

# Language awareness and the education of non-native English teachers in South America: *TLA concept review and implications*

Evelin Suij-Ojeda

evelinsuij-ojeda@westcliff.edu

## Abstract

Reflecting upon language allows teachers, not only to have a greater insight on how English, the language they teach works in the “real world”, but also helps them design activities for their learners to discover language by themselves while, as stated by Bolitho (2003), promoting independent and critical thinking in their classrooms. This paper explores the implications and theoretical foundations of introducing Language Awareness activities as part of the curriculum in teacher education programs in South America. Because of its length, this paper does not intend to recommend a solution to the issue but analyses the theories that support the inclusion of TLA activities as part of the English Language teacher training and education curriculum. Besides, it forecasts the implications derived from such implementation and changes.

## Introduction

Considering my experience as a teacher educator with more than 20 years of expertise in the field, I believe pre-service teachers or teacher trainees require implicit and explicit knowledge not only of the teaching craft, but also of the English language to carry out their job in the most effective possible way. This transition from learner to teacher must be carefully planned and take into consideration many aspects of language and didactic these future teachers might need when facing a real classroom with at least 40 pupils, sometimes reluctant to learn a new language.

McNeill (2016) states that while teacher language awareness (TLA) receives little attention, thus not much research, native and non-native English language teachers are assessed and compared in terms of how versed they are in terms of pedagogical knowledge: strategies, techniques and overall teaching styles, along with how competent they are in the target language.

While having taught for so long, and after dealing myself with the challenges most English language teachers encounter in the classroom, I came to a realisation: Language awareness is a KEY factor to the education of pre-service teachers: the more they know about language and the way it functions in different contexts, the better they will perform as English teachers because this knowledge of the language will provide them with the confidence needed to deal with the different aspects of the English Language taught in their classrooms. That is why if TESOL programs worldwide want to transform their students from dependent to autonomous learners and teachers, we need to introduce Teacher Language Awareness (*TLA*) to their curriculum.

As a language teacher and teacher educator, I know that language awareness is not always an issue in most of the syllabi of the subjects taught as part of the curriculum in most teacher education programs in Latin America. There might be many courses that deal with skills development such as didactics, phonology, culture, EFL and the like, but the objective is not to develop language awareness as a mean to educate better English teachers: The aim is to teach language competence with the assumption that is what is needed: nothing more.

The reality proves something is missing: trainee teachers invest five years of their lives, eight hours a day, five days a week being trained to become English teachers, but they do not have the chance to reflect, analyze and further research on the matter; They go straight to public

schools to teach without having realised of the importance of language awareness, sometimes not even having heard of it or how their identity as language users, analysts and teachers influences their practice inside the classroom.

Bolitho (2003), when answering the question about the relationship between language awareness and existing models of teaching education, declares what is exactly happening at higher education institutions in South America: pre-service teacher's education programs usually include a language system component (grammar, phonology, semantics, etc) and a language improvement course to make sure trainee teachers achieve English proficiency. But according to this author, the two aspects mention before, proficiency and knowledge of the language, are not enough; to be able to plan classes, forecast students' difficulties and possible questions, assess didactic materials, among others, pre-service teachers need to be able to analyse language as it is used in real contexts. The only way to do so is by promoting independence and critical thinking within the curriculum in teacher education.

Following the same theme, Senior (2006) states a priority for trainee teachers is to master as many language teaching techniques and skills as they can during the period of their training. Even at an early stage in their professional careers, significant number of trainee teachers has irritating feelings than there is more to teaching than simply teaching lessons in a fun and effective way. The reasons newly teachers might feel that way can be due to the fact their students expect them to know "everything" about English, how it functions as a system and request teachers to explain it all. This phase, where future teachers struggle to find meaning among knowledge is a stage of awakening arising from within: becoming a language teacher is about far more than mastering a fixed number of classroom strategies and abilities, it is about understanding how English, the language they are learning and teaching (sometimes at the same time) works in real life.

## **Discussion**

### *Language Awareness*

As a starting point, it is crucial to define what language awareness is, what it implies and involves so as making sense of its relevance in the training and education of English language teachers. For that reason, I wanted to know what teacher trainers at one university in Venezuela

thought about Language Awareness, so I emailed some ex-colleagues and asked them to give me their personal explanation of what LA is. Two experienced language teachers / teacher educator were the only ones answering and here I share their enriching insights:

*“For me it's the deep and conscious knowledge about any language, which covers its understanding in grammar and grammatical uses, its phonetic and anthropology, and most important of all its use in different contexts and the benefits it can give to the development of any person, their careers or lifestyles”. -- Ann*

*“Language Awareness: The process of consciously discovering and understanding language features (vocabulary, grammar, sounds, other) received from (non)deliberate reading and listening input. Becoming aware of language is essential to subsequently integrating the features discovered in articulate spoken and written language. This conscious understanding may be take place during language teaching or spontaneous discovery by the student's innate and developed cognitive and learner skills”. --Andrés*

The above comments from these two Venezuelan teacher educators I have worked with are a testimony there is a common understanding of what language awareness is and the benefits it has in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Language awareness implies implicit and explicit knowledge of the language, how it works in “real life”, how it is used by native speakers from different contexts, its variations; it is understanding language as a flexible mean to convey meaning taking into consideration internal and external factors, including socio-cultural features.

An array of research papers, books and documents have addressed Language Awareness, and in the last 20 years, this topic has been studied by experts in SLA. This paper shares some of the concepts of LA I find more digestible and easy for teachers to understand.

For Hales (1997) Language Awareness could be glossed as sensitivity to grammatical, analysis lexical, or phonological features, and the effect on meaning brought about using different forms. Language analysis can be viewed as the process of identifying and examining

linguistic features to see how they function, and from this deriving an explanation for their use. (Some might also like to add to both definitions the ability to explain these features.) Awareness is thus seen as a competence, whereas analysis is an activity, but the two are inextricably connected. From one perspective, it is possible to view awareness as considering analysis, as the capacity of awareness presupposes the ability to identify linguistic features as a starting point. Also, the process of analysing language can, if successful, develop awareness.

According to Tomlinson (2003), LA is a mental attribute which is developed through paying motivated attention to language in use which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work. It is also a pedagogic approach that aims to help learners to achieve such insights. Carter (2003) points out that language awareness refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language. The approach has been developed in contexts of both second and foreign language learning, and in mother-tongue language education, where the term 'knowledge about language' has sometimes been preferred.

Accurately, Arndt et al (2000) point out that LA is something that takes language "out of the classroom" and places it in the real world and the way it influences their attitudes; It deals with the way people perceive language They also describe a quite detailed framework for language awareness in use taking into consideration a socio-cultural perspective of language as dynamic, flexible, complex and never context free; For these researchers, all the following features are equally important and not mutually exclusive:

- *Knowledge of the world*: How our vision of the world, culture, prior experiences, etc influence the way we use and understand language.
- *Context*: How language can be different according to the context we deal with. Here, the importance of situation and environment is highlighted.
- *Variety*: the different forms in which language appears: written, oral, source, situation, dialects and the like.
- *Medium*: The means through language is displayed. A written and spoken medium along with style and form play a major role when conveying meaning.

- *Attitude*: People have different attitudes towards language and use language to convey such features.
- *Effectiveness*: how successful the user is when delivering the appropriate message and achieving his/her purpose.
- *Structure*: It deals basically with how language is organized and structured to understand how language works. Not only syntax is included, but also vocabulary and pronunciation are important aspects of structure.
- *Flexibility*: The language is lively and flexible to adapt to any given situation.

To summarize, all the authors above mentioned agree that Language Awareness is a conscious mental characteristic that analyses language as a complex, contextualized and flexible matter. Such awareness needs to be internalized to identify key features and relevant insights with the purpose of shaping our identity as language users, analysts and teachers. Highlighting the importance of language awareness and how teachers can incorporate it not only in the classrooms as core part of the lessons, but also as part of their teaching training, is a crucial aspect that will be discussed below.

#### *Teacher Language Awareness*

Having such enriching concepts of *Language Awareness* stated in previous paragraphs, it is now important to establish connections between such conceptions and the training/education of teachers in English as an additional language: the Teacher Language Awareness (*TLA*) concept then arises.

*TLA* is a complex subject and it affects pedagogical practice since, according to my experience as a teacher at all levels, if teachers know how language really works, they will feel more confident when making decisions in the classroom, and consequently they will engage with any content-related issues that arise while teaching; they will be able to answer what choices they made and why. Currently, most higher education programs in South America are graduating teachers who, based on informal chats held with teacher trainees, do not feel confident enough to face a classroom since they think they do not really know how the English language works: they have a good proficiency level, but the awareness of the language as a whole complex system is missing.

In that matter, Garreth (2013) discussing Language Awareness in teacher education programmes for non-native speakers points out that knowledge about language also makes a powerful psychological contribution to the teacher's work - confidence. This confidence may be fundamental for any teacher but even more so for the non-native speaker who may be held up as a role model and source of information about the language. Very often, demands like those placed on native speakers of English are placed upon non-native-speaker teachers. They are expected to know their language, both as user in the everyday sense and as technician in the didactic sense. Here, the user and the analyst perfectly combine.

In addition, Andrews (2016) defines language awareness as "the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively". According to such a view, TLA is essentially concerned with subject-matter knowledge and its impact upon teaching.

Later, Andrews (2007) understands Thornbury's (1997) definition of Teacher Language Awareness as "the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively", and claims TLA must do with subject-matter knowledge and its impact towards the teaching practice: bottom line: L2 teachers need to function as language analysts to understand how language works in different settings in real life. In that way, they will enhance their teaching practice.

Furthermore, for Wright and Bolitho (1993) the more aware a teacher is of language and how it works, the better. A linguistically-aware teacher will be in a strong and secure position to achieve various tasks such as: preparing lessons, evaluating, adapting, and writing materials; understanding, interpreting, and ultimately designing a syllabus or curriculum; testing and assessing learners' performance; and contributing to English language work across the curriculum.

This applies equally to teachers of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) origin. It follows that a short or lack of awareness of language often makes itself visible at classroom level - for example when a teacher is not capable to identify and balance for shortcomings in a course book, or is 'caught out' by a learner's question on the language.

To sum up, we have discussed what Language Awareness implies as well as the concept of Teacher Language Awareness and its impact in the classroom practice; these theories support the idea to introducing LA activities into the teacher education curriculum with the aim of training independent, competent, effective and efficient English teachers who can cope with the ongoing and dynamic reality faced inside language classrooms in South America nowadays.

#### *TLA activities and the Curriculum*

For designing effective and efficient L2 teacher education courses, it is important to consider the three main roles trainee teachers need to take on according to Edge (1988): those of language user, language analyst and language teacher. These three roles involve very specific competences, but overlap and complement one another. That is what it takes to be a good language teacher: being able to use the language, talk about the language and teach it at the same time.

To welcome TLA activities in any courses taught within the teacher education programs taking place in Latin America, and with the purpose in mind of linking the user, analyst and teacher domain, Wright (2002) describes the stages to follow:

*Stage 1: Working on language data.* Students work with linguistic data, considering their previous experiences and their current views and discuss them with their classmates.

*Stage 2: Looking back – Reviewing.* The participants reflect on stage 1 and draw some new linguistic insights. Stages 1 and 2 are also known as “awareness-raising process”.

*Stage 3: Making sense.* Participants work together to make sense of what happened in stage 1 and 2. They formulate rules that can be helpful in the classroom.

*Stage 4: Linking.* Analysing the practical side of language to link what was learnt to how to use it in the classroom for teaching purposes.

*Stage 5: To the classroom.* It is the last stage and it deals with engaging trainees with the planning of language activities, taking the insights discussed as a basis.

The five-stage TLA procedure explained previously can be completed within any course and there is no need for the teacher educator to change the materials they are already working with. It is all about the way they approach the materials and what they do with it in the language classroom. If time is the limitation, then I would suggest resorting to an online component to help



students shape their teacher identity, therefore become better English teachers. If teacher trainers' language awareness is the issue, then training the teachers on TLA is the answer.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher Language Awareness plays a major role of paramount importance in the education of future language teachers: it helps boost teacher confidence in the handling of language features that might arise in the classroom while teaching at any level. Besides, the more I read the more I realise my role as teacher educator must go beyond teaching methodology, it needs to aim at helping trainees understand what makes a good teacher: substantial command of the English language, excellent understanding of its features and considerable management of teaching approaches to face the challenges encountered in the classrooms.

The teaching craft is so complex, and enriching at the same time, that having the opportunity to reflect on the different roles that we teachers can undertake to help our students to enhance their English language skills is an opportunity that every educator should appreciate.

## REFERENCES

- Andrews, S. (2001). The Language Awareness of the L2 Teacher: Its Impact Upon Pedagogical Practice. *Language Awareness, 10*(2-3), 75-90.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658410108667027>
- Andrews, S. (2007). *Teacher language awareness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Andrews, S., & Svalberg, A. M. (2016). Teacher language awareness. *Language Awareness and Multilingualism, 1-12*.
- Arndt, V. (2000) *Alive to language*. Cambridge. Cambridge University press
- Bolitho, R. (2003). Ten questions about language awareness. *ELT Journal, 57*(3), 251-259.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/57.3.251>
- Carter, R. (1999). Editorial. *Language Awareness, 8*(1), 1-2.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658419908667112>
- Edge, J. (1988). Applying linguistics in English language teacher training for speakers of other languages. *ELT Journal, 42*(1), 9-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/42.1.9>
- Hales, T. (1997). Exploring data-driven language awareness. *ELT Journal, 51*(3), 217-223.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/51.3.217>
- James, C., Garrett, P., & Candlin, C. N. (2014). *Language awareness in the classroom*. Routledge.
- McNeill, A. (2017). Native and non-native teachers' sensitivity to language learning difficulties from a learner's perspective: Implications and challenges for teacher education. *Native and Non-Native Teachers in English Language Classrooms: Professional Challenges and Teacher Education, 26*, 239.
- Senior, R. (2006) *The Experience of language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Thornbury, S. (1997). *About Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, T. (1993). Language awareness: a missing link in language teacher education? *ELT Journal, 47*(4), 292-304. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/47.4.292>
- Wright, T. (2002). *Doing language awareness: Issues for language studies in teacher education*. Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.