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About Language

Second Edition

Tasks for
teachers of English

Scott Thornbury

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teachers of English

Scott Thornbury

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Introduction

The assumption underlying this book is that teachers of English not only need to be able to speak and understand the language they are teaching; they also need to know a good deal about the way the language works: its components, its regularities, and the way it is used. It is further assumed that this kind of knowledge can usefully be gained through the investigation – or analysis – of samples of the language itself. Accordingly, the core of the book consists of sequences of tasks, the purpose of which is to raise the user’s understanding of how language works, that is, to promote *language awareness*.

What is language awareness?

Acquiring your mother tongue is an unconscious process, like learning to walk, and leaves no trace in memory. Likewise, using the language thus acquired involves little or no conscious attention to its formal properties. ‘Language is like the air we breathe. We cannot do without it, but we do not often consciously pay attention to it’ (Van Lier 1995). It is not surprising, then, that we have a hard time trying to describe what it is that we intuitively ‘know’ about the language that we speak. Even such basic concepts as noun, verb and preposition, let alone phoneme or clause, are not self-evident. It usually requires someone with the relevant expertise to point these elements out to us – to make them explicit. This is what language awareness is: explicit knowledge about language.

This should not be confused with the ability to speak and write the language, i.e. language proficiency. The one does not assume the other: as was pointed out, language proficiency – especially for native speakers – is largely implicit and intuitive, whereas language awareness, by definition, is conscious and can be articulated. Put another way: one is acquired, while the other is learned – although, as Andrews (2007) points out, in language classes where the target language is also the medium of instruction, it is often difficult to disentangle the two: ‘Once teachers are in the classroom, anything they say about grammar during the lesson not only will draw on their subject-matter knowledge, but will also be mediated through their language proficiency’. In an ideal world, the language teacher will be both language proficient *and* language aware.

In first language education the focus of language awareness is broad, encompassing not only the linguistic domain, for example, the grammar of the language, but the sociolinguistic and cultural domains as well. In the words of The National Council for Language in Education Working Party on Language Awareness: ‘Language Awareness is a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language *and its role in human life*.’ (Donmal 1985, emphasis added). Typical activities for children might involve the exploration of the differences between written and spoken language, for example, or the researching of dialect diversity and its effects. Such activities may extend beyond the development of literacy and have a broader educational remit. In second language education language awareness has a narrower compass, referring – traditionally, at least – to linguistic knowledge only, and to the teacher’s knowledge rather than the learner’s. Put simply, it is the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively.

This is not to suggest that the broader picture – the role of language in human life – has no relevance to second language education. On the contrary, the learning of another language is significantly influenced by cultural and attitudinal factors and this is increasingly reflected in the

content and approach of current English language teaching (ELT) materials. Nevertheless, it is not within the scope of this book to explore these factors. So, if this book is ‘about’ language, it is about language in the narrower sense, that is *the analysis of the linguistic systems that constitute language*.

What is language analysis?

If language awareness is the goal, then language analysis is the route to it – or one route, at least. A more direct route might simply be to get hold of an up-to-date grammar and read it from cover to cover. It is a basic tenet of this book, however, that working out something for yourself pays greater dividends in terms of memory and understanding than simply having it explained to you. In other words, an inductive – rather than a deductive – approach to learning underpins the design of the tasks that follow. This is also consistent with the view that a discovery approach to grammar is an effective pedagogical option in second language classrooms. Language analysis, then, is a form of guided research into language. The aim of this research is to discover the language’s underlying systems, in order to be in a better position to deal with them from a pedagogical perspective. Hence, the tasks do not stop at the point where the rules are laid bare – they are designed to invite the teacher to consider the pedagogical implications and classroom applications of these rules and systems by, for example, studying and evaluating relevant teaching materials. As Wright (2002) notes, language awareness ‘is more than simply awareness raising; it is a process that aims to create and develop links between linguistic knowledge and classroom activity, closing the content/methodology gap and establishing relevance for language study in LTE [Language Teacher Education]’.

It is perhaps important at this point to emphasise what language analysis is *not*. As suggested above, it is not what is often called ‘language arts’, that is, the study of one’s first language in order to appreciate its expressive and stylistic qualities, and in order to be able to speak and write like an educated user of the language. This is not to deny that language has an expressive function, as realised in literary texts, but for most learners of English as a second language this may not be a priority. Nor is language analysis the formal study of language known as ‘linguistics’. The object of study is not language as an end in itself. The goal of language analysis for teachers of English is strictly a pedagogical one, i.e. what is it that a teacher needs to know about English in order to teach it effectively *as a second language*? While it is the case that all sound pedagogical descriptions of English will ultimately derive from linguistic models, or at least be accountable in terms of linguistic theory, they do not depend on these models and theories for their validity. Their validity is determined by their relevance to classroom practice – and, ultimately, by learner outcomes. After all, languages were being taught successfully and pedagogical rules were being formulated long before the advent of linguistics as a science.

Why language awareness and language analysis?

It would seem to be axiomatic that knowledge of subject matter is a prerequisite for effective teaching, whether the subject be mathematics, history, geography, or, as in this case, a second or foreign language. This is certainly the perception of learners: in a survey of several thousand former foreign language students who were asked to identify the qualities of ‘outstanding’ language teachers they had been taught by, the quality that was most frequently cited was that the teacher had had ‘thorough knowledge of subject matter’ (Moscowitz 1976). This was a

characteristic quoted more often than, for example, the fact that the teacher was ‘fluent in the use of the foreign language’ or was ‘enthusiastic, animated’.

This view is echoed throughout the literature on language awareness. For example, Andrews (2007) is emphatic: ‘The language-aware L2 teacher is more likely to be effective in promoting student learning than the teacher who was not language-aware’. It is an assumption that is manifested in the design of teacher training programmes, both at pre-service and in-service level, and at undergraduate and graduate level: there are few courses that do not have a prominent language awareness component, even if it is named *linguistics* or *language analysis* or simply *grammar*.

And yet there is a school of thought that argues that language awareness – or, at least, familiarity with the grammar – is incidental to effective teaching, and may even be prejudicial to it, especially when it becomes, not simply the means, but the object of learning a language. This view dates back at least to the late nineteenth-century Reform Movement and its reaction to grammar-translation methods. The ‘direct method’ approaches that ensued, and that in turn helped shape audiolingualism, rejected both translation and explicit reference to grammatical rules. These proscriptions persisted into the early days of communicative language teaching (CLT) and were fuelled in part by the work of Krashen (1982) who argued that language acquisition, both first and second, occurs independently of explicit knowledge of rules. Proponents of task-based instruction, e.g. Prabhu (1987), similarly argued that grammatical competence develops when the learner’s attention is focused exclusively on communicating meanings. The popularity of this position may have been partly reinforced by an attendant boom in demand for ‘native-speaker’ teachers, whose knowledge of formal grammar was often minimal and whose training was typically brief.

Nevertheless, there is an intuitive appeal in the idea that language acquisition simply ‘grows’, like a plant, given the right conditions of nurture. And the frustration felt by generations of learners who, although steeped in the grammar of a language were incapable of speaking it, has fortified the case for more ‘natural’ and less academic approaches to second language learning. But whether you subscribe to this position or not, the argument that it exempts teachers from the need to ‘know grammar’ confuses the needs of teachers on the one hand, and of learners on the other. Language teachers, regardless of the methodology they adopt, are still *language* teachers. Whether or not they choose to make explicit to the learners the systems underlying the language they are teaching, they are still bound to be authorities in the language itself.

This is because, at every stage of the process, the decisions that govern language teaching are frequently linguistic ones. At the planning level, language awareness aids in the anticipation of learners’ learning problems so that lessons and materials can be pitched at an appropriate level. It also helps in interpreting coursebook syllabuses and in gearing teaching objectives to the demands of formal assessments. At the level of execution, language awareness is needed in order to deal satisfactorily with errors, to field learners’ queries and to help in the interpretation and production of written texts. And, importantly, a perceptible lack of such awareness, as evidenced by an inability to present or explain new language clearly and efficiently, can have a negative effect on learners’ motivation.

Of course, there have always been teachers who have been over-zealous in their desire to display their language awareness, and teachers who have been over-concerned with linguistic accuracy at the expense of fluency – teachers, in short, who have given grammar teaching a bad name. As Wright (1991) has pointed out: ‘One great danger of acquiring specialist knowledge is the possible desire to show learners that you have this knowledge’. But this is not a problem of too

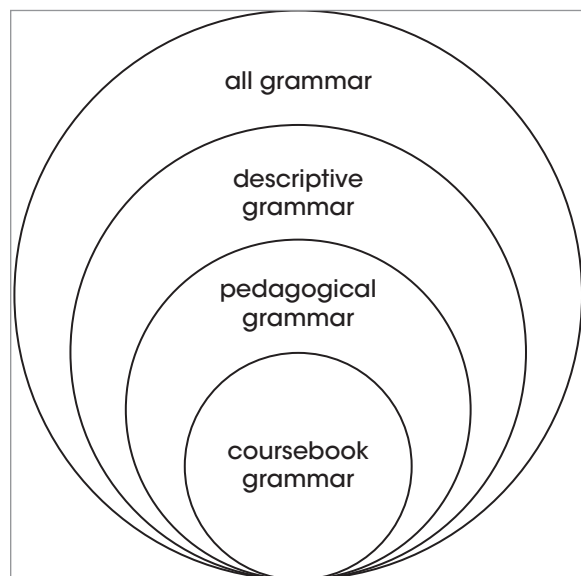
much knowledge; it is a problem of not enough methodology. The remedy for ‘chalk-and-talk’ type teaching lies in (re-)training such teachers in the use of techniques that are more consistent with what we now know about the way people learn and what language proficiency consists of. Moreover, the non-interventionist approach advocated by Krashen, Prabhu and their followers has long since been superseded by a renewed interest in the benefits of form-focused instruction, i.e. teaching that directs attention to the formal properties of language, including the explicit teaching of grammar and error correction. A failure to attend to the formal features of the language, it has been argued, explains why many learners in ‘acquisition-rich’ contexts still do not achieve anything like a native-like mastery of the second language – many, indeed, falling far short. Hence, the case for explicit, pro-active teaching of grammar has been argued on the grounds that it can counteract the premature stabilization of the learner’s developing grammatical system that has been shown to result from an exclusive focus on meaning. A ‘focus on form’ is particularly important as a counterbalance to more meaning-based teaching approaches, such as in classrooms where the focus is primarily on content, as in immersion or ‘content and language integrated learning’ (CLIL) contexts. Moreover, a case has been made for grammar teaching acting as a kind of ‘advance organizer’, that is, it primes learners to notice the targeted grammar item when it occurs in their linguistic environment. Finally, there are those who argue that explicit knowledge can become automated through practice, thereby validating the traditional present – practise – produce (PPP) teaching paradigm.

It would seem, therefore, that – in an educational climate that favours at least some explicit focus on language features – there is no escaping the fact that teachers need to be sufficiently knowledgeable about, at the very least, those features of language that will be the object of focus. In the end, though, and whether or not we make explicit reference to rules and terminology in our teaching, language is what we deal with, and language is inherently interesting. In fact, language teaching brings together two of the qualities that most uniquely define us as humans: language and cultural transmission, i.e. teaching. If we cease to be fascinated by either, we risk turning our vocation into just another routine occupation.

What do teachers need to know about language?

Having addressed the question as to *why* language awareness is important, it is time to look at what this awareness consists of. For teaching purposes, knowledge about language is traditionally construed as knowledge about *grammar*. The ‘language analysis’ strand of most pre-service and in-service courses tends to deal primarily with grammar, with a strand on phonology often included. And, on closer scrutiny, the grammar syllabus is almost exclusively concerned with features of verb morphology (the so-called tenses) with little reference to syntax, let alone phraseology. This somewhat narrow perspective on language is, of course, consistent with the notion that *pedagogical grammar* – the grammar for teaching – is a sub-set of *descriptive grammar*, the comprehensive description of the language as it is currently used. But even a descriptive grammar represents only a portion of what occurs in actual language use – just as a map of the night sky is only the visible fragment of a vastly more extensive system. Moreover, language is changing, morphing, shifting, fragmenting and merging even as we speak. No single ‘grammar’ is capable of capturing this dynamism and complexity.

We could represent these different grammars in the form of embedded circles:



Notice that ‘coursebook grammar’ is subsumed under pedagogical grammar, due to the somewhat narrow focus that general English coursebooks adopt. Compare, for example, the grammar syllabus of a typical intermediate coursebook with the index of a pedagogical grammar, such as Martin Parrott’s *Grammar for English Teachers* (2010): many items in the latter do not receive a great deal of attention in the former. Arguably, then, teachers whose knowledge is coextensive only with coursebook grammar (i.e. the smallest circle) may not be equipped for the task of dealing with all the kinds of language issues that arise in the course of teaching.

How much knowledge about language is necessary, then? A lot will depend on the teaching context and the specific needs of the learners. If, for example, you are teaching very young learners, the use of metalanguage – i.e. the language *about* language – is unlikely to make a lot of sense, and therefore there is less pressure on the teacher to display such knowledge. Teaching beginners, too, is probably more a matter of facilitating the acquisition of a critical mass of vocabulary and formulaic language than of transmitting ‘facts’ about the language. At the other end of the spectrum, however, such as the teaching of advanced adults, or those preparing for formal examinations, or those needing to read or write academic texts, an extensive knowledge of grammar, lexis, phraseology, phonology and discourse will be a requirement.

Who is this book for?

Once the need for language awareness is accepted, the question remains: how do you get it? The particular problem for many language teachers is that, unlike, say, teachers of mathematics or history, they may never have formally studied the subject that they are teaching. This is, of course, typically the case of teachers who are teaching their first language (their L1). It is a common experience of novice native-speaker teachers of English to discover that their explicit knowledge of English grammar is fragmentary at best, and, at worst, may well be below the level of their students.