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Language Awareness and Cultural Awareness for Language Learners

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1. Language awareness: Past and present

Language Awareness is an approach to language learning and teaching that has been increasingly discussed and applied – both within the L1 and L2 context – during the past few years. Language Awareness has been especially prominent in the United Kingdom, where it originated (see eg. Hawkins 1984). At present, several conferences have been arranged, and a scientific journal called *Language Awareness* is regularly published. Language Awareness is not a methodology nor a theory of learning. Rather, it may be understood as a cover term for a wide range of approaches towards language and language teaching, all of which emphasize the aspect of language being something personal and meaningful.

Language Awareness is defined as follows by the (British) National Council for Language education (NCLE): „Language awareness is a person's sensitivity to and conscious perception of the nature of language and its role in human life" (James and Garrett eds. 1991: xi). Thus language awareness may be considered partly synonymous with *reflectivity* in matters of language/language learning, *sensitivity* to matters of language/language learning, and *ability to explore* language/language learning and appreciate it. Thus students in a foreign language classroom may be encouraged to think about the similarities and differences between languages. They can be given means to reflect themselves as learners. They may be given tasks that develop their ability to deal with language analytically. In this paper, I will discuss more closely what *language* in Language Awareness might refer to. I also explore some theoretical points and practical applications of Language Awareness in more detail.

When Language Awareness is put into action in the classroom, it may imply all such theories of learning and teaching, all such methods and all such activities that make language more accessible, and indeed, more alive for a learner. Language Awareness is often connected to the *learner-centered* approaches. One presupposition embedded in the notion of Language Awareness is that the level of awareness is not stable, but can be both *raised* and *focussed*, and that this is done in an *inductive* manner. Thus everyone of us may be naturally and spontaneously aware of various 'linguistic' matters, but the aim of teaching is to shape and increase conscious thought around a chosen aspect of language by offering the students such data that they are, for example, able to induce rules and regularities that underlie. In this process of becoming more aware, so it is optimistically argued, the level of language proficiency also increases.

These ideas are not necessarily new. To take one example only, van den Bosch, a Dutch scholar writing at the turn of the century, urged language teachers to show their pupils how to compare and distinguish, and how to find out things themselves; their aim was „to turn the youngster into a keen observer and a shrewd judge" (see van Essen 1992). Thus Language Awareness could also be characterized as the teacher's attitude – anyone who has ever taught language by any other means than explicit rules and structures to be learned by heart practises a Language Awareness approach.

2. Is language enough? Language, interaction and culture

It has become increasingly evident that learning of languages is not a matter of *language* only. Issues of *interaction* and *culture* are integral elements of language teaching. Therefore, it is not enough to make learners aware of language only. They must also be made interactively and culturally aware. It is essential for the language learner to realize how language is actually used in everyday interaction, and what is characteristic in a given culture.

Especially earlier, but to some extent even today, second language teaching has focussed on the structure of language. A foreign language is primarily seen in terms of a new code of grammar and new set of vocabulary that has to be forced upon the mind of the student. This emphasis on the structural and formal aspects of language can be called **formalist**, as opposed to **functionalism** which stresses the meaningful and functional element of language. A formalist language teacher starts from the formal elements of language (eg. *the past tense* or *the partitive case*), while a functionalist may try to get his/her students to see how *time* is expressed in this particular language or what is the function of a case called *partitive* in this language, and what are the possible other means that convey this function as well (see Martin 1993).

The knowledge of the language structure may be necessary for students, but they need also what can be called **pragmatic awareness**[1] (ie. knowledge about language use in the target culture) that is of crucial importance from the point of view of social interaction. It may simply be more important to sound polite than to be able to form correct sentences. Thus, when the term Language Awareness is used, it has to be specified that not only awareness of language structure is involved, but awareness of language use as well. Even though it is often claimed that the pragmatic features of a language can be taught only „after the students have learned the basic grammar", I do not find this view justified. Pragmatic awareness ensures that the first attempts to communicate in foreign language are likely to be successful (see also Muikku–Werner 1993).

Also, a strong emphasis on formalist and structural aspects of language may lead to increased knowledge of grammatical **facts** (ie. explicit knowledge about language) at the expense of **experiential** knowledge and **communicative skills**. In fact, this is well demonstrated in a study in which Finnish subjects were interviewed and their *concept of language teaching* was investigated. The general sentiment is summarized by a remark of one interviewee: „I know the grammar all right, but this is precisely what prevents me from opening my mouth" (Lähteenmäki 1994).

Too much grammar – in the form of explicit rules – may be a dangerous thing. But the warning against relying too heavily on the factual information applies to linguists as well. Linguistics is not necessarily a direct route, or the best route, to language awareness. This is particularly appropriate when the more formal and structural approaches to language are considered. Language Awareness classroom should not be turned into an introductory course on phonetics or a course in elementary syntax. And, although results of research on pragmatics or nonverbal communication might be fascinating and they might seem down-to-earth enough to be reported in the classroom, this may not be wise. Instead, it would be better to expose the students to relevant material and give them tasks to find out these things *themselves.*[2]

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[1] 'Pragmatic' is used here in a very wide sense, covering all language usage. Therefore, it includes such aspects of language that are studied within semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and social psychology, for example.

Language Awareness programs should also encourage the view of language as a form of **interaction**. It is not enough to consider language and linguistic properties, but also pragmatic and social features in interaction, including nonverbal behaviour. Also these features can be taken under observation and introspection in a foreign language classroom. The learners can be sensitized to various things: Are there different communicative styles in different cultures? What are the most notable differences between the source and target cultures? What types of nonverbal behaviour are regarded as impolite, rude or unsuitable in the target culture? Are gaze contact rules similar in the source culture and target culture? How are the male and female roles in interaction defined in that culture? Are there – in the target culture – wide differences in spoken language and nonverbal behaviour in respect to age, sex, class, or ethnic group?

Furthermore, to regard social interaction is to regard **culture**. Culture, not necessarily in the sense of fine arts, but especially in the sense of everyday behaviour and everyday thought cannot be excluded from language teaching or Language Awareness programs (for a teaching material, see eg. Dufva, Muikku–Werner and Aalto 1993). It is to be noted that culture does not only involve *external* elements, such as observable manners, habits, customs or rituals, but also *internal* aspect as well, such as notions, attitudes, beliefs and conceptual systems held by people living in this culture (for a theory of these cultural models, see eg. Holland and Quinn eds. 1987).

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[2] This does not mean that the teacher should *not* offer his/her expertise when needed. It may be helpful to know something about articulatory phonetics when learning pronunciation, and it may be helpful to illustrate structural differences between two sentence types with the help of a tree diagram.

Thus **language, interaction** and **culture** are three interrelated and intermingling aspects that are central for language awareness activities in a foreign language classroom.

3. Teachers and learners

Although Language Awareness may not be a theory of learning or a methodology of teaching as such, many people working with Language Awareness have emphasized the **learner-centered** views of language teaching (see eg. Holec 1980). In these approaches, language teaching is regarded as a process, in which the learner is put in the focus, and teaching is regarded from his/her point of view. You can consider questions like:

* what are the learner's goals? (eg. wants to learn English to be able to work abroad)
* how well is he motivated? (eg. is not really interested at all, attends only because it is obligatory)
* what are his own priorities? (eg. wants to be able to write business letters in German, is not interested in learning to speak without a foreign accent)
* what kind of learning style or cognitive style does he have? (eg. analytic vs. holistic)
* what does he know already? (eg. knows a few words of French)
* which aspects are OK, which need more work (eg. grammar, reading skills, articulation...)
* how are better results achieved? (eg. extra homework, focussed classroom activities, tailored tasks, notes, diaries...)
* what external resources are available (eg. language lab, audiotapes, videotapes, dictionaries, computer-assisted programs, library, resource persons...) ?

It is natural to emphasize methods which offer learners a possibility to develop their skills in a way of their own (eg. Smith 1984; Ellis and Sinclair 1989). When learners are made aware of their strengths and weaknesses and their goals are defined, they can be helped in finding the existing resources and strategies that could be useful in reaching the goals.

A learner-centered view, however, does not imply that the learner does all the work, or that the teacher is passive. On the contrary, it is possible that there is more work to do for the teacher, but the work is of a different kind. As a matter of fact, it could be suggested that the concept *learner-centered* itself is a bit biased as well. Learning and teaching could be considered in terms of a common enterprise, a system, or a **dialogue**. Dialogical thought, or dialogicism (for an introduction, see eg. Markova and Foppa eds. 1990) emphasizes the fact that no action can be regarded in individual terms only, but that it is always interactive in nature. To take one example, it is easy to see that everyday talk is a system that consists of its participants (ie. the speaker and the hearer) and their environment. More than that, however, language itself is a dialogical phenomenon, as was argued by Bakhtin. Language is grounded in interaction and therefore, it cannot exist acontextually at all (see eg. Bakhtin 1986; Vološinov 1990). Thus we arrive at the idea that not only external behaviours (such as speaking, for example) are to be seen as interactions, but that all human knowledge is interactive in character as well.

This view creates also new demands on what is being taught and how it is being done. In dialogical thought, *negotiation of meanings* is a central concept. According to Rommetveit (1988), it is time to reject the myth of literal meanings. Meanings that are conveyed in communication are negotiable, not static. Meaning (of an utterance, for example) is ontologically vague – and the notion that in communication an idea (or proposition) is transferred from one mind to another has to be seen as false. Instead, it can be argued that meaning is something that is generated *within a given situation*, and results from *co-operation between the participants*. This coincides extremely well with the teaching ideal expressed by Paulo Freire: a teacher is not supposed to transfer his/her own meanings to his/her students, not to be „a simple bank depositor in the students' accounts" (see Freire 1972; Scott 1991). On the contrary, a teacher is supposed to help his/her students to their own meanings, to increase their own capital. It is thus as necessary for the teacher to be aware as it is for the learner – to reflect upon his/her own beliefs, knowledge system and how they affect what is being communicated in the classroom (Aalto 1994, forthcoming).

In a dialogical classroom (see eg. Nystrand 1992), *roles and relationships* of the classroom are more flexible than traditionally. The teacher and his/her students stand in a **reciprocal** relationship: what one does has an effect on the other, but both can vary their roles. In a dialogical frame, a teacher could assume any of the roles below:

Teacher as a (linguistic and cultural) informant. This means that a teacher is linguistically and culturally – to the extent needed in a given course – aware of the features typical for the target language/culture, and also able to function as a member of this linguistic and cultural community. This role is advantageous for a native teacher: a teacher of Finnish speaks fluent Finnish, knows how to behave in the *sauna*, eats *mämmi* at Easter, and knows who *Martti Ahtisaari*, *Juha Kankkunen* and *Karita Mattila* are. Non-native teachers may find this role more difficult – but also they should remember that they can excel in other roles – those that do not require a native-like linguistic and cultural competence.

Teacher as an expert. The teacher is also a resource person who has specialized knowledge on both language, learning and teaching. Thus, a teacher is able to formulate explicit rules of grammar when needed and offer expert knowledge on linguistic and cultural matters – when required. A teacher of Finnish, for example, has such explicit knowledge about grammar and usage that is not required from a layman. In addition, a teacher may have extra knowledge on some area of language study which s/he may share with his/her students, remembering, however, that „one great danger of acquiring a specialist knowledge about language is the possible desire to show learners that you have this knowledge" (Wright 1991: 68–69).

Teacher as a negotiator. In addition, a teacher may have a negotiating role: s/he will summarize and explicate the ideas expressed by the learners, and point out how they may be developed. The teacher is certainly also allowed to express his/her own opinions, preferences and priorities. In many cases, however, it is not necessary to treat the teacher's remarks as given norms, but as *facts liable for negotiation*. In practice, the negotiating role of the teacher would include such functions as a chairperson, go-between, referee, and authority when necessary.

Teacher as a learner. Finally, a teacher is someone who is also supposed to learn. This is especially natural and spontaneous in a multilingual and multicultural classroom. When the teacher represents a different linguistic, cultural or ethnic group than his/her students, this allows a natural outlet for the 'exchange of roles'. The teacher can learn from his/her pupils about their language and their culture. As a by-product, the students feel appreciated and accepted.

Also, a teacher often is imprisoned with his/her predilections of how things are best learned and therefore, how they should be taught. It is a fresh experience to try to see how things look when regarded from a beginner's or a layman's point of view. Why not ask which methods and strategies learners have used themselves in self-study and how they seem to work? And why not try some of these methods and activities in classroom as well? A teacher who reflects upon his/her role and looks at the world from the point of view of his/her students is a participant in a personal teacher training program (see eg. Wright 1987; Aalto, forthcoming).

It is essential that language learners will find the joys of language learning and their own strengths: an experiental relationship to the substance to be learnt and an optimistic approach how this substance is best learned. Such a world view cannot be handed down by the teacher – it is something the learner needs to find by him/herself. The teacher, however, can help to create an atmosphere in which this is possible.

4. How to become aware?

As the needs of teachers, learners and groups differ, there is hardly a set of common activities to increase awareness. Beginners are different from advanced students, children need different input than adults do, and, in addition, there are huge individual differences between learners. Some will learn by reading books, others will learn only by trying something themselves. Some are reflective observers by nature, while others like to act.

Also things to be taught and learned differ. The pupils need to assume both theoretical knowledge and pragmatic skills. They need passive recognition skills as well as active, well-rehearsed routines. They need to be able to articulate well enough, but also to write comprehensible sentences. Some of the things may be of crucial importance, while others might be trivial. Learning how to make a plural form may require a drastically different approach than learning how to articulate a sound foreign to one's mother tongue.

In the following, some general ideas for activities are listed which can be further specified and modified for the purposes of a given course.

Talk. To talk about something may seem too trivial to mention. Nevertheless, Socrates taught with talk, and to this day, the method works just as well. In addition, it is simple – and cheap. All you need is time. When you talk about something, you think about something – and you learn to compare your own patterns of thought and experiences to those of others. On the whole, talk, at best, is a process in which new approaches and unthought aspects may appear (see Bain 1991; Howe 1992). And, although a teacher may be a disciplinary authority, he should not be an omnipotent epistemological authority. Talk is dialogue, not interrogation. Talk is generated in *groupwork, co-operative tasks, debates, and interviews*, but also in *small-talk* (for activity types, see eg. Wingate 1993).

Observation and introspection. Learners may also be asked to explicitly observe and/or to record various things: language use in a political debate, nonverbal behaviour of males vs. females, the progress of their own language learning, to take a couple of examples only. Observations can be done individually, as pair-work, or in groups. Depending on the situation and time, this could be done as naturalistic fieldwork and notes could be recorded in diaries, for example. It can also be pre-arranged by the teacher who will provide the pictures, newspaper clippings, ads, texts, tapes, or video-tapes to be observed. Data can be discussed and reported using blackboard, transparencies, newspaper clippings, drawings, posters, mini-articles etc. Introspection can be encouraged in using different techniques arranging from diaries to thinking aloud experiments.

Tasks. Possible tasks that increase awareness of language are many, ranging from trivial games to serious intellectual problems. The tasks that can be given to learners vary from group to group.

Children may love games, youngsters may feel comfortable with computer games, and adults may want to focus on text analysis or solving a difficult puzzle. Various activities suitable for Language Awareness classroom include *rhyming, word play, tongue twisters, crossword puzzles, games, trivia, quizes, role play, modified psycholinguistic experiments...* The teacher is usually able to find various exercise types and activities not only in professional literature (for process writing, see eg. Linnakylä, Mattinen ja Olkinuora 1989; for role play and drama, see eg. Pasanen 1992), but also by adopting the practices of everyday life to the purpose of language teaching. Why not use commercial games, steal an idea from a television quiz show or adopt an exercise from a primary school textbook?

The activities above naturally intertwine. Doing a crossword puzzle may lead to talk, while talking may lead to closer observation of a particular point in language and behaviour.

5. What's the use of being aware?

James and Garrett (1991:12f) discuss five different domains on which the learner may gain by being involved in Language Awareness activities. One is the **affective** domain, which means that students may become more intensively, or holistically, involved and establish a personal relationship to language. It is natural that motivation to learn is increased when the emotions are positive: when interest is aroused by intellectual curiosity or aesthetic admiration. To acquire new insights into language may be fun, and should be fun, especially as many people still seem to have strongly negative memories about how they were taught foreign languages (see eg. Lähteenmäki 1994). Cognition and emotion *do* go hand in hand in the learning process: learning occurs when a new stimulus arouses one's interest and challenges one to learn. Cognitive insights are thus accompanied by appropriate emotional states (for a background in neurosciences, see eg. Jacobs and Schumann 1992).

The second is the **social** domain which deals with how the student will perceive the relationship between language and society: How is language used? How do different groups use language? What norms exist? What attitudes are held? James and Garrett (1991) see this domain as being of special importance in multicultural settings in which increased tolerance and consequently, better relations between ethnic groups are strived for.

In the **power domain,** people who become aware also become alerted to hidden meanings, tacit assumptions and rhetorical traps laid by those in power. Being aware of the possibly manipulative and euphemistic uses of language makes one also more empowered. At first sight, the power domain may seem of little importance in second language teaching, but social values and attitudes – sometimes very implicit and worth exposing – are being held also there.

Is it not true, for example, that in every culture certain foreign languages, and certain communicative patterns are regarded as 'better' than others (see eg. Dufva et al. 1989). Finns, for example, tend to admire French as a language of civilization, or marvel at the American fluency at small talk, while condemning their own language and own traditional ways of talk and means of communication as inferior. Similarly, is there not *linguistic imperialism* (see Phillipson 1992) present in the status that the English language holds, not only politically as a world language, but also within linguistics and within language learning/teaching research? And what about the 'linguistic rights' of the language learner, who has always been infavourably compared to *the native speaker*, linguistically and communicatively omnipotent (the view has been criticized by Kachru 1986). When the myth of native competence is abandoned, it may be found that native speakers make mistakes as well (see eg. Dufva 1992) and that their communicative skills and verbal abilities vary to a great extent. How can we aim at a native competence, if there is not any, just varying speakers, varying skills and varying situations?

Thus language awareness can, and indeed should, also imply a critical attitude, such as present in eg. *critical language awareness* (see eg. Fairclough ed. 1992). Language teaching is not an asocial venture: social values are present, however implicit they may be.

James and Garrett (1991) also suggest that an improvement is possible in the **cognitive** domain. When the learner is guided to perceive organizatory principles in language, to see units, categories, rules, patterns, and contrasts, he is shown at the same time new cognitive strategies and perhaps skills. Much research related to this area has been done on **metalinguistic awareness**, or on whether the subjects (often children) are aware of a given unit of language, and/or a given property of language (for a good survey, see Gombert 1992).

Whether students who participate a Language Awareness activity really benefit from it in the **performance** domain seems to be still dubious. Does Language Awareness help people to become better language learners? More fluent speakers? More skilfull communicators? Better persons? Opinions seem to be undetermined (see eg. Section 5 in James and Garrett eds. 1991). One way of giving an answer, however, is to ask *what we mean by good, fluent and skillful in our societies*. Is a good language learner a person who does not make mistakes and speaks without a foreign accent? Or is a good language learner a person who is a good conversationalist? A person who can write good prose? A person who learns quickly? There are no definite answers. Perhaps the questions themselves could be a critical awareness project in foreign language classroom?

My suggestion is that a good language learner is a person who has found his/her own voice. In this, language awareness is clearly helpful. Even if the voyage were not fast, the learner proceeds – at his or her own pace – towards the day when he or she has a mental textbook of his own: *Language: Owner's Handbook*. This is certainly worth the effort.

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