

## What's language awareness?

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El presente artículo es una introducción general a todo aquello que en sí encierra el término Consciencia Lingüística, concepto que se ha convertido en los últimos tiempos en un campo de investigación de gran interés para todos aquellos dedicados a la enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras.

Todavía no existe una definición precisa y única de este concepto, pero sí se está trabajando en distintas direcciones que permiten ver la riqueza, productividad y utilidad de esta área de conocimiento.

### 1. What is LA? Where did it all come from?

Language Awareness (LA) is an exciting vibrant area of activity and interest. It is referred to more and more by those working in language and education. There are books devoted to it (e.g. Hawkins, 1984; Donmall, 1985; Fairclough, 1992; James and Garrett, 1992). There is a large and regularly updated<sup>1</sup> bibliography of LA books and articles. There are organisations promoting it and even producing newsletters about it (e.g. the Association for Language Awareness<sup>2</sup>). There have been LA conferences<sup>3</sup>, and there is now, in addition, a journal called *Language Awareness*<sup>4</sup>.

So what is LA? There is no clear answer; it is a field still searching for clear definition. However, this arguably adds to rather than subtracts from its appeal. One definition which is often quoted is: Language Awareness is a person's sensitivity to a conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life (Donmall, 1985: 7). This does not tell us much about what people actually do when they «do» LA, though, so we begin by looking at how the field of LA has evolved, initially in the UK.

Responding to the notorious lack of achievement in literacy and in foreign language learning in British schools, Hawkins (1981, 1984) argued for the introduction of programmes of study about language. These, he argued, should begin in primary schools and continue into secondary schools, thus building a bridge between the teaching of the mother tongue (MT) and foreign languages (FLs). LA (a programme of study about language) would bridge the transition (at the age of 11) from primary to secondary education language work. It was also to provide a point of contact for all fields of language education (e.g. FLs, MT, UK community languages, such as Punjabi). Its content would be aimed at stimulating talk about language and linguistic diversity, and also at developing confidence in writing, reading and listening. Typically, such programmes would include coverage of stages of language acquisition and development and the processes involved, grammatical concepts, language varieties, comparison of structure, vocabulary, and writing systems in different languages. Methods would be oriented towards pair group work data collecting in order to generate discussion about language.

## **2. Other Areas of LA.**

LA has grown into more than just this kind of programme, however. To begin with, even if we restrict ourselves to LA activities within educational systems, they take place at all levels, from primary schools to universities, from private language schools to adult education centres, from young children to teachers and teacher trainees.

LA may or may not concern itself with building bridges across different fields of language education. It may restrict itself to EFL, (Bolitho and Tomlinson, 1980; Frank and Rivoluceri, 1983), or to ESP (Holmes and Ramos, 1992), or to a shared MT (Tinkel, 1992).

The field of literary awareness and the use of literature in the classroom also feature in LA work (Prieto Pablos, 1992), as does the role of language in other areas of education: e.g. in the teaching of mathematics. Nor is LA restricted to educational contexts. People working in the media, for example, might have something to say about the role of language awareness in their work.

LA interests also extend beyond awareness of language to learners' awareness of themselves and their preferred strategies in the language learning process. Toncheva (1992), for example, has investigated the facilitative aspects of learners «switching off» in language lessons, claiming that this is sometimes a strategy employed by learners when they sense a mismatch between their learning style and the teaching methodology. Holmes and Ramos (1992) constructed and issued a checklist of strategies to learners on the basis of which learners recorded, contemplated and discussed the strategies they used in particular classroom language tasks.

In addition, LA embraces the debate about the role of consciousness in language learning, about whether the explicit formulation of rules, for example, is facilitative (Rutherford, 1987) or an impediment (Krashen, 1981) in the process of learning a language. Is conscious knowledge more helpful for older learners, or for particular aspects of language? Is it all a question of person's individual learning style?

Fundamentally, then, LA is about reflection, talk, and knowledge about language and language learning. But why bother with this? After all, wasn't the Grammar Translation method criticised because students finished up knowing lots about language but still did not actually know the language itself: e.g. they could not speak it? let us take a closer look then at the rationale of LA.

### **3. The Five Domains of LA.**

James and Garrett (1992: 12) emphasise that LA should not be seen as an alternative to language learning. Rather, parallel to language learning, the benefits that are claimed for it may be seen along five domains: affective, social, power, cognitive and performance.

#### **A. The affective Domain.**

LA recognises that learning is done with the heart as well as the head. One of the central goals of LA work is to stimulate curiosity about language (Hawkins, 1984: 45), thereby «... increasing receptivity to new linguistic experience» (Anderson 1992: 133). In

addition, there is within the English as a Foreign Language field, a further recognised branch of LA not so much concerned with talking about language, but with activities directed at links between the affective domain and improved language performance. Such activities are aimed at «... encouraging the learner to contribute new things of personal relevance» (Frank and Rinvoluceri, 1983: 7-8).

### **B. The Social Domain.**

This is a particularly strong motivation for LA work in multicultural contexts: social harmonisation. LA work can be geared towards building «... better relations between all ethnic groups by arousing pupils' awareness of the origins and characteristics of their own language and dialect and their place in the wider map of language and dialects used in the world beyond» (Donmall, 1985: 8). «Deepening understanding, fostering tolerance» are two of the aims LA is generally held to pursue (Anderson, 1992: 133).

### **C. The Power Domain.**

LA work can alert students to the ways in which language can be used as an instrument of manipulation. Thus it is possible to develop students' linguistic sensitivity and vigilance, and to empower them in their own use of language. Of particular note in this domain is the work in *Language Awareness* of the Lancaster University group (Fairclough, 1989, 1992).

### **D. The Cognitive Domain.**

LA can develop «... awareness of pattern, contrast, system, units, categories, rules of language in use and the ability to reflect on them» (Donmall, 1985: 7). This does not entail a return to traditional grammar teaching, then, because here we are also looking at language in use, at functions, at genres, and also at language learning processes.

### **E. The Performance Domain.**

Some would argue that LA needs no justification in terms of improved language proficiency, in the same way that the study of biology does not need to lead to increased crop production in order to justify itself. However, there are widely held beliefs or hopes (at best) that the analytical knowledge fostered by LA has a positive effect on language behaviour. For example, to take Donmall (1985:

7) once more, «Heightened awareness may be *expected* to bring pupils to increase the language resources available to them and to foster their mastery of them» [our italics].

#### **4. Current Concerns.**

That final point really brings us to the most burning issue in LA at present: the search for some tangible proof that LA has a real impact on some or all of these domains, and what the nature, conditions, and limitations of any impact are. Little has been done in the way of evaluating LA programmes (but see Heap, 1992), though there is of course some research into the debate with Krashen regarding the role of conscious knowledge in language learning (for brief summaries, see Rutherford, 1987: 24f, Garrett and Austin, 1992: 43f). These are fundamental questions in language teaching and learning, and it is to be hoped that the growing body of people interested in LA will take up the challenge of addressing them.

#### **NOTES**

1. The LA bibliography will be published in *Language Awareness*, Volume 2, 1993 (see note 4).
2. Details regarding the Association for Language Awareness and the Newsletter may be obtained from Peter Garrett, Linguistics Department, University of Wales, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2DG, UK.
3. E.g. Seminar on Language Awareness (organised on behalf of the British Association for Applied Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, 1989), International Conference on Language Awareness (organised for the National Consortium of Centres for Language Awareness at the University of Wales, Bangor, 1992).
4. The journal is published by Multilingual Matters, Frankfurt Lodge, Clevedon Hall, Victoria Road, Clevedon, Avon, BS21 7SJ, UK. Members of the Association for Language Awareness may purchase the journal at a reduced price.

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