

1.2. Teaching language awareness (TLA)

Thornbury (1997) stated the crucial role of teachers to support the noticing process of language learners. To do this, teachers have to sufficiently aware the L2/ foreign language in order to “alert the learner to the features of language” and navigate learners to develop the process of implicit knowledge. The teacher also needs the sensitivity of recognizing the learner’s interlanguage progress; the consciousness-raising activities, therefore, is timed to coincide with their best readiness state. Regarding this demand, linguists found the intricate nature of teaching language awareness (TLA), which involves its relationship with (1) language competence and with (2) subject-matter knowledge being taught in pedagogical settings (Andrews, 2007). As Andrews also mentioned in his book (Teacher Language Awareness, 2007, p. 34), TLA plays a significant role in three approaches including “focus-on-form”, “focus-on-formS”, and “focus-on-meaning”. In the first instruction, the teachers attempt to attract learners’ attention to the targeted linguistic form (Ellis, 2001) and focus on meaning interaction instead of intensively analyzing the form. TLA, therefore, could be seen in TBLT, which strongly emphasize on the form-focus instruction. In this case, the teachers are required to use appropriate types and volume of the input, clearly guide learners to do the “task”, which is the ultimate goal in the lesson. That is why the learners in TBLT lesson have lots of interaction. To fully evaluate students’ “product”, the teacher is required to be a good observer in recognizing students in help when they are doing the task. Possessing TLA can also lead teachers become a good listener to give high-quality feedback on students’ language performance after the task cycle. Regarding the “focus-on-forms” instruction, there could be seen lots of pedagogical intervention of teachers to explicit and analyze the linguistic structure, in other words, the TLA practice of teacher hold a center place in this approach. Grammar analyzing is a typical example of the formS-focus instruction, in which the better language teaching awareness is, the better evaluation teachers would make in terms of

how learners acquire the grammatical subject matter. Following this, teachers can regulate the appropriate teaching level. However, TLA seems to less contribute to the “focus-on-meaning” approach, which is “an approach which provides exposure to rich input and meaningful use of the L2 in context, which is intended to lead to incidental acquisition of the L2” (Norris & Ortega, 2001, p. 160). “After all, if the emphasis is on non-intervention, then it might be assumed that the demands on a teacher’s language awareness would be greatly reduced, if not entirely eliminated” (Andrews, 2007, p. 34). However, I argue that TLA also holds an important place because the teachers are required to make critical decisions in these tasks:

- selecting comprehensible input in order to sufficiently support L2 acquisition;
- organizing tasks with an appropriate linguistic level;
- and controlling their own language to a level a little beyond the students’ current competence level;

These tasks potentially pose significant challenges to the language awareness of teachers.

2. Language teaching issue

2.1. *Lacking of subject-matter knowledge*

Andrews (2007) argued that when the teacher lacks subject-matter knowledge, it could lead to certain problems in terms of language teaching. Specifically, the knowledge relating to the underlying system of the language plays an important role.

Take an example of students in a grammar lesson face no problem with the mechanical structure of the present continuous tense. Suddenly, one student raises a question “We can use ‘go’ in the continuous form but ‘arrive’ cannot. What is the reason?” Many teachers find this question challenging because they lack “core” knowledge or the very nature of the continuous tense as well as different types of the verb.

Teaching idioms is also another circumstance that demands strong knowledge about cultural background or history behind taught idioms (Nghị, Thang, & Yen, 2022). Certain very potential questions of students could be what the idiom “Break a leg” comes from or why the phrase “under weather” indicates bad feeling. To answer these questions, teachers have to constantly pose a question for himself/herself in order to improve their knowledge about the targeted language.

2.2. *Appreciation of learner awareness*

However, Andrew also found that the subject matter itself is insufficient to apply TLA effectively in pedagogical settings. In fact, a wide range of factors could contribute to the complexity of TLA. Such awareness could be the teacher’s sensitivity to the interlingual development of students. Chomsky (1965) posits a hypothesis that emphasizes the general characteristics of someone’s capacity to acquire knowledge or an individual’s innate ideas and principles. Based on this assumption, the teacher who instructs preschool students should be aware of certain types of vocabulary that are appropriate for pupils at this age, such as visual words and physical objects. Additionally, the number of vocabulary words should be limited to three to five per day when teaching very young students (Swift, 2020). The teacher also

possesses an awareness of certain subject matter or content that can potentially cause difficulties for students. Andrews (2007) emphasized the relationship between content and pedagogy in terms of transforming the teacher's content knowledge into effective forms and being adaptable to the "variations in ability and background presented by the students." In fact, some content knowledge could be challenging, such as passive voice, phrasal verbs, or perfect tense, demanding a keen sense from teachers to recognize and address problems correctly to support students in a timely manner. In this case, observation plays a crucial role in identifying the problems on students' faces.

3. Teaching learning issues

One of the most challenging tasks that Wright (2002) supposed is how to shift "from new knowledge to classroom reality" for those deal with the language awareness development for teachers. After the conceptualizing stage, the teacher should make an effort to transform the content knowledge into the practice through appropriate activities, creating opportunities for students to use the target language and raise potential questions relating to the language in their reality.

The other problem that has been common is the imbalance between the domain of language knowledge in teacher education and to what extent the teachers apply this knowledge in their classes. On the one hand, this problem can be raised by the course outline of the teacher-training program, which can be vague or confuse the trainees. The training program, therefore, cannot meet the trainees' demand or the course quality is insufficient to convey the expected content. On the other hand, the teachers' motivation when they join the training programs plays an important role in the success level. Many participants expect to complete the teaching programs as a compulsory procedure to legalize their teaching career. Hence, these teachers tend to ignore the LA knowledge they can gain in the educational programs. The existing perception of teachers about LA also has an impact on how much LA is applied in their classes. If the teachers expect to develop professionally, they may need to "get out of their comfort zone" by reflecting on their current teaching practice and perception about TLA, in other words, they have to push lots of efforts to change towards the more professional practice. In Kerr's study conducted (Kerr, 1998), he discovered that the language awareness (LA) aspect of training programs across 30 CELTA centers remained largely unaltered. Despite recent advancements in the curriculum and the broader study of language, these changes had minimal influence on how CELTA trainers perceived and presented language awareness to their trainees.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the critical role of TLA in language education and the multifaceted challenges it poses for educators. LA is an indispensable concept in understanding language's nature, cultural ties, forms, and ideological implications. The study emphasizes the significance of TLA, particularly within various teaching methods, including "focus-on-form," "focus-on-formS," and "focus-on-meaning."

One of the primary challenges discussed is the need for educators to possess subject-matter knowledge, as a lack of it can hinder effective language teaching. Teachers must be well-versed in the underlying

systems of language to address students' inquiries effectively, such as explaining the nuances of verb usage in different contexts and unraveling the cultural origins of idiomatic expressions.

Additionally, the research underscores the importance of educators' sensitivity to learner development, including their interlingual progress and language-related difficulties. Chomsky's hypothesis on innate ideas and principles highlights the need for teachers to be aware of age-appropriate vocabulary and adapt their teaching methods accordingly.

Furthermore, the study recognizes the gap between teacher education and classroom application, which can be influenced by educators' motivations and perceptions. It suggests that teachers must be willing to step out of their comfort zones, reflect on their teaching practices, and embrace professional growth.

In summary, this research advocates for the crucial role of Teaching Language Awareness, identifies common challenges in its implementation, and calls for further exploration into integrating Language Awareness into diverse teaching approaches. By addressing these issues, educators can enhance their language teaching practices and ultimately facilitate more effective language learning experiences for their students.

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