Language Awareness in the Second and Foreign Language Grammar Classroom

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Abstract

In the many decades since Applied Linguistics became a formalized and popular academic discipline, we have been introduced to several inter related terminology in language pedagogy that are used to help explain the process of becoming proficient in a second language. These terms include *language acquisition*, *intake*, *the developing interlanguage system*, and more recently, *language awareness*. From the perspective of language teachers, these terms and the concepts they describe formally state desirable goals and point in the direction to which we want to bring our students but do not provide explicit information on how we can do so. Although language awareness may best be described as an educational movement in its initial stage, it has now taken on varying perspectives that affect almost all aspects of language use and consequently has clear implications on how language should be taught in classrooms. This paper will begin by briefly examining the concept of language awareness and its scope. It will then discuss some possible ways how language awareness can occur in an educational context and finally, drawing upon work conducting by earlier practitioners, especially Batstone (1995), the paper will propose a format for incorporating language awareness into the second and foreign language grammar classroom.

Key words: Language awareness, teaching grammar, language teaching

Introduction

Leo van Lier (1995) alludes to the importance of language and how it is taken for granted when he states that "language is as important to human beings as water is to fish. Yet it often seems that we go through life as unaware of language as we suppose the average fish is of the water it swims in". This quotation is found on the Association for Language Awareness website and reflects the need for one to become more sensitive and aware to how language is used and can be used in daily life. Language teachers may find the description especially relevant as it depicts the final goal for their learners – to use language naturally and with little effort. However, van Lier's intention was to highlight a more conscious need on the part of language learners to attend to language and language use. Hence, the role of Language Awareness in language teaching and learning.

Language Awareness (LA) grew from a "Language Awareness" movement that focused on Knowledge about Language (KAL) and drew greatest support from the United Kingdom in the early 1980s. In his review of its development as a concept, Andrews (2007) describes how the "underlying belief" behind the Language Awareness movement was that "students who were able to analyse and describe language accurately are likely to be more effective users of the language" (p. 10). Andrews argues that the concept of language awareness is broad and, especially early after it was first proposed, it was also vague with many considering it to be nothing more than a return to explicit teaching of grammar and declarative knowledge of grammar (Mitchell, Hooper and Brumfit, 1994). The vast scope of LA is reflected by James & Garrett (1991) who consider it to impact the affective, social, power, cognitive and performance domains of human life. Nevertheless, the concept of LA began to gain greater international prominence and clarity through the formation of the Association for Language Awareness in 1992. Svalberg (2007), however, notes that LA has yet to gain a strong foothold in Asia and

Africa as "little LA research appears to have been conducted in Asian and African settings" (p. 302).

In language teaching and learning, LA was not so quickly received as a concept to be integrated into the classrooms and discussed among education circles. This was probably for various reasons. Firstly, its introduction into second and foreign language pedagogy can be considered relatively late as the field was already saturated with concerns such as the Communicative approach, the dichotomy between acquisition and learning, and the roles of language input and student output. Second language acquisition, which was a major influence in language pedagogy, was itself a new and growing discipline, having branched off from more established disciplines such as theoretical linguistics, psychology and education. Furthermore, LA was more a localized issue, discussed primarily in the United Kingdom and Europe before important events in LA such as the founding of the Association of Language Awareness and the publication of research and thought concerning LA. Added to this was the elusiveness of the definition of LA among its proponents.

Various definitions of LA exist as proposed by its many proponents. Leo van Lier (1995), for example, defines language awareness as an "understanding of the human faculty of language and its role in thinking, learning and social life. It includes awareness of power and control through language, and the intricate relationships between language and culture" (p. xi). This definition clearly shows the vastness of the concept of LA as well as its far reaching influence. Indeed, Donmall (1995) as cited in Thornbury (1997) regards language awareness to cover all aspects of human life when he defines language awareness as "sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life". Consequently, because of the breadth of LA, different emphases have been placed on the concept of language awareness. The NCTE in the United States, for example, are concerned with Doublespeak, or the use of language to mislead and conceal information. Lutz (1988) emphasizes the need to raise language awareness on the potential abuse of language and the "perversion inherent in doublespeak" (p. 42). The Association of Language Awareness, on the other hand, focuses on a becoming better teachers, learners and users of the language through increased language awareness. This is in line with how Hawkins (1999) envisions LA and how it can hasten student language learning by challenging students to ask questions about language. In an earlier article, Hawkins (1984) expressed the promise of LA among students as "… lighting the fires of curiousity about the central human characteristic of language which will blaze throughout our pupils' lives" (p. 6). We can certainly see how LA can be an underlying educational approach that permeates all aspects of language teaching, from the teaching of the language skills to grammar and vocabulary.

Language Awareness and Teaching Grammar

In language pedagogy, probably more so in dealing with a second or foreign language, LA from the perspective of the teacher as well as the learner is often reflected by concepts such as *attention*, *noticing*, *consciousness* and even *focus* as in *focus on form*. Although these terms emerged from research done especially in Second Language Acquisition, they are not contrary to processes and goals of LA. In fact, because of the broad and holistic nature of LA, Svalberg (2007) comments that it may be possible to consider any teaching approach that aims to raise consciousness about how the language works as an LA related approach. However, she immediately points out that LA does tend to have certain specific characteristics. She refers to work by Wright & Bolitho (1993) and later Borg (1994) to elicit five major characteristics of an LA approach which are: an ongoing investigation of language, talking analytically about language, involvement of learners in exploration and discovery, learner skills leading to learner independence, and cognitive and affective involvement of learners (Svalberg, 2007, 290-91). Svalberg summarizes the picture of LA pedagogy as "one which aims to engender LA by learner engagement with the language, including the use of languaging, to construct knowledge

about the language in any of its domains affective, social, power, cognitive and performance" (p. 293).

It is possible for LA to be incorporated in the teaching of the four major language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. In discussing LA in writing, for example, Svalberg refers to research on how raising awareness on genre can help students, especially in identifying moves in a particular genre (Johns, 1997). Similarly, in listening and speaking, awareness of such language related features as phonetic prominence, intonation and oral communication strategies may lead to better mastery of the skills. These examples once again underscore the breadth of LA as not only limited to linguistic form but also to text types, prosodic features as well as language strategies in language learning and use. In this paper, however, the focus is on the incorporation of an LA approach in the teaching of grammar. In many second and foreign language teaching situations, grammar is taught as part of the teaching of the language skills, especially reading and writing. Nevertheless, even during those situations, we should still examine how best to present grammar and suggest a manner how LA can be integrated into its presentation.

Batstone (1995) suggests three interrelated approaches to the teaching of grammar which he refers to as teaching grammar as product, teaching grammar as process and teaching grammar as skill. Teaching grammar as product emphasizes the form of the grammatical structure while teaching grammar as process emphasizes its use and teaching grammar as skill focuses instead on developing the students' ability to become independent in dealing with grammatical aspects of language. Within these three approaches are processes that are directly or indirectly relevant to LA. More specifically, I believe that four of these processes can together represent a comprehensive approach to LA in the classroom. These processes are noticing, structuring, communicative use, and finally a collection of related activities which is referred to here as awareness enhancement. Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic representation of the four processes as stages in a grammar lesson.
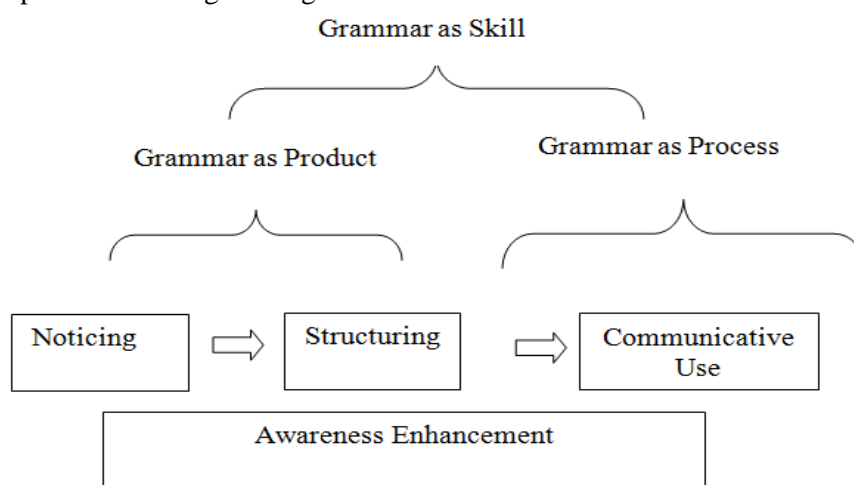

Fig. 1. Stages in a grammar lesson involving noticing, structuring, communicative use and reflection.

Noticing. The first of these processes is *Noticing*, a common enough concept in language pedagogy. Noticing is most commonly associated with Schmidt (1990) who remarks that "noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input into intake" (p. 29). Batstone's conceptualization of noticing does not differ tremendously as he positions it as the first requirement in learning grammar. He notes that "learners have to notice features of grammar before they can do anything with them" (p. 54).

Taking the classroom context into consideration, Batstone, however, expanded on the notion of noticing to noticing for the learner and noticing by the learner. In noticing for the learner, the teacher has set up the input in such a way that noticing the target grammatical structure becomes

obvious to the learner. In noticing by the learner, on the other hand, some effort needs to be made by the learner to notice the structure. Common noticing activities include input enhancement, short explicit grammar explanations as well posing questions to draw students attention to the target grammatical structure.

Structuring. The second process is *Structuring*, during which more common drill and practice activities may take place. The goal of structuring is to provide students with a safe and controlled environment in which to become familiar with the target structure. Batstone disagrees with noticing as being a sufficient condition for intake as claimed by Schmidt as he considers structuring to be a necessary follow-up to noticing. He notes that "once having noticed something about the grammar, learners have to act on it, building it into their working hypothesis about how grammar is structured" (Batstone, 1995: 59).
Structuring activities fall into a continuum that ranges from activities that require only mechanical manipulation of the target language forms at one end to activities that require students to "manipulate forms as choice to make meanings clear" (p. 72) at the other. The former type of activities are referred to by Batstone as "structuring for the learner activities" while the latter as "structuring by the learner activities", similar to the noticing activities previously mentioned. A simple example of a structuring for the learner activity is the mechanical language drill, while more meaningful drills in which students are given a choice in providing a response is more reflective of the structuring. Retaining drills, albeit in varying forms and as part of a larger approach, as part of an accepted technique in teaching grammar may be welcomed by many practitioners who are familiar with the technique. Dakin's work on language drills are valuable in obtaining a clearer idea of how drills can be effectively used in the language classroom.

Communicative Use. Communicative Use allows the students to use the grammar structure in more natural communicative contexts in order to develop proceduralized knowledge. In Batstone's three approaches to grammar teaching, there is no specific mention of communicative use although it is clearly implied under his Teaching Grammar as Process approach. Batstone once again takes the position of the teacher and views communicative use in terms of what he refers to as process teaching. In process teaching, the teacher will regulate elements of co-text found in everyday communication such as time and topic familiarity in order to gradually allow students to use the target structures in more authentic situations. Students can no longer seek refuge in the comfort of the controlled setting of structuring activities but will need to deploy their own resources and knowledge in communicating in more authentic everyday communicative events. A communicative use stage is essential in encouraging students to use the language in a setting where teachers gradually release much of the control they exert in drill and practice activities found in the earlier stages of grammar teaching.
Many activities can provide students with the opportunity for communicative language use. Gapped and task based activities offer the most common platforms. These activities require students to convey purposeful information accurately and can be designed to ensure that the target language structures are used. Similarly, Hussein (2014) uses ill-defined problems for students to work together and solve as a context for communicative use of language. In dealing with such problems, students will be able to come up with a variety of resolutions rather than being constrained to having to come up with only the one accepted response.

Awareness Enhancement. Batstone groups several activities under the Teaching Grammar as Skill approach. These activities – teaching noticing as a skill, grammaticisation and reflection – are intended to teach learners to "attend to grammar in language use" (p. 99). As such, I believe that these activities are most closely related to the concept of LA. Hence, activities such as these are referred to as Awareness Enhancement activities in this paper. Batstone also discusses these activities separately from the other two grammar teaching approaches of Teaching Grammar as Product and as Process. However, he notes that they provide a balance to the two

approaches and can serve as a bridge between the two. In this paper, I would like to suggest that these awareness enhancement activities can occur throughout the grammar teaching process and does not have to be regarded as a separate stage of a grammar lesson. Consequently, in Figure 1 presented earlier, Awareness Enhancement is placed not as a final stage in a sequence of stages but rather overlapping the noticing, structuring and communicative use stages of teaching.

LA can occur in the process of noticing by the teacher asking questions about a grammar structure after an appropriate stimulus is given. For example, after presenting students with a conversation in which both the present perfect and simple past tenses are used – e.g. *have worked* and *worked* – the student is asked to explain why the interlocutor uses one or the other as in the following example:

> Ahmad: I have worked as a teacher for 5 years and worked as a clerk for 10.
>
> Explain why Ahmad says that he "have worked" as a teacher but "worked" as a clerk?
> - Is he still working as a teacher?
> - Does he still work as a clerk?

This form of questioning can raise language awareness although it occurs at the noticing stage of the grammar lesson.

In the structuring stage of the grammar lesson, some examples of drills that require student engagement are Consequence, Hyponymy and antonym drills suggested by Dakin. In a consequence drill, for example, the repetitive nature of drills can still be maintained but meaning and context become important elements of the drill. The following is an example of such a drill:

> Stimulus: Raymond is such a nice man.
> Response: Good. I would like to meet him.
> Stimulus: This is an interesting book.
> Response: Good. I would like to read it.
> Stimulus: They play exciting football.
> Response: Good. I would like to watch them.

Although the drill is repetitive, the students cannot mechanically provide a response. Instead, they will need to understand elements of the stimulus – in this case the pronoun form, the adjective and the noun it describes – before they can provide an appropriate response.

Finally, LA can also be enhanced during the communicative use stage of the grammar lesson. Student reflection on their performance after they have completed a communicative task can be an important form of LA. This reflection can include how messages and intent were conveyed during the communicative activity and how they could have been done more effectively. Many classroom activities can benefit from a well conducted debriefing session although these sessions are seldom carried out sometimes because of time constraints and at other times because of the teacher's lack of familiarity with such an activity. In addition to this, the grammaticization activity suggested by Batstone can also be used during the communicative use stage to enhance LA. In this activity, students are provided a situation and some words which they should use to form sentences that are appropriate for the situation. In doing so, the students will have to use grammar to clearly convey their intended meanings. For example, students can be given a series of related pictures telling a story spanning past, present and future time accompanied by words in their base form. In order to tell the story, the students will have to use the correct form of verb according to its time of occurrence.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the concept and scope of Language Awareness. The pedagogical application of LA, together with specific characteristics of such an application was then discussed. In this respect, this paper proposes a four stage model for incorporating LA into the teaching of grammar based primarily on suggestions made by Batstone (1994). It argues that LA activities can be applied to various stages of a grammar learning programme and

supports this with sample activities for each stage. Nevertheless, practitioners and researchers alike must make further explorations into how LA can be incorporated into the language classroom, especially in the teaching of grammar. Svalberg (2007) concurs with Gnutzmann (1997) who argues that LA is a holistic approach and therefore various differing pedagogical orientations and ideologies can be accommodated with the approach. This paper has demonstrated this by amalgamating techniques such as drills and communicative practice which are akin to behavioural and communicative approaches together with a language awareness element. At the same time, it must be stated that if teachers are to gain from LA activities, the concept of LA needs to be more extensively researched. This is especially true in the Asian context where LA has not yet gained a strong foothold and where the intercultural and inter lingual aspects of Asian society can play a significant role in LA. There is a growing emphasis on encouraging LA among language teachers and this emphasis should be supported and strengthened. Teachers should first be sensitive to and aware of how language is used in order to guide their students to be similarly competent. It would be ideal if second and foreign language learners can treat and use the target language as if they were fish in water, but to get to such a stage will require them to first be aware of the medium, which in this case is the target language.

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