

## Language awareness

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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.

The concept of language awareness is not new. van Essen (1997) points to a long tradition in several European countries; see also the journal *Language Awareness* 1990, 1/1.<sup>1</sup> The approach was, however, associated in the 1980s with a reaction to those more prescriptive approaches to language learning which were generally typified by atomistic analysis of language, and reinforced by narrowly formalistic methodologies, such as grammar translation, drills, and pattern practice. However, the language awareness movement also developed a parallel impetus in reaction to the relative neglect of attention to forms of language within some versions of communicative language teaching methodologies. More recently, the approach has evolved alongside advances in language description which deal with larger stretches of discourse, including literary discourse, and which go beyond the single sentence or the individual speaking turn as the basic unit. In general, language awareness is characterized by a more holistic and text-based approach to language, of which a natural extension is work in *critical language awareness*, or CLA. [CLA is also referred to by the term 'critical linguistics'.] CLA presents the view that language use is not neutral, but is always part of a wider social struggle underlining the importance for learners of exploring the ways in which language can both conceal and reveal the social and ideological nature of all texts. (Fairclough 1992). One example would be drawing attention to the ways in which the passive voice or noun phrases can be used to conceal agency (although see Widdowson 2000 for some reservations about such claims). Language awareness has also been strongly advocated as an essential component in teacher education (see James and Garrett 1992; Wright and Bolitho 1993).

But language awareness does not simply involve a focus on language itself. Its adherents also stress the cognitive advantages of reflecting upon language, and argue that attitudes to language and to language learning can change as a result of methods which highlight particular

language features by affectively involving the learner (Bolitho and Tomlinson 1995). Language acquisition research has underlined the developmental value of enhanced 'noticing' and of 'consciousness raising' in relation to the target language. Initial research in language awareness has shown increased motivation resulting from activities, especially task-based activities, which foster the learner's involvement by promoting the inductive learning of language rules, which allow learners time and space to develop their own affective and experiential responses to the language, especially to its contextual meanings and effects. The approach has been extensively researched and developed in relation to the teaching of grammar (Rutherford 1987; Ellis 1998), although a number of factors remain under-researched, such as the role of metalanguage in learners' responses; whether metalinguistic knowledge can enhance or hinder language development; and the precise relationships between task-based methodologies and the induction of rules and features of language use (see Ellis 1995).

Appropriate assessment of language awareness is less likely to involve correct production than to elicit the learner's ability to explain how particular forms function. For example, how in English the 'get-passive' differs from the standard passive, and to comment, in their first language where appropriate, on the different uses and usages.

#### Note

- 1 The journal *Language Awareness* is published quarterly by Multilingual Matters.

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