

2 Teaching and learning Language Awareness

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Key Words

Language proficiency and Language Awareness (LA)

Teacher Language Awareness (TLA)

English as a global language

Language change

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What are LA and TLA?

Why is language awareness important in the context of teaching English in Austria?

What should an up-to-date concept of (T)LA include?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Historically, there used to be a clear distinction between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) in ELT theory, which is illustrated by Kachru's model of the three circles (cited in Rose et al., 2020). In this model, English is spoken as a native language in countries such as the USA, the UK and Ireland (inner circle); it has an official role in countries such as India (outer circle); and it is learned as a foreign language in many other countries (expanding circle). Austria, as an expanding circle country, would traditionally have been considered the province of English as a Foreign Language. However, the role of English as a global language is now subverting the model of the three circles.

Although English has no official role in Austria (unlike minority languages such as Croatian in the province of Burgenland), it plays an important and growing role in everyday life. Smit and Schwarz (2020) find that English is the most frequently used and most prominent language after German in Austria and see this as a sign of a "growing de facto bilingualism" in Austrian society, particularly among the younger generation (p. 299). The ease and confidence with which many young people now use English, however, is only partly due to the fact that Austrian learners of English start studying the language in their first year of primary school, if not before, and that they are expected to reach CEFR level B2 by the time they take their secondary school leaving exam. Informal learning of English outside a traditional classroom setting also plays an important role. This development is attracting some research

interest at the moment, as the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is becoming more conscious of the growing role of what has been described as extramural English (EE). For example, in Austria a study shows that 15/16-year-old teenagers spend more than four hours per day engaging with English on average. Popular activities include listening to music, watching films online and reading in social media, but more niche activities such as fan-fiction writing or online gaming also play a role. This informal input far exceeds the input the teenagers receive in their English lessons in school (Smit & Schwarz, 2020).

Thus, learners of English in Austria, as expanding circle users of English, have needs that extend beyond foreign language use. In other words, due to its dominance in media and culture, English can no longer be considered a purely ‘foreign’ language for Austrian learners. There can be no doubt that English is now an international, global language and is perceived as such by today’s learners. They understand that they will use English not only to communicate with people from English-speaking countries, but also as a global lingua franca. Teachers will have to adapt their classroom practices to this new reality, and (Teacher) Language Awareness plays a key role here.

Defining Language Awareness (LA) and Teacher Language Awareness (TLA)

There are many different definitions of LA, but one of the most commonly cited ones is by the Association for Language Awareness, which defines LA as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (Association for Language Awareness, n.d.). This definition does not only cover LA in the field of foreign language teaching, but is more general. For example, questions of LA arise in fields such as advertising or language use in multilingual settings. Nor is LA only relevant to L2 contexts. In fact, the concept of Knowledge about Language (KAL) was developed in Britain in the late 1980s in response to a perceived need for better L1 literacy teaching in British schools which was understood to require “conscious awareness of the nature of language in its social, affective and cognitive domains” (Komorowska, 2014, p. 5). This interest in LA was later transferred to the fields of SLA research and English language teaching.

In this chapter, we will focus on the role of LA in teaching English in Austria. Both components of the definition of LA quoted above – explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception of and sensitivity towards language – are highly relevant to ELT.

First of all, being language-aware means possessing explicit knowledge about language. This should not be confused with language proficiency: while language proficiency is implicit and intuitive, LA is conscious and explicit (Thornbury, 2017). Even very proficient speakers of a language may find it difficult to discuss its properties (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) explicitly. Being able to explain language phenomena to learners is obviously a very important skill for a language teacher to have, and it requires LA.

Conscious perception and sensitivity towards language, the second part of the definition, refer to the way a person engages with language. Arndt et al. (2000) describe language-aware individuals as being “‘alive’ to language”, by which they mean that they show curiosity about how language works and a general interest in language phenomena (p. 11). According to Young (2018), being language-aware requires “simple curiosity, open-mindedness and a willingness to undertake life-long learning” (p. 35). This aspect of LA can help a language teacher improve their knowledge base and gain a more sophisticated understanding of the material they teach.

Thus, it could be said that LA is relevant to language teaching in two ways: as teachers, we want our learners to develop LA; and we can only achieve this if we have a high degree of LA ourselves. The concept of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) comprises both of these aspects. A popular definition of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) is “the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively” (Thornbury, 1997, p. x). This focus on language systems has meant that TLA has often been reduced to an understanding of the grammar of the L2, but this is a misconception. It should be “seen as applying in principle to the full range of a teacher’s language knowledge and awareness, not just grammar”, including, for example, an awareness of register and language variation (Andrews, 2003, p. 75). In addition to that, up-to-date conceptualisations of TLA should arguably also include an awareness of the current role of English as a global lingua franca and of language change, which have an impact on the way we teach English today.

Expanding the concept of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA)

As teachers of a global language, we have to be aware that providing input for our learners is no longer our primary function as the English language is all around our students in an easily accessible form, thanks to the internet, readily available e-books, social media, etc. The function of the English teacher therefore needs to shift from providing input to helping students learn from the input in the world around

them. They have to support learners in developing an awareness of various different language elements (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical structures, register) so that they can eventually develop as users of English beyond the classroom and without explicit instruction.

English teachers can also not afford to ignore the fact that the English language is changing rapidly. According to David Crystal (2001), developing a methodology that recognizes and adapts to language variation and change is even the most important challenge facing English teachers today: “[T]here is no doubt in my mind that the concept of ‘best practice’ for the next century will need to be grounded in a dynamic linguistic relativism, recognizing as axiomatic the notions of variation and change. This is the chief challenge facing ELT specialists” (p. 63). To ensure the relevance of the English which is learned in the classroom, teachers have to be aware of the processes of change that are at work around us. This awareness should have an impact on a variety of classroom practices, from grammar teaching to error correction.

To summarize, then, an up-to-date concept of TLA should include an awareness of the global role of English and of changes in the English language as well as an awareness of the language system.

Impact on classroom practices

All three components of LA discussed above have (or should have) an impact on classroom practices.

As for an awareness of the underlying system of English, this meta-linguistic understanding of the L2 allows teachers to monitor their learners’ progress more closely and contributes to a deeper understanding of individual language development. A teacher with a well-developed TLA can uncover gaps in the learners’ knowledge, which in turn allows them to customize feedback procedures. For example, a teacher with a well-developed understanding of the language system does not only spot an error in a learner text, they also understand the source of the error (e.g., L1 interference, overgeneralisation). They can then specifically address the source of the error in their feedback and point the learner towards appropriate resources.

A well-developed awareness of the language system also allows teachers to understand learners’ needs at a particular stage of their language development and to provide content on a level appropriate to learners’ proficiency. Firstly, this concerns their own language use. Teachers who are proficient speakers of the language

may have got into the habit of using complex language structures or idiomatic expressions automatically, and it takes practice to understand which ones cause difficulties to the learners. A teacher who is aware of the idiosyncrasies of their own language use can adapt it to their learners' level. Secondly, this is relevant for designing effective language learning tasks. In order to do so, the teacher has to have a clear understanding of the language goal of the task, which requires an in-depth understanding of the underlying language structures. They also have to be able to look at the task from the learner's perspective to assess how challenging it is likely to be and if it will allow learners to notice the language feature a particular task is intended to teach. In this way, they will be successful at designing tasks which, in turn, raise learners' LA.

Similarly, a good understanding of the language system allows teachers to critically evaluate and adapt all kinds of published teaching materials to suit their learners' needs or even simply makes them better at understanding the goal of a task in a coursebook (see chapter 6 in this volume). For example, coursebooks sometimes include pronunciation tasks that are intended to familiarise learners with a specific aspect of pronunciation, such as the different ways of pronouncing the past tense suffix *-ed*. A teacher who has a good understanding of this feature of English pronunciation, rather than just the ability to produce the feature correctly themselves, will get more out of the materials and be better able to support their learners' emerging awareness of the feature in question.

Concerning an awareness of the global role of English, this is important so that teachers can make sure that the language they teach is relevant to their learners' goals, i.e., what they are likely to use English for. As we said above, learners in Austria will overwhelmingly use English for lingua franca communication. Teachers and learners could explore examples of lingua franca communication together and discuss what qualities a successful communicator needs in such settings. These skills (e.g., paraphrasing) could then be practiced in class.

Another way to ensure the relevance of the content taught is to work with the English the learners engage with outside of class, for example, the teacher and the learners could analyse some film dialogue together and discuss features such as puns and other forms of language play. This can encourage learners to move beyond simply understanding what is going on and engage with language on a deeper level. Such tasks contribute to the development of learners' LA and pave the way for more autonomous language learning.

It is also possible to foster language engagement and learner autonomy by giving learners opportunities to become aware of their own learning process and the level

of English they have already reached. This may take the form of class discussions, (anonymous) surveys and feedback forms, for example. At the end of a teaching segment, the teacher may choose to let students evaluate the segment with regard to retained elements, self-assessment of their own progress and areas that need further attention. Many coursebooks now encourage this kind of reflection.

As for language change, language-aware teachers should make sure, most of all, that the language they use in the classroom reflects contemporary standards. The ‘singular they’ is a good example. It was seen as incorrect not too long ago, but is now an accepted way to use English in a gender-neutral way. It is important that teachers also explicitly discuss such developments so that their learners understand that language is not static, but dynamic, and they may well notice changes themselves over the course of their career as language learners.

As can be seen from these examples, “pupil language awareness does indeed start with teacher language awareness”, and several of the examples given show teachers and learners collaborating to develop their LA further (Young, 2017, p. 35). In fact, according to Arndt et al. (2000), working on (T)LA should be considered an important strand of teacher development as it results in “a broader and better informed knowledge-base from which to teach, thus boosting confidence, and widening teaching perspectives” (p. 13).

Practical Applications

Example 1:

Goal: learners will understand different ways of reporting speech; learners will become aware of the different functions these have

Activity: reporting on an interview

Rationale: ‘Tense backshift’ in reporting is quite rare in real-world language use and has a specific function, yet it is often taught as the default. This activity aims to create a more holistic understanding of reporting by making learners aware of how it is used in authentic texts.

Pre-knowledge: standard rules for ‘reported speech’

Level: B1 and above

Procedure

1. Revise any rules learners might already be familiar with for ‘reported / indirect speech’, including rules for ‘tense backshift’.
2. Ask learners how we informally report what somebody said. Point them towards films, sitcoms, young adult literature etc. (This can also be a homework task.)
3. Elicit forms such as ‘and he’s like,...’ etc. Establish that such forms are typical of contemporary spoken English and that the rules for ‘tense backshift’ do not apply here.
4. Hand out a newspaper article that contains reporting. Tell learners to mark passages that refer to things somebody said and ask them to identify strategies used by the writer to report speech.
5. Elicit three main strategies: summarizing, quoting and reported speech (with or without backshift).
6. Let learners guess which of these strategies is least common (answer: reported speech).
7. Discuss how a writer chooses which strategy to employ when they write about what somebody said.
8. Get learners to interview a classmate or teacher on a topic of their choice and write a piece of reporting, using all strategies appropriately.
9. Give feedback reinforcing or correcting learners’ emerging awareness of the conventions of reporting speech.

Example 2:

Goal: learners will understand slogans on t-shirts; learners will revise and practice storytelling

Activity: t-shirts with a message

Rationale: to make use of English in the learners’ environment as a starting point for language learning; to make them aware of English in their environment as a language learning resource

Pre-knowledge: narrative tense use in the past, vocabulary for personality traits (revision)

Level: B1 and above

Procedure

Preparation:

Ask the learners if they own t-shirts with funny or cute sayings in English printed on them. Invite them to wear these t-shirts to class for their next English lesson or bring a photograph of such a t-shirt.

In class:

1. Talk about the messages on learners' t-shirts/photographs and clarify vocabulary as needed. Then show learners a photograph of a t-shirt with a funny slogan, e.g., 'I'm not listening'.
2. Tell them to work in pairs or groups of 3 and answer the following questions: 'Would you wear this t-shirt? Why (not)?', 'Do you think the message is funny? Why (not)?', 'Why do you think somebody would decide to wear this t-shirt? What kind of person do you think they are?' Share the answers with the whole group. Revise vocabulary to describe people's personalities as you go along and write the expressions on the board.
3. Tell the learners that they are going to write the story of a person who decided to wear this t-shirt one day. They have two options:
 - a story about why somebody decided to wear this t-shirt: what happened before? Why did they want to tell everybody they encountered that they were not listening?
 - a story about what happened when somebody wore this t-shirt for a day: who did they encounter? How did they react to the message on the t-shirt?

They should give their protagonist a name and discuss what sort of person he/she is before they start writing. Remind them to use the past tense for their story and revise the background/event structure: *When she **was walking** along the street, she **noticed** that a man was staring at her t-shirt.* Tell the learners to underline all the past tense forms (simple and progressive) in their story and make sure that they are correct. If in doubt, they should ask the teacher.

4. Get the pairs/groups to read out their stories. Let the class choose the best story (vote).
5. The learners write a similar story individually about a different t-shirt. Just like in class, they should underline all the past tense forms.

Activities and questions for reflection

- 1.** What is the difference between language proficiency and LA?
- 2.** Why do some theorists claim that Austria is in a state of ‘de facto (German-English) bilingualism’?
- 3.** Give one specific example of how you have integrated / are planning to integrate English that is relevant to your learners.
- 4.** Can you think of any changes in the English language that you have observed yourself over your career as a learner and teacher of English?

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Suggestions for further reading

- Andrews, S. (2007). *Teacher language awareness*. Cambridge University Press.
- This is a theoretical discussion of TLA with particular reference to grammar. The links between TLA and teaching practices are also explored in detail.
- Rose, H., Syrbe, M., Montakantiwong, A., & Funada, N. (2020). *Global TESOL for the 21st Century*. Multilingual Matters.
- This book explores the pedagogical implications of the global spread of English and proposes innovations for teaching a global language effectively.
- Thornbury, S. (2017). *About Language: Tasks for Teachers of English*. Cambridge University Press.
- This practical resource book is aimed at teachers who want to develop their TLA. It is mostly, but not exclusively, focussed on an awareness of the formal properties of language, especially grammar, but it does include references to register and language change. There is a key, making it a good choice for self-study. (A very similar book is Bolitho, R., & Tomlinson, B. (2015). *Discover English: Language Awareness for Teachers*. Macmillan.)

Commentary on reflection questions

- 1.** Language proficiency is the ability to use a language; it is implicit and intuitive. LA refers to a more theoretical understanding of the language; it is conscious and explicit.
- 2.** Because many people, especially from younger generations, use English a lot in their everyday lives. Thus, English cannot be considered a 'foreign' language in the strict sense of the word anymore.
- 3. to 4.** Your answers to the reflection questions will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of these questions is to encourage reflection on TLA.