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A Rough Guide to Language Awareness

For teachers of a second language (L2), the role of grammar instruction in the classroom has been a perennial subject of debate and has undergone many changes over the years. For example, the once well-respected traditional methods that relied on extensive drilling and memorization of grammar evoked a backlash in the 1970s, which resulted in new methods that excluded grammar instruction in favor of "natural" communication in the classroom. Nevertheless, the topic of grammar remained a live issue, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, research in the classroom reported positive results for grammar instruction. Even so, the communicative methods had an enduring effect, and the traditional methods of teaching grammar did not return; instead, techniques were developed whereby students would be able to "notice" grammar, often spontaneously in the course of a communicative lesson, and especially if the grammatical problem impeded comprehension. In this way, learners would notice and learn the pattern of grammatical rules for themselves. This new way of looking at grammar instruction has come to be known as *language awareness*, among other designations. This article will discuss the background and rationale of language awareness, and will introduce a few of the techniques that teachers can use to help students discover grammatical relationships and improve their learning of English.

The demise of traditional grammar instruction

Traditional grammar instruction, as it was commonly called, was criticized for its long-winded teacher explanations, its drills and drudgery, and its boring and banal exercises. In the 1970s, new teaching methods appeared that replaced grammar exercises with meaningful communicative environments. In general, the goal was to mirror the way a person learned his or her first language, an approach that was derived from the linguistic theories of Chomsky (1965), who pointed out that humans are endowed with a language acquisition device that enables

that enables them to acquire whatever language they are exposed to. According to Chomsky (1965, 36), our "organ of language" extracts the rules of the target language from the data of performance, and this innate schema comprises "linguistic universals," which are part of our genetic inheritance.

Chomsky's theories revolutionized the field of linguistics, and had a dramatic impact on language teaching as well. The basic assumption underpinning the communicative approach is that language is made in the mind and is internal, a process that generates what Chomsky (1986) refers to as *I-language*. This suggests that language cannot be acquired by putting learners through a series of linguistic hoops, which is the approach found in the traditional grammar book, and what Chomsky calls *E-language*, language external to the learner.

Based on Chomsky's theories, "nativists," including Krashen (1981), Prabhu (1987), and others, argued against explicit grammatical instruction in favor of the naturalistic "discovery" of the target language's rule system. In the early 1980s, Krashen (1981) proclaimed that exposure to comprehensible input in a stress-free environment was the primary condition for successful L2 acquisition. However, at the same time this was being propagated, a number of researchers were investigating the effect of formal instruction on L2 acquisition. Long (1983), for instance, in an extensive review of the empirical research, found that certain types of instruction did make a significant difference and hence one could no longer accept the nativist argument that the effects of grammar teaching appear to be peripheral and fragile.

The reincarnation of grammar instruction

In spite of the reaction against direct grammar instruction, many researchers and practitioners continued to strongly advocate for the role of conscious learning and have produced a number of studies concluding that syntax can and should be taught, and that formal instruction makes a difference. However, even though these researchers supported grammar teaching, they also recognized that intervention by means of traditional exercises such as drills and slot-filling exercises, are much less effective than the communicative techniques that supplanted it.

The result was a number of do-it-yourself strategies devised by second language teachers to enable learners to analyze and internalize language rules and systems. These various tools and techniques differ considerably in their specific aims and in the manner in which they are implemented, but they all have a common purpose, which is to raise learners' awareness of important linguistic features, to see what attributes these features share, to notice how they differ from other related features, and, in time, to help learners construct their own grammar from personal exploration and trial-and-error tasks.

Language awareness defined

Language awareness fits into this new paradigm, and is defined as "the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (Carter 2003, 64). Since the early 1990s, an impressive body of research shows that conscious learning (especially the kind one would characterize as language awareness) also builds interlanguage, one's interim grammar in the mind. Interlanguage has to grow and develop; otherwise, fossilization sets in and learners may exhibit the all-too-familiar symptoms of a "grammar gap" (Bourke 1989, 21). Many learners seem to experience this gap and need remedial work in order to eradicate fossilized errors. For this reason, the present author refers to language awareness as *linguistic problem-solving* (Bourke 1992).

Other definitions that are similar to language awareness include *consciousness-raising* (Rutherford 1987; Schmidt 1990; Fotos 1993; Sharwood Smith 1993); *focus on form* (Long 1991; Doughty and Williams 1998); *grammar interpretation tasks* (Ellis 1995); and *form-focused instruction* (Ellis 2001; Hinkel and Fotos 2002).

It should be noted that James (1998) makes a fine distinction between language awareness and consciousness-raising (CR). He suggests that language awareness is a learned ability to analyze one's internalized language, be it the first language or that part of the L2 that one has acquired so far. In other words, it is about making implicit knowledge explicit. On the other hand, CR refers to getting explicit insight into what one does not yet know implicitly of the L2. James (1998, 260)

concludes: Language awareness "is for knowers and CR is for learners." Rightly or wrongly, however, most applied linguists nowadays regard the two terms as synonymous.

Language awareness does differ from some of the above definitions in that it is wider in scope, including not only grammatical awareness but also lexical awareness, phonological awareness, and discourse awareness. In order to simplify matters, I shall refer to all of these approaches as language awareness (LA), as they have much in common and differ from traditional grammar teaching in a number of significant ways.

Differences between language awareness and traditional grammar

Language awareness does not use the same traditional techniques used to teach grammar that one finds in structural grammar books like Stannard Allen's (1974) famous *Living English Structure*, Thompson and Martinet's (1980) *A Practical English Grammar,* or *Graver's* (1986) *Advanced English Practice*. In addition, the practice that LA supports is different in kind from the exercises in traditional grammar books like Azar (1989), Murphy (1997), and Willis and Wright (1995).

Language awareness also contrasts sharply with the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instructional cycle, another traditional way of teaching grammar in the L2 classroom where the main focus is on controlled practice in the form of drills and various contextualized grammar exercises. The PPP cycle is based on a simplistic theory of language acquisition, namely "implanting through practice." In contrast, the LA model is more concerned with input processing and comprehension than with practice with drills and repetition. LA is different in that it involves learners, individually or in groups, in exploratory tasks, very often on bits of language that need repair.

The differences between LA and traditional grammar teaching may be summarized as follows:

- LA is not a body of established facts about grammar, and it differs fundamentally from the repertoire of structures and functions found in an itemized syllabus. Several researchers, notably Long (1991) and Spada (1997), regard this distinction as crucial. LA is

the sum of the enabling strategies one uses to get a handle on the language system. It employs cognitive strategies, such as noticing, hypothesis testing, problem-solving, and restructuring.

- LA comes out of an initial focus on meaning. The objective is to investigate which forms are available in English to realize certain meanings, notions, and language functions. Whereas traditional grammar was a grammar of classes, LA is a grammar of meanings, functions, and form-function mapping.

- The aim of LA is to develop in the learner an awareness of and sensitivity to form, and not just to learn a long list of grammatical items. Learners have to explore structured input and develop an awareness of particular linguistic features by performing certain operations. According to Schmidt (1995), there can be learning without intention, but there can be no learning without attention.

- LA occurs by means of certain types of formal instruction or task-based learning, where learners do grammar tasks in groups. It can come in many different forms and vary greatly in degree of explicitness and elaboration. It is not the same thing as practice. It is about input processing, noticing certain patterns or relationships, discovering rules, and noticing the difference between one's current interlanguage and the target language system and as a result subconsciously restructuring one's still evolving grammar system. As Schmidt (1993, 4) says, *noticing* is "the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake."

- LA is multi-faceted. It goes beyond the raising of grammatical consciousness to include all linguistic components—vocabulary, morphology, phonology, and discourse. However, most of the published examples of LA relate to grammatical and lexical problems, such as exploring the grammatical devices used to express the concept of futurity, looking at the difference between the standard passive (*The book was lost by Sally*) and the "get" passive (*I got lost*),

making sense of modal verbs, examining collocation or redundancy, and other features of English.

- LA is data driven. Learners are not told the rule, but are given a set of data from which they infer the rule or generalization in their own way. They check their tentative rule against other sets of data and then see if it still holds in a number of contexts of use. Here again, by noticing the gap between their production and the correct target form, learners may restructure or fine-tune their conclusion. Rules in English are seldom clear-cut, and a lot of work needs to be done on the gray areas.

Certainly, the concept of LA and related approaches have become a major new trend in second language learning. There is now extensive literature on the subject, including excellent summaries in Doughty and Williams (1998), Ellis (2001), Carter (2003), Hinkel and Fotos (2002), and Bolitho et al. (2003). The key concept of noticing is explained by Batstone (1996), and some ways to implement LA in the classroom are found in Hawkins (1984), James and Garrett (1992), Wright and Bolitho (1993), Wright (1994), and Ellis (2006).

The rational for language awareness

One way to think about language awareness is that everyone is a learner, since even teachers have to continue to explore language systems—a lifelong process. It is therefore useful to look at the following two complementary aspects of LA in the context of learning a second language.

1. The personal exploration of the L2 helps the learner find out how language works and thereby enriches and extends one's knowledge of the language. Here, one is talking about a focus on language itself. Everyone has a subconscious knowledge of the language they use, but not everyone has managed to make that internalized language explicit, by noticing and reflecting on the linguistic data all around them.

2. The other aspect of language awareness is the applied perspective, which for teachers means helping learners effectively explore, internalize, and gain greater understanding of the target language. The basic assumption here is that all learners have to be actively involved in discovering features of the language. They are not given the rule, but rather work inductively from structured input to arrive at their own understandings. It is a *process-oriented* approach, which includes steps of discovery, investigation, and understanding, which contrasts markedly with the traditional *product-oriented* approach in which one is told the rules and has to drill and memorize them, a method found even in recent grammar books for teaching purposes.

Integrating language awareness into task-based learning

There are probably dozens of effective activities in the literature that teachers can use to facilitate LA in the classroom. These activities enable the teacher to "problematize" instruction, and they allow learners to actively engage in the learning process. For this reason, they are referred to as "enabling tasks" (Bourke 2002). According to Estaire and Zanon (1994, 15), "enabling tasks act as a support for communication tasks. Their purpose is to provide students with the necessary linguistic tools to carry out a communication task." This viewpoint ties LA to task-based learning, another major paradigm shift in the way second language is experienced in the classroom. In Willis' (1996, 101–116) task based learning model "language focus" is the last phase in the framework. Upon completing a communicative/interactive task, students have the opportunity to explore points of language arising out of the task cycle. The language focus may consist of analysis or practice activities. Analysis consists of consciousness raising activities in which students analyze texts, transcripts, and sets of examples in order to notice specific language points, such as:

1. Semantic concepts related to themes, notions, functions (e.g., Find and classify all the phrases referring to time.)

2. Words or parts of a word (e.g., When do we use the word *any*? What does it mean? Study the examples in the text.)

3. Categories of meaning or use (e.g., The word *will* has four categories of meaning in the text. What are they? Give an example of each category.)

Practice activities may consist of one or more of the following (Willis 1996, 110–113):

1. Unpacking and repacking a sentence

2. Repeating, reading, or completing phrases

3. Making a concordance

4. Progressive deletion from board

5. Gapped transcript

6. Dictionary work and reporting back

7. Looking up a point of grammar in a reference grammar and reporting back

8. Computer games

9. Language games

10. C-text restoration activity and follow-up discussion

The idea behind LA is that learners themselves construct their own grammar from their own language experience, and thereby either consciously or subconsciously restructure their emerging interlanguage. They need access to negative evidence, which in LA is provided by means of corrective feedback from the teacher or by looking up the problem point in a comprehensible reference grammar or dictionary.

Implementing language awareness techniques

Many other techniques, in addition to the task-based ones mentioned above, can raise learners' consciousness of the form and function of targeted grammatical items. The techniques listed below may be classed as LA and have been found to be especially useful, user-friendly, and effective. Where possible, these techniques should be sequenced as follows:

1. The student is exposed to oral or written structured input where the initial focus is on the meaning of the text.

2. The student notices the target structure and the context in which it occurs; this can include observation of syntactic patterning, judgments and discriminations, and the articulation of rules.

3. The student checks that the rule holds against further data and, if not, revises the rule.

4. The student uses the structure in a short production task.

Technique 1: Linguistic problem-solving

Any piece of language can be targeted for exploration. For instance, Hall and Foley (1990) present topics such as tense contrasts, modal verbs, conditionals, infinitive versus gerund, verb patterns, adjectives and adverbs, prepositions, and articles and determiners.

Analysis may take place at the input stage or the output stage. The task is often presented by means of "perceptual frames," i.e., a short dialogue, narrative, or expository text. The "input frames" provide a meaningful context to focus on the new language item, and sufficient data to enable the learner to make a tentative induction as to the rule or generalization. Progress along that route is speeded up by exposure to "enhanced input" and the application of cognitive strategies. Further frames/data are then presented and the initial hypothesis is either confirmed or rejected. The problem-solving procedure involves a simple recursion, comprising three moves:

1. Read the next frame

2. Form a hypothesis

3. Test, and if necessary, revise your hypothesis

The input frames are seeded with pertinent data and are carefully sequenced to address different aspects of the problem under study. For example, in presenting the article system in English, one might look at a series of binary contrasts:

1. count vs. mass nouns

2. *a* versus *an*

3. *the* versus *a / an*

4. article versus no article

The *a* versus *an* problem might be presented to a beginning class as follows:

Problem: Why are some nouns preceded by *a* and others by *an*?

Instructions: Read the passage below and underline all nouns preceded by *a* or *an*. Enter the underlined nouns in the correct column.

Passage (with solution): Molly is an awful cat. She sleeps on <u>a mat</u> and never catches <u>a mouse</u>. She eats five times <u>a day</u>. She often sits in <u>an armchair</u> for <u>an hour</u> or more without making <u>a sound</u>. Some people say she's a horrid cat, but I think she's an old rascal.

a	an
mat	armchair
mouse	hour
day	
sound	

This technique allows the learner to notice syntactic patterning and make judgments and discriminations about a rule. In this case, the fact that not only the nouns but intervening adjectives take indefinite articles may help the learner "notice" that the rule is based on sound.

Technique 2: Error detection and correction

Noticing is also a key process in analyzing output and is essential for error detection and correction. Making errors and having them corrected is a normal part of learning. We are told "there is no learning without making errors." However, it is pointless to tell students to edit their work if they do not know how to edit. In many cases, they do not know the rules; if they did, there would not be errors. Student errors are a very good source of remedial work, which may focus on one particular problem, or on a number of related problems, such as looking at the form and function of narrative tenses in a piece of writing.

It is no easy task to eradicate persistent grave errors which have fossilized over many years. It may be necessary to target each case of fossilized error in a systematic manner through language awareness activities.

Technique 3: Restoring C-texts

The use of C-texts for measuring general language proficiency has by now become quite common. The standard C-text consists of four to six short texts which have been altered by deleting the second half of every second word and replacing it with a blank. The task is to restore the missing pieces by using a variety of conscious strategies, such as contextual inferencing and analogy, among others.

The advantages of C-texts are numerous, some of the main ones being the following:

- They prime learners to discuss points of grammar or lexis on which they miscue, and thus remove some of the roadblocks to correct usage.
- Working on a C-text is like doing a puzzle—it is an enjoyable and challenging activity. (Students generally respond well to problem-solving tasks.)
- C-texts can lead learners to become aware of target language forms.
- C-texts are easy to construct and they can be calibrated quite precisely to learners' abilities.
- Learners can self-correct the C-text and thus benefit from immediate feedback.
- C-texts sample a wide range of grammatical categories.
- C-texts are objective, easy to administer, and score.

Technique 4: Cloze procedure

The basic fixed-ratio Cloze procedure involves the systematic deletion of words from a text (such as every fifth word) for students to fill in (Oller 1973). This creates an awareness of word order, collocation, and dependency relations between elements. It is a problem-solving exercise in which the learner has to exploit linguistic clues on many fronts, not only in the linguistic context, but also in the wider context of situation. Importantly, the Cloze can be used to focus attention on specific language items if selected function words (such as pronouns, articles, and conjunctions) or inflectional morphemes (such as the past tense marker *-ed* or the progressive tense marker *-ing*) are deleted. The Cloze procedure is often used for language testing; as such, it is not without its critics,

even though, as Barnwell (1987) notes, work is still in progress on Cloze variations. As a result, some language teachers prefer to use the C-text for language testing and the Cloze text for language teaching (Khoo 2002). Whatever its role as a testing tool, the Cloze procedure, and especially the selective Cloze variation, seems to possess certain merits as a teaching tool and can help learners consolidate and restructure their grammar.

Technique 5: Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is a very powerful pedagogical tool for syntactic and lexical exploitation. Moreover, it can be employed at different levels of L2 proficiency. For example, having analyzed the form and function of the present perfect tense in English, one might devise various stimulus sentences related to a current task to elicit this tense, as in this example:

Instruction: Rewrite each sentence so that it means the same, or nearly the same, as the given sentence.

Tom no longer lives in Kuching.

He_____ [Answer: *He has left Kuching.*]

There isn't any food left.

Abu_____ [Answer: *Abu has eaten it all.*]

Technique 6: Propositional cluster

Rutherford (1987, 167) defines a "propositional cluster" as a skeletal sentence consisting of an unmarked verb and its associated noun-phrases. The learner is given the discourse setting, and the task is to arrange the cluster into a well-formed sentence and to do so within the context indicated. For example:

Round the corner came a boy.

  ride – he (boy) – bicycle

The most natural realization of this cluster would be:

He was riding a bicycle.

The learner has to figure out which noun phrase is selected as grammatical subject, the form it takes, and the most likely type of verbal form and complementation.

Technique 7: Sentence combining

The issue of sentence combining as a teaching tool is discussed by James (1994) and Zamel (1980). Sentence combining has been and still is extensively used as a pre-writing task. It is a very effective way of raising students' consciousness of cohesion. Some learners tend to write a string of loosely-connected sentences. For instance, in lower primary grades, one often finds a lot of redundancy in composition writing, as in the following example:

I have a cat. My cat is black. She has white paws. My cat has green eyes.

These four sentences can be more economically expressed in a single sentence:

I have a black cat with white paws and green eyes.

Sentence combining helps students to become aware of the structural changes that come into play when two or more simple sentences are combined. It covers an enormous area of English grammar, ranging from coordination to subordination and the various types of sentence connectives that signal a wide range of semantic relationships. One LA activity in this area is known as "packing" and "unpacking" sentences, which is combining two or more sentences into one, or extracting the embedded propositions from a complex sentence.

Technique 8: Grammaring

Teachers teach grammar, but learners need *grammaring*, which is the ability to access and use grammatical devices to make meaning. Thornbury (2001, 1) makes a distinction between making an omelette (or "omeletting") and an omelette. Likewise, he distinguishes between doing grammar (or "grammaring") and grammar. The same idea is found in Rutherford (1987), but he refers to the process of exploiting grammatical devices as "grammaticization."

In order to demonstrate the various ways in which a single concept is expressed, learners may be given a set of propositions and asked to indicate the many ways in which they can be "grammared." For instance, in English the language function "contrast" is expressed in a number of ways.

A *[but]*	B. [simple conjunction]
A; *[however,]*	B. [sentence connector]
A *[whereas]*	B. [subordinator]

The focus here is to build procedural knowledge by sensitizing learners to the forms available and enabling them to select the most appropriate form for a particular context of use. Thus, in casual conversation the *but* option is most likely, while in formal writing the whereas option is more appropriate. (The range of options available would not be given as above, but would be inferred from a text or several texts.)

Grammaring tasks require learners to make decisions as to which grammatical devices are most appropriate to express their intended meaning. They have to ask themselves questions such as:

- "Shall I use the active or passive?"
- "Shall I use any narrative tenses, and if so, which one, and why?"
- "Shall I use coordination or subordination?"

Thornbury (2001, 81–99) offers a selection of photocopiable grammaring materials. Many of these are lexical clusters to which grammar has to be added. For example:

boy   blue suit   Carlos

One possible way of grammaring this set of lexical items is as follows:

The boy **in the** blue suit **is** *Carlos.*

Technique 9: Dictogloss

Dictogloss or *Grammar Dictation* is a technique that involves the teacher and students in communicative interaction, text reconstruction, and error analysis. There are four stages in the procedure:

1. Preparation—the learner finds out about the topic of the text and is prepared for some of the vocabulary.
2. Dictation—the learner hears the text and takes fragmentary notes. The text is dictated at a speed which allows only key words to be noted.
3. Reconstruction—students in pairs or small groups pool their resources to reconstruct their own version of the original text.
4. Analysis and correction—learners analyze and correct their texts.

Dictogloss is a fairly severe test of grammaring. It involves all the four skills and develops awareness of language items (in particular grammar and vocabulary) but also raises the learner's consciousness of textual organization.

Technique 10: Language games

All language learners enjoy an element of fun and inventiveness, and language games have long been part and parcel of second language teaching and learning (Rinvolucri 1984; Rinvolucri and Davis 1995). One can easily devise game-like activities to elicit and use a particular pattern. For instance, the pair-work games such *Describe and Draw, Spot the Difference,* and *Board Rush* are popular with young learners, while older learners seem to enjoy word games, puzzles, and problem-solving scenarios. The same kind of game can be used in different ways to focus on language items, or real interaction. For example, an information-gap activity about zoo animals might focus on the present progressive (e.g., *Abu is feeding the zebra*), while a communicative version might require each participant to talk freely about the animals. One can find many stimulating games that focus on the language system, for instance, the discovery activities in Hall and Shepheard's (1991) *The Anti-grammar Grammar Book.*

Many of the techniques outlined above have been around for the past 10 to 20 years. Some of them focus on input processing, while others focus on output processing. Language awareness is, therefore, any technique or combination of techniques that enable learners to understand how a piece of language works. Far from being a new concept, it is often a matter of putting old wine into new bottles.

Conclusion

One of the great challenges for second language teachers has been the implementation of procedures that help learners process comprehensible input while at the same time giving them opportunities for language awareness. In other words, effective second language teaching requires input processing (acquisition) combined with focus on form (learning). It matters not whether we call the new process-oriented approach language awareness, or consciousness-raising, or linguistic problem-solving. Language is no longer seen as a fixed inventory of structures prescribed by an itemized syllabus that is presented in an atomistic and linear fashion. Rather, it is

seen as a dynamic process in which learners themselves are actively involved. According to Nunan (1998, 140), an "organic" approach to language teaching:

- offers a set of choices
- provides opportunities for learners to explore grammatical and discoursal relationships in authentic data
- makes the form/function relationships transparent
- encourages learners to become active explorers of language
- encourages learners to explore relationships between grammar and discourse

In summary, then, language awareness has to do with the raising of learners' awareness of features of the target language. Its point of departure is input processing, exploring examples of language in context, noticing salient points and patterns, inferring a rule and testing it against further data. But that is only half the story. It is equally important to allow and require learners to outperform their newly acquired grammar, or as Nunan (1998, 108) says, "for learners to press their grammatical resources into communicative use."

Research on LA is still in its infancy, and it is probably too soon to say which forms may be most effective with different groups of learners. However, we now have a large body of empirical evidence supporting the inductive problem-solving route to linguistic knowledge. Hence, the teacher's role is no longer that of "great guru"—or "all knowing one"—but that of the facilitator of learning.

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ANSWERS TO *THE LIGHTER SIDE*
NEW YORK CITY WORD SEARCH

1. Broadway
2. Hudson River
3. Greenwich Village
4. Erie Canal
5. United Nations
6. Statue of Liberty
7. Guggenheim Museum
8. Central Park
9. Carnegie Hall
10. Empire State Building
11. Brooklyn Bridge
12. Harlem