Language Awareness at Tertiary Education Level

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Abstract: This article discusses language awareness, a new approach in teaching a target language. It provides differences between traditional looking at grammar teaching and the new one i.e. LA (language awareness) whereby students “reveals” grammar spontaneously. It also introduces some techniques teachers can use aiming to raise students’ consciousness of the form and function of targeted grammatical features. The written techniques have been used effectively and successfully by the authors at their faculties of Agriculture. However they can be modified and used at any education level.

Keywords: awareness, language, traditional, teaching, techniques.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional methods of teaching grammar by extensive drilling and grammar memorization were in 1970s subjected to changes in favour of excluded grammar teaching i.e. natural communication in the lecture rooms. Namely, students should “notice” grammar spontaneously during a communicative lecture. In this way students see and learn the model of grammatical rules for themselves. It is known as language awareness. Traditional grammar was often criticized for its long, boring drills and banal exercises. In 1972 new teaching methods used exercises with meaningful communication. According to Chomsky (1965) our “language organ” extracts the rules of the target language from the performance data and this innate schema encompasses “linguistic universals” being a part of our genetic inheritance. By the Chomsky’s theories, Krashen (1981) and some other linguists were against explicit grammatical teaching in favour of the naturalistic target language’s rule system.

Many researches on the above said have been conducted aiming to:
- raise learners’ awareness of important linguistic features
- to see what attributes are common to these features
- to notice how they differ from other related features
- to help students construct their own grammar using personal exploration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Definition of language awareness. According to Carter (2003, 64) language awareness is defined as “development in learners of an enhanced consciousness and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language”. Many researches dated back to 1990s show that conscious learning also builds inter-language in the mind which should grow and develop to prevent fossilization. That’s why Bourke (1992) refers to language awareness as linguistic problem solving.
Other definition of LA (language awareness) include term **consciousness-raising** (Rutherford 1987; Schmidt 1990 and others; **focus on form** (Long 1991), **grammar interpretation tasks** and **form-focused instruction** (Ellis 1995, 2001).

Regardless the fact that some linguists have made distinction between **language awareness** (LA) and **consciousness raising** (CR) most applied linguists regard the two terms as synonymous. However it should be pointed out that LA differs from some of the abovementioned definitions since it includes, apart from grammatical awareness, lexical awareness, phonological awareness and discourse awareness.

Features differing LA from TG (traditional grammar):

**LA**

- is the sum of the enabling strategies for dealing with language system. It comprises cognitive strategies like noticing, hypothesis, testing, problem solving and restructuring Long (1991), Spada (1997);
- is a grammar of meaning, functions and form-function mapping;
- students have to explore structured input and develop an awareness of certain linguistic features by performing some activities (Schmidt (1995);
- it is about input processing, noticing certain patterns or relationships, revealing rules and noticing the difference between one’s current inter-language and the target language system (Schmidt 1993,4);
- it includes all linguistic components-vocabulary, morphology, phonology and discourse;

(e.g. Explore the grammatical devices for expressing the futurity concept; difference between the standard passive *(Much money was lost by the farmer)* and the “get” passive *(I got lost)*; make sense of modal verbs; examine collocation or redundancy etc.);

-Students are not told the rules, but are given a set of data from which they indicate the rule or generalization in their own way.

It also should be pointed out that students have to be actively involved in discovering language features. They are not given the rule, but work inductively from structured input to reach their own understanding. It is a **process-oriented** approach including discovery, investigation and understanding unlike traditional **product-oriented** in which one is told the rules and has to drill and memorize them.

Activities used to facilitate LA

Such activities allow professor to “problematize” lectures and enable students to actively involve in the teaching process. These are enabling tasks and according to Estair and Zanon (1994) they aim to provide students with the required linguistic tools to conduct a communication task. When this task is finished students explore the language points. The language focus consists of **analysis** or **practice activities**. Analysis includes consciousness raising activities where students analyze texts, transcripts aiming to see the specific language points.

Here are examples of some analysis activities:

- **Semantic concepts relative in terms of topics, notions, functions** *(e.g. In the text Pigs -Unit 8 (Anica Perković, 2009) find and classify all the phrases referring to time, comparison..*)
- **Words or parts of a word** *(e.g. When do we use word while? –to indicate subordination, temporal proximity etc. What does it mean? Study examples in the set of sentences.)*
- **Categories of meaning or use** *(e.g. When do we use –ing words? They have three categories of meanings in the text. What are they? (nominal, adjectival, verbal ) Study examples in the text–Unit 12 –Energy and Equipment)*
Practice activities can be carried out within:
Looking up a point of grammar in a reference grammar and reporting back (e.g. Find modal verbs and explain their use in the text. (Unit 10-Poultry) Look at Unit 4 for reference
- Computer games
- Language games

The objective of the aforementioned activities is that students construct their own grammar from their own language experience and thus restructure their inter-language. They are given means of corrective feedback either from the professor or by looking at a comprehensible reference.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

User-friendly and Effective LA Techniques Implemented

1. Linguistic problem-solving
   The task is often given within “perceptual frames” such as short dialogues, narrative. The input frames give a meaningful context to focus on the new language item and enough data for the students to provide a tentative induction as to the rule or generalization. Further data are presented then and the initial hypothesis is either confirmed or rejected.
   There are three steps to be done here:
   1. Read the frame/data
   2. Form a hypothesis
   3. Test and if required, revise your hypothesis
   For example articles in English could be presented within contrasts:
   - Count versus mass nouns
   - a versus an
   - the versus a/an
   - article versus no article

   The above can be set out as follows:
   **Problem**: Why are some nouns preceded by articles and others by no articles?
   **Instructions**: Read the text /set of examples and underline all nouns preceded by articles or no articles.
   This technique makes the student to notice syntactic patterning and make judgments and discriminations about a rule.

2. Detection and correction of an error
   Making errors and correcting them is also a part of learning. Students should be focused on particular error in a piece of writing. They might look at the form and function of narrative tenses.

3. Restoring C-texts
   The common C-text is composed of 4 to six short texts been altered by deleting the second half of every second word and replacing it with blank. Students should restore the missing pieces by using conscious strategies such as contextual inferences, analogy etc.

3. Paraphrase
This is very good for syntactic and lexical exploitation. For example, if they analyse the form and function of the present perfect tense in English stimulus sentences related to the current task might devise to elicit this tense.

**Instruction:** Write each sentence again so that it doesn’t change the meaning.
- Old methods are not used any more.
- They ------------------------------------ Answer: They have been changed.
- There are no weeds left.
- The chemicals ------------------------Answer: The chemicals have killed them all.

4. **Propositional cluster**

Rutherford (1987, 167) states that a propositional cluster is a skeletal sentence composed of unmarked verb and associated noun phrases.

**Instruction:** Arrange the cluster into a correct sentence within the context.
- Castle Luznica is a cultural heritage of Croatia.
  - Near Situate – it-----Zagreb.
  - The correct cluster solution would be: It is situated near Zagreb.
  - In this case a student had to know which noun phrase is chosen as grammatical subject, the form it takes and type of verbal form and complementation.

5. **Combining sentences (packing/unpacking)**

According to James (1994) and Zamel (1980) this activity is especially good as pre-writing assignment raising students’ consciousness of cohesion.

**Instruction:** Combine these three sentences into one.
- The domestic pig is descended from the wild pig. It roamed the forests. It lived on green food and the roots of many plants. They were supplemented at the right season by acorns and beech mast.
  - Answer: The domestic pig is descended from the wild pig which roamed the forests and lived on green food and the roots of many plants supplemented at the right season by acorns and beech mast.
  - This activity helps students to become aware of the structural changes by using diverse connectives signalling semantic relations
  - Also a long sentence can be subjected to extracting the embedded propositions from a complex sentence.

6. **Grammatical devices use**

Thornbury (2001,1) and Rutherford (1987) call ability of using grammatical devices “grammaring” and “grammaticization” respectively.

**Instruction:** Select the most appropriate form for a particular context of using “contrast” which can be expressed as follows:
- A (but) B. (simple conjunction)
- A; (however) B. (sentence connector)
- A (whereas) B. (subordinator)
  - Thus, in common conversation “but” option is more frequently used whereas in formal writing more appropriate would be “whereas” one.

While choosing grammatical devices to express some meanings students will ask themselves questions as follows:
Shall I use the active or passive? – If the doer of the action is important she/he will use active.
What narrative tenses shall I use? Which ones and why?

7. Language games:
Our students enjoy word games such as word pies. They should add a letter to each pie to make a complete word. On task completion a word representing a major agricultural product of US is provided.

Answer the riddles. E.g. Why are fish considered well-educated?

Also games can be used for both language items and real interaction. For example an information-gap activity about pigs might focus on the present simple (e.g. The domestic pig is descended from the wild pig whereas communicative version might require talking freely about pigs.

Considering the above-mentioned activities we can say that LA is any technique or techniques combination that help students to understand how a piece of language works. Finally it can be said that LA activity is often putting old wine into new bottles.

CONCLUSION

Effective SLT (second language teaching) demands input processing (acquisition) combined with focus on form (learning). It is a dynamic process where students are actively involved. Thus, language awareness considers raising of students’ awareness of features of the target language. It comprises: input processing, exploring examples of language in context, noticing salient points and models, inferring a rule and testing against further data.

Also students are allowed to outperform their newly acquired grammar. What LA techniques are most effective? It is early to say. However, we have sufficient research papers which support the inductive problem-solving way to linguistic knowledge. What is the role of the teacher? He/she is the learning facilitator.

REFERENCES