

Language awareness and its importance from a teacher's viewpoint

Language awareness

The term 'language awareness' describes the achievement of consciousness and understanding towards different aspects of language, such as form and function, in learners. It is commonly referred to as 'knowledge about language' and is used in the context of foreign language, second language and mother tongue language education (Carter, 2003). Language awareness is more relevant to the current context due to widespread immigration, globalization, and international trade and conflict. According to the Association for Language Awareness (ALA), language awareness is defined as a clear knowledge of a particular language and sensitivity in the learning, teaching and use of a language. The term widely includes a number of concepts such as benefits obtained from acquiring knowledge of a language and a deep understanding about the dynamics of a language (Ellis, 2012).

Eric Hawkins, also known as the father of language awareness, has played an important role in the 1960s to bring reflection on language use and awareness into the school curriculum. According to him, every student should study language awareness of both their mother tongue and a foreign language. Upon taking this course, students should be able to notice and articulate features of a language and apply this understanding to both languages being learnt. This would enable people to understand how use of a particular language affects our way of life and relationships and how it promotes cross-cultural understanding among communities (Ellis, 2012).

The concept of language awareness has been around for quite some time and it came to light in the 1980s when other aspects of language such as atomistic analysis and formalistic

methodologies were given more strength. It was observed that some language teaching methodologies did not give language forms its due importance. Currently, language awareness is understood by considering entire literary passages rather than just single sentences. It provides a holistic approach to learning of a language (Carter, 2003).

Language awareness is not only important for learners, but increasing importance is being given to it even in teacher education. Focus on this aspect began in 1962 in London when the introduction of a language awareness course for teachers was contemplated. Today, this course is offered in many places around the world and in many cases, is a compulsory requirement for taking up teaching as a profession (Ellis, 2012).

Language awareness of teachers is determined by a number of factors such as cultural context, theory and pedagogical practice. It deals with a teacher's knowledge of grammar, lexis, pronunciation, level of formality, standardization and dialects. Every teacher of language awareness needs to know the 5 domains that determine a student's competence and understanding of a language. These are the affective domain, the social domain, the power domain, the cognitive domain and the performance domain. The affective domain is associated with the development of attitudes, curiosity, attention and interest towards a language. The social domain aims to enable the students to develop tolerance for other languages and other language speakers. The power domain helps students understand the power of language and use it appropriately to influence and manipulate people. The cognitive domain enables students to awaken their inherent understanding of different features and rules of a language. The performance domain helps students achieve excellence in their learning of a language (Louw, 2013).

One extension of language awareness is Critical Language Learning (CLA). It is also known as critical language study, critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. CLA refers to the understanding of the ability of language to throw light on the social and ideological themes in a given text. For example, passive voice or certain noun phrases are often used in a text to avoid using names of people or agencies (Carter, 2003). CLA functions in the power domain described earlier and makes use of the communicative ability of language to get work done (Louw, 2013).

There are a number of key features of language awareness. It is cognitive, as it encourages a learner to expand his/her dimension of thoughts and explore a language at various levels. It is also affective, as it plays a role in the development of values and attitudes towards a particular language. As gaining an awareness of a language is a logical and rational process, it mostly involves the left brain. It also involves the right brain while performing tasks that spark intuition about a language. The study of language awareness is developmental, functional and utilitarian (Wright and Bolitho, 1993).

Language awareness is intricately connected to cognitive psychology as it is associated with the process of organizing thoughts and giving words to them. In this context, the learning of a particular language is more intentional rather than incidental. It also involves noticing and focusing on key features and usage of a language. It requires that a learner is aware of the basic rules of the language in order to make precise use of its features. The three main elements of cognition are alertness, detection and orientation. All these three elements are essential for awareness of a language. Awareness in turn results in a change in cognition as it enables the person to reflect on the topic of his/her awareness (Soons, 2008).

Factors that affect language use

Changes in language often take place over generations resulting in changes in linguistic expressions that are considerably different from those of the previous generations (Yang, 2001). Given below is a list of factors that have an effect over the usage and changes in a given language. These factors can broadly be classified as external factors and internal factors based on whether the change is influenced from outside sources or arises from within the language.

1. External factors

- Social life

The different types of social lives have an important bearing on the ways in which a given language is used. Any form of communication between people affects the forms of language. It largely depends on people's knowledge, thoughts and beliefs about their own and other people's identities, and this in turn will affect the language they use for communication (Krauss and Chiu). When people communicate with each other, small changes are made to language at the individual level, and slowly these changes get magnified and become an integral part of the language (Smith et al., 2013).

- Language acquisition by child learners

As children learn a language by listening and observing their parents' usage, they often tend to pick up slight variations in form and functions of the language. When they become parents, they pass on the slight variations they have acquired to their children and thus, the cycle continues (Yang, 2001).

- Media

With the introduction of media in the daily lives of people, the minute changes in the spoken language has been adapted by the people and become a part of the language. Constant exposure to different types of language features on the radio and the television has led to widespread structural changes in people's use of language (Smith et al., 2013).

2. Internal factors

- Simplicity and symmetry

It is the basic nature of any learner to understand and establish regularity within features of a language. Speakers usually tend to develop an intuition of the usage of word classes and sets of a language. Hence, they tend to intuitively remove any irregularities resulting in change in the language over time. Certain simple patterns of a language become dominant over others changing the way in which features of a language are used (Hickey, 2001).

- Iconicity and indexicality

There are two types of iconicity that have an effect on language change. The first type is the direct or imagic iconicity where certain structural features of a language are stressed in order to give weightage to the meaning of a word. The second type of iconicity is the diagrammatic type where words are given plurality to highlight the relationship between objects and actions (Hickey, 2001).

- Markedness and naturalness

A lot of features in a particular language can be called marked, based on the frequency of its occurrence and the unusualness in its phonetic pronunciation. These features may either be borrowed from other languages or may arise from totally independent mechanisms, the regular

use of which might lead to the development of similar sounding words over time. Features in a language that are considered natural are used quite often and these give rise to other features according to universal rules of languages. Hence, rules of one language might often be used for the development of features of another language making it an integral part of that particular language (Hickey, 2001).

- Telic changes and epiphenomena

Telic or goal-oriented changes in a language are often cases of reanalysis of the language on the part of the speakers and they often turn out to serve an important purpose in the use of the language. Epiphenomena refers to changes in a language that are unintentional and occur due to the presence of other changes which further lead to other alterations in the language. This could also lead to the evolution of new forms of a particular language (Hickey, 2001).

- Mergers and distinctions

There are often changes in a language that provide no real functional relevance to the use of that language. Rather, these kinds of mergers may often turn out to be harmful to a given language. In any case, the accumulation of such mergers over time leads to permanent changes in a language (Hickey, 2001).

Factors that affect usage and change in grammar

Changes in the grammar of any language are best studied as syntactic changes. Syntactic changes are quite slow and take hundreds of years to emerge in a language. These kinds of changes are not visible on the surface, but run as a subconscious change in a speaker's mind. Due to the above reasons, it takes effort to recognize syntactic changes in a language. Examples of these kinds of changes in the English language include the use of the word 'like' as a

conjunction, for example, “It looks like it is going to rain heavily today” and the use of the word ‘hopefully’ as an adverb, for example, “Hopefully, it will not rain heavily today”. However, other changes such as increase in the use of the progressive aspect and the use of gerundial complements rather than infinitival ones are not noticed easily in the language (Mair and Leech, 2006).

There are two ways in analyzing and understanding syntactic changes in a language. The first approach is by considering the diachronic development of grammar as a decontextualized system where changes happen abruptly and discretely, and lead to changes in structures, constraints and rules. The other approach is by considering that syntactic changes are gradual and take place over long periods of time (Mair and Leech, 2006).

Changes in grammar of a given language are largely affected by semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors (Mair and Leech, 2006). Given below is a list of factors that play an important role in changes in grammar.

- Inter-generational transmission

A wide range of synchronic variation is often seen in a language. As the basis of any change is variation or heterogeneity, it is obvious that changes in a language always take place over time. Changes acquired in a language by one generation is often passed on to the next generation directly by observation and imitation. Some researchers have also come up with the ‘child-based theory’ which believes that the people of a given generation reanalyze a language in exactly the same way and at exactly the same point in their lifetimes as their preceding generations (Causes of language change).

- Variation and prestige

According to this theory, changes in grammar of a language happen less due to acquisition by children and more due to variations in communication between members of a community. These changes then spread from one social group to another and gradually become a part of the language (Causes of language change).

- Teleology

It is widely assumed that any change in the grammar of a language is always goal-oriented. Hence, the action of speakers of a language to bring about a change is intentional and not a chance event (Causes of language change).

- External causes

Changes in grammar can also be affected by external causes such as communication or interaction between people belonging to different cultures and speaking in different languages. People who are bilingual play an important role in transferring the rules of one language to another leading to a gradual change over time (Causes of language change). Changes in grammar are also influenced by the relationship shared between a speaker and his/her society. This includes geographical boundaries, nationality, ethnicity, and other related factors. Internal social changes within a community may also have an impact on syntactic changes in a language (Medina).

There are three main sociolinguistic factors that affect changes in grammar of a language. These are fashion, foreign influence and social need. It automatically follows that a person's vocabulary and grammar may change as per the fashion of a particular period of time and in a particular region. Foreign influence causes changes in a language due to widespread immigration. Immigrants often learn the local language of that region with a lot of mistakes and

transfer these to the next generation. An existence of social need may also lead to changes in grammar and the evolution of new words and/or pronunciations (Medina).

- Internal causes

A deep connection exists between syntactic changes and biological evolution. As a child evolves his/her speaking ability and begins learning a language, he/she also develops a cognitive ability to understand the dynamics of a language and learns to speak accordingly. There might also be a genetic component involved in a person's ability to grasp the language everyone around him/her is speaking. Thus, these kinds of psycholinguistic features of grammar are an inherent part of any language (Medina).

Some of the changes that are currently taking place in English grammar are listed below (Mair and Leech, 2006).

1. Regularization of irregular morphology of words, for example, 'dreamed' instead of 'dreamt'.
2. Revival and reuse of the mandative subjunctive, for example, "we demand that he 'take' part in the competition".
3. Elimination of the use of the word 'shall' as a marker of future in the first person.
4. Development of new uses of lexical verbs, for example, 'get' and 'want'.
5. Extension of the progressive to new constructions of words, for example, the bridge 'had not been being built' before the competition.
6. Increase in the number of verbs with multiple words, for example, 'take a ride'.
7. Structuring frequency adverbs before auxiliary verbs, for example, "I never have said so".

8. The use of the support word 'do' for the word 'have', for example, "Do you have any money?"
9. Decrease in the use of the word 'whom'.
10. Replacement of the word 'fewer' with the word 'less'.
11. Use of the genitive 's' to non-human words, for example, the table's cover.
12. Deletion of the definite article in certain places.
13. The use of 'they' as singular.
14. Use of the words 'like', 'same as' and 'immediately' in the form of conjunctions.
15. The preference of analytical comparatives and superlatives in sentences.

Personal reflection on my development of language awareness

I have been a teacher for almost two years now and language awareness means more to me than it ever did when I was a student. According to me, language awareness is a clear and concise knowledge about language and consciousness and sensitivity in the use, learning and teaching of a language. I have learnt to engage with the language in order to construct language awareness for my students.

Places and contexts where languages are learnt, such as classrooms, are quite complex. A classroom is a place where a number of independent variables play a role in ways that are still beyond most teachers' understanding. As the interaction of these variables cannot be predicted with any level of surety, it makes teaching language awareness a very daunting task for a teacher. In my experience as a learner and teacher of language awareness, I have come across the 'Ecological Approach', which is not a single theory for best practices for teaching, rather it takes a more holistic approach by placing the student in a complex ecosystem of knowledge. A number of relationships and interactions are considered in this approach, thus placing the learner's

perceptions, opinions and beliefs in the picture. I strongly believe that these in turn help create either a positive or negative environment for my students. As a teacher, I too form an integral part of this ecosystem and contribute to this environment and hence, I need to get my attitude right every time I step into my classroom. I have had a chance to contemplate on this theory and come up with practical examples. For example, a particular concept can be taught at either the classroom level, the school level or the societal level. In each of these cases, the relationship of the student with the learning environment will be different and this is important for adopting teaching methods at various levels.

I have understood that the study of language awareness is cross disciplinary, and it is more a process or a product, rather than just a concept. It involves a deep engagement with the language in order to understand features of language awareness. This engagement is cognitive, affective and social, and is influenced by a number of factors such as space and time. The long interaction period with my students has given me insight into their attitudes regarding concepts of language awareness – I know that if my students are attentive, they are eager to learn more about the language and are willing to discuss it with their friends.

In my experience as a teacher, I have come across a particular state of mind that goes hand in hand with the learning and understanding of a language, and that is anxiety. This can turn out to be either positive or negative for the students, but it mostly has a negative influence in their learning of a language. However, on the positive side, it can lead to complete and effortless grasp of the language during the process of learning. Engagement with the language is also affected by each student's needs, circumstances and expectations.

I have also had the opportunity to explore the cognitive aspects of language awareness. Language awareness greatly involves the functions of attention and noticing. Hence, in order to

involve students in the learning of language awareness, I feel they need to be given strong visual inputs to hold their attention. I used the techniques of colors, formatting and highlighting certain keywords to direct attention to these.

Having gone through the process of both learning and teaching language awareness, I think there is a deep relationship between a teacher's language awareness and content knowledge of pedagogy. A teacher's engagement with the language is highly essential for teaching language awareness to students. A teacher's language awareness should include knowledge about the terminology of grammar, and rules and classifications of a language and their applications. As it is often more practical to teach grammar along with language skills, a teacher's language awareness should also have a strong foundation of grammar.

In conclusion, my experience of teaching language awareness enabled me to grow as a learner and understand my students' needs and expectations. I believe that every teacher who teaches language should make an attempt to learn and teach language awareness to the students. I strongly feel that without having the foundation of language awareness, language cannot be taught in a way that can be applied to better the field of literature.

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