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Language Awareness in EFL Context: An Overview

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Abstract

In recent years language awareness (LA) has attracted much attention in language education and has resulted in much debate. In order to present an overall view of LA, the present article discusses the influential views regarding the concept of LA as well as critical language awareness (CLA), puts forward the importance of LA in the context of foreign language (FL) teaching, differentiates the new trend with the traditional view on teaching grammar, and argues for the possibility of teaching LA.

Keywords

Language Awareness, Foreign Language, Critical Language Awareness, Knowledge of Language

1. Introduction

It was in the late 1950s that the idea of awareness was introduced. It was the time when linguists and researchers like Hawkins and Halliday favored the idea that the aim of language teaching should not be limited to help their students master the target language, but it should help them deal with issues related to language in general (Mastas, 2001).

LA which has been widely advocated in recent years is one of these general issues. Carter (2003) explains that "language awareness refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (p.64). In the same vein, Fairclough (1992) states that LA is "conscious attention to properties of language and language use as an element of language education" (p. 2).Similarly, Verity (2003) defines LA as a subfield of applied linguistics and maintains that LA delves into the native speaker knowledge "to bring it to the surface, to make it conscious, to make it available tools to learners" (p.133).

Such definitions may provoke some questions regarding the role of LA (Svalberg, 2007). Does better understanding of language helps one to be a better language teacher or learner? Does higher degrees of awareness of language result in one's better relationship with the world around him? As it is evident, the questions do not only refer to the context of FL teaching; they refer to all the contexts in which language is used. According to Garcia (2009), "language awareness (LA) or knowledge about language (KAL) in teaching is used to encompass three understandings: about language, its teaching, and its learning" (p.385). He later elaborates on these three:

1. Knowledge of language (proficiency). (The language user) Includes ability to use language appropriately in many situations; awareness of social and pragmatic norms.

2. Knowledge about language (subject–matter knowledge). (The language analyst) Includes forms and functions of systems—grammar, phonology, vocabulary.

3. Pedagogical practice. (The language teacher) Includes creating language learning opportunities; classroom interaction. (p.385-386)

It should be noted that consciousness-raising should not be mistaken with language awareness. James cited in Bourke (2008) refers to the difference and holds that language awareness is the already established internalized language ability. In other words, it is often in the form of one's implicit knowledge. In contrast, based on James, consciousness-raising refers to conscious and explicit knowledge about things one does not possess in the form of implicit knowledge.

2. The Importance of LA in the Context of FL Teaching

Tulasiewicz (1997), sums up the possible advantages gained from the consideration of LA:

1. Language Awareness in the study of the mother tongue

helps to improve users' competence and performance of their own language and enables it to be used as a more efficient instrument for transactions.

2. Language Awareness improves the knowledge of the processes of language acquisition and language learning and facilitates the study of modern foreign languages by drawing learners' attention to similarities and differences with their own mother tongues, for example in the recognition of patterns; and

3. Language Awareness encourages the acquisition of linguistic sensitivity…. to other languages and dialects with a view to making sense of them. This is intended to lead to a better understanding of their speakers; a process which can be accepted as the language tolerance component of an intercultural education. (p. 394)

Additionally, apart from the fact that everyone is a user of a language and LA is critical in people's life, LA is important in the context of FL based on the following rationales (Bourke, 2008).

1. The personal exploration of the L2 helps the learner find out how language works and thereby enriches and extends one's knowledge of the language… by noticing and reflecting on the linguistic data all around them.

2. The other aspect of language awareness is the applied perspective which means for teachers to help learners effectively explore, internalize, and gain greater understanding of the target language. (p.15)

Bourke's (2008) rationales are based on a process-oriented view of language since learners actively get involved in discovering aspects related to language.

3. Differences Between Language Awareness and Traditional Grammar

Bourke (2008) argues that LA is not the same as traditional techniques used to teach grammar. He elaborates on the idea by stating the reasons for his argument. As he contents, the same traditional techniques used to teach grammar especially those found in grammar books are not used in LA. Moreover, LA is not in line with the Presentation-Practice-Production which is the commonPractice of providing students with grammatical structures in the FL classroom. As Bolitho et al.(2003) put it "it is important to distinguish between a teaching approach which advocates giving explicit knowledge to the learners, and a language awareness approach , which is actually a reaction against such top down transmission of explicit knowledge" (p.251).

4. Critical Language Awareness

Critical appraisal of any education is one of the necessities(Fairclough, 1998). As such, application of Critical Applied Linguistics on education has resulted in the appearance of CLA. As Smith (2004) puts it, "the overall aims of critical language awareness (CLA) are the emancipation and empowerment of students" (p.1) since each learner in some way or another is affected by the way language is used. Fairclough (1998) elaborates on the issue and argues that "language conventions and language practices are involved with power relations and ideological processes…" (p.7). For example, language may be used as a threat against the learner who comes from a low income family or the one who has emigrated from smaller towns to cities. Even, it might be the case that some teachers are not conscious of the specific needs of pupils who speak non-standard dialects of the standard language spoken in the schools. Furthermore, teachers may be unaware that their own use of language can create barriers between themselves and their pupils. In the context of FL, the condition gets more complex since teachers should be aware of the fact that their students have their own expectations of the FL they are learning. These expectations may not be the same as the expectations they have from their first language (Hawkins, 1999).

5. Teaching Language Awareness

Yiakoumetti (2006) recognizes LA as part of the education especially language education. According to Yiakoumetti "LA is an approach to teaching the mother tongue, second or foreign languages and dialects as part of a comprehensive language education"(p.299). In the same line, Tulasiewicz (1997) suggests that, LA acquisition can be either embedded into the curriculum at schools or be studied by itself. He argues that the inclusion would be more than teaching a kind of linguistics to which has been modified and simplified, but such an attempt would aim at incorporating "classroom activity which shifts attention towards the practical application of the linguistic knowledge acquired" (p.396). Henry (2007) discusses that a "language awareness approach to teaching involves activities that concentrate on making learners aware of their MT intuitions and increasing their explicit knowledge of what happens in the FL"(p.470). In such case, LA would not be limited to the study of language. It goes well beyond and deals with cultural, social as well as linguistic aspects of language, no matter first or second language is the medium of communication in class.

Despite the assertions regarding the incorporation of LA activities in classrooms Borg cited in Svalberg (2007) presents five main features. As he argues, an LA methodology has the following characteristics:

1. It involves an ongoing investigation of language as a dynamic phenomenon rather than awareness of a fixed body of established facts.

2. It involves learners in talking analytically about language, often to each other.

3. It considers essential the involvement of learners in exploration and discovery.

4. It aims to develop not only the learners' knowledge about and understanding of language but also their learning skills, thus promoting learner independence.

5. The aim is to involve learners on both a cognitive and

an affective level. (pp. 290-291)

According to Svalberg, Borg's view regarding an LA approach to language teaching is a constructivist view since he emphasizes learners' independence and his/her involvement in a process of discovery learning. As Svalberg holds, Borg also stresses a metalanguage approach which involves a process of talking about language. Additionally, as it is evident, for Borg the practice of language awareness involves both cognitive and affective engagement. This supports Donmall's (1985) view which states that LA operates on three distinctive levels of cognitive, affective, and social.

6. Conclusion

The concept of language awareness has attracted much attention since its inception. It has been the common belief that students can benefit from LA (Ellis, 2012) and that by getting insight from LA students and specifically FL learners can critically get involved in four language skills. Such an understanding helps learners be aware of the effect of language on human beings. Furthermore, implementation of LA in FL courses enriches learners' experiences and knowledge regarding elements of language as well as the related culture.

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