

Language Awareness Work on an INSET Course: A Case Study

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Introduction

Anyone who has created a teacher training course, whether pre-service (PRESET) or in-service (INSET), will recognise the challenge of deciding on course content. Only so much can be covered in a 150 or 300 hour course, and overfilling a programme is likely to see less learning occur among trainees, as opposed to more. As the area of language teaching expands and diversifies, there is an increasing number of topics which warrant inclusion, task-based learning and content-based instruction are but two examples. The course designer is left with the dilemma of what to include and what to exclude.

When preparing training programmes for language teachers, I feel strongly that we should not overlook the need to develop trainees' ability to analyse and understand the English language, which is, after all, our subject matter. This has traditionally been done by covering a limited number of key areas of grammar to ensure that trainees can demonstrate reasonable competence in this aspect of teaching. In this paper I demonstrate an alternative approach which is more concerned with helping trainees develop the skill of analysing language rather than seeing them accrue a number of discrete, and diverse, rules. Building on the work of Wright & Bolitho (1993), I shall refer to a language awareness session I conducted with a COTE (Certificate for Overseas Teachers for English) group. I will outline the tasks the trainees worked on and refer to the rationale that underpinned them. I will end by evaluating the session and highlight ways in which it could be modified in the future.

Subject Knowledge and Teacher Education

Thornbury (1997) states that "it would appear to be axiomatic that knowledge of subject matter is a prerequisite for effective teaching" (p. xi) and indeed it is hard to disagree with this view. While the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) saw less emphasis placed on questions of language form, and more on issues of meaning, the downgrading of grammar has now been re-evaluated. Language is certainly a tool of communication, but language accuracy can help us refine messages and communicate more effectively. The present orthodoxy is to have students study language in context (see Willis 1996 for her outline of task-based learning as an example) and in all its complexity. Clearly, English teachers still require a sound understanding of the language we teach in order to achieve this.

A Product Approach to Subject Knowledge

The traditional approach to the treatment of subject knowledge, and one that is by no means discontinued, is to see grammar (and phonology) presented as a body of knowledge to be learnt by novice teachers. Trainees are guided through activities intended to provide them with an understanding of a number of key grammar rules. An example follows:

Table 1. A Product-Oriented Worksheet

Look at the sentences below. They all include an *if clause*, but what is the difference in meaning between the two sentences in each pair?

1. If you help me with my homework, I'll buy you a coffee.
2. If she studied more, she'd get better grades.
3. If I were you, I'd accept the offer.
4. If we go early, we can get the best seats.

What different tenses/verb forms do these sentences contain?

If trainees are provided with a series of such activities, they will be better armed to teach a number of tenses and verb forms that regularly occur in course books. Whilst this is valuable, we need to be realistic and recognise that we are providing them with the briefest snapshot of English grammar. Given that the time available to dedicate to grammar is limited, there will be extensive areas of English grammar that trainees will not know about, and crucially, they will not have the necessary tools to discover this knowledge for themselves subsequent to their course.

The type of activity above also reflects a view of language that is being increasingly challenged. Kerr (1996, p. 95) outlines these beliefs and comments upon them as follows:

- *Grammar is at the centre of language.* Several contend that it is lexis that truly characterises the nature of a language (for example Lewis, 1993).
- *Grammar is a body of finite rules that needs to be learnt through controlled practice.* Language learning is more widely perceived now as a matter of problem solving. Guiding students through meaning based tasks is more productive than providing decontextualised controlled practice (Skehan, 1996).
- *Grammar operates at sentence-level.* This linguistic description of language is increasingly being abandoned for a discourse view of language (for example McCarthy, 2001). What students need is to see language in texts, not in sentences invented for teaching purposes.

- *The most important element of grammar is the verb phrase.* This reflects the influence linguistic description has had on language teaching, but it fails to recognise the importance of the noun phrase in language use.

So, it is fair to say that the product-oriented approach exemplified in Table One has important shortcomings. I will now outline an alternative process-oriented approach that I believe is of greater benefit to trainees.

A Process Approach to Subject Knowledge

Language Awareness (LA) is an approach to the analysis and study of language that has received increasing attention in the professional literature (see for example Arndt, Harvey & Nuttall, 2000; Bolitho & Tomlinson, 1995; Bolitho & Wright, 1993; Borg, 1994; Thornbury, 1997). Hales (1997) defines language awareness as 'a sensitivity to grammatical, lexical or phonological features, and the effect on meaning brought about by the use of different forms' (p. 217).

In the context of language-oriented work on teacher training courses, LA focuses on "what teachers need to do, not the rules they need to learn" (Kerr, 1996, p. 97). Thus, rather than trying to impart a segment of subject knowledge, trainees are exposed to the processes involved in investigating language. This involves working with language data (texts, etc.) and carrying out such tasks as classifying, comparing, contrasting, judging grammaticality and so on. The knowledge that is acquired is not an end in itself. The concern is to help trainees develop the tools and strategies required for later independent study of language. Teachers with an enhanced sensitivity to language are better armed to solve a range of pedagogical problems such as planning lessons, analysing student language problems, presenting language and the like. Here we have the acquisition of subject knowledge addressed through a *process* approach.

In order to illustrate how language awareness work could be included in a teacher training programme, I will make reference to work I conducted with a group of teachers studying in a COTE course.

The Background

COTE is an early INSET course which forms part of the UCLES (University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate) teacher education scheme. The group I was working with was studying at the Anglo Mexican Foundation (Puebla). It consisted of 9 trainees, ranging in age from mid-20's to mid-40's. Whilst one trainee had only 1 year of experience, and another 15 years, the majority of the group had been teaching for between 4 and 6 years. Their teaching contexts varied widely, and included private language institutes, a state secondary school and private company teaching.

This group consisted of non-native speakers with an advanced level of English. At the time of the 4-hour session they had taken 30 hours of their 150 hour course. Relevant recent work included lesson planning and theories of learning and acquisition. The COTE syllabus makes the following specifications regarding knowledge of the language system:

Candidates should demonstrate a familiarity with and an understanding of the relationship between form, meaning and function, the simplest patterns of the noun group, verb group and clause, as set out in any standard modern reference grammar of contemporary English. (UCLES 1994: unnumbered)

The Session

In referring to the language awareness session, I shall provide a breakdown of the various tasks the group performed. Besides outlining procedures, I will also expand on my rationale. I will also comment on how trainees reacted to the tasks.

Task 1. Working with Trainees' Constructs

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Procedure</i>
Make trainees' beliefs about the English language more explicit.	Trainees think of an aspect of the English language which is difficult for Mexican Ss.

The intention of this opening activity was to make trainees' tacit beliefs about the nature of the English language more explicit and orientate them towards the goal of the session. Edge (1988) describes how experiences of learning and using the language informs our view as teachers of English, so I was drawing upon rich and diverse personal experience.

The areas the group mentioned included passive voice (mentioned twice) and reported speech, with only one reference to lexis (lend & borrow). When I mentioned that our language awareness work was focused on the definite and indefinite article, there was some, but by no means universal recognition that this too causes difficulties for students. During the session, those who harboured doubts as to its complexities appeared to moderate their view.

Task 2. Working with a Text

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Procedure</i>
Prepare for new learning; stimulate schema; focus attentional resources	Introduce text (Appendix 1), elicit ideas from title; pre-teach difficult lexis. Set gist question: Who are 'the Romans'?
Stimulate existing knowledge of target language	In pairs, Ts complete sorting task.

I designed a task based on the definite/indefinite article for several reasons. Firstly, according to *Cobuild* (in Willis, 1996, p. 171) articles are amongst the most commonly occurring words in English, *the* and *a* placed first and third respectively in the 'Top 200 Words of Spoken English'. Rules of usage are also complex; Swan (1995) dedicates 15 pages to articles. Given these complexities, articles appear to be better addressed through an inductive awareness raising approach rather than through teacher-led deductive work.

The text I used with trainees can be found in Appendix 1. I felt that working with a text would contextualise language study and thereby make it more meaningful. In addition, articles operate at the level of discourse rather than at sentence level, and so are best studied by looking at longer stretches of language. My reason for pre-teaching difficult vocabulary was to allow trainees to focus their attentional resources (Skehan, 1996) on the target language, and avoid the unwanted distraction of unfamiliar lexis.

Trainees were asked to complete the sorting task, categorising the articles in the text into 'specific', 'definite/indefinite' and 'generic' reference. The complexity of the task ensured trainees genuinely approached the text as learners of English, as opposed to being required to take on the role of their less proficient students.

As with any learning task, the activity tended to suit particular types of learners (the more analytical) more than others. Some appeared to become a little disheartened when they failed to make rapid progress through the classification. In retrospect, the use of grammatical terminology, such as 'specific', 'definite/indefinite' and 'generic', at the beginning of the task was perhaps unhelpful. These terms could have been paraphrased for trainees. Borg (1998) has researched how teachers' use of terminology impacts upon learners, and trainers need to be equally aware of when, and when not to turn to metalanguage in the training room.

Selecting an example of the noun phrase for LA work helped trainees see that grammar cannot be simply equated with verb forms. Furthermore, having trainees work with language at the discourse level, before moving on to the study of sentences, more closely replicated the nature of language acquisition (Little & Singleton, 1991), a point they recognised themselves.

Task 3. Moving Towards Understanding

Objective	Procedure
Provide 'closure' on sorting task.	With group, trainer sets out agreed classification.
Consolidate and refine new knowledge. Familiarise trainees with reference material	Trainees consult grammar reference material to check hypotheses developed and note down 'rules of thumb'.

I feel it is very important to be sensitive to trainees' natural desire for closure after the openness that normally accompanies LA work. My interest was in establishing an agreed classification of article use (See Appendix 2 for the key). Not surprisingly given the complexity of the article, there was some disagreement. Some trainees saw the second definite article in the phrase *The might of the Roman legions (line 2)* as generic reference, others as specific and definite. I pointed out that both interpretations were valid and mentioned that when doing LA work we have to accept that language cannot always be easily classified, a view expressed by Swan (2001), who commented that:

All languages have areas that are inherently complex and messy, and which refuse to be described clearly and economically...The reason why teachers think the English tense system, or article systems, for instance, are complicated and difficult to teach is quite simply that they are (p. 182).

Having trainees refer to pedagogical data sources, such as grammar reference books, is instructive as they have the opportunity to become familiar with the reference material and the way it is organised. Predictably trainees found the task of designing pedagogic rules challenging, initial attempts being too imprecise (e.g. a noun referred to a second time becomes definite). Thornbury (1999, p. 32) states rules should be clear, simple, truthful, indicate the limits of the rule, and relate to concepts students are familiar with. When considering the complexity of article use, satisfying each criterion is no small task. I believe that it is helpful to expose trainees to this reality rather than suggesting simple explanations can always be found if only we can obtain the correct grammar book.

Task 4. Reflection and Transfer

Objective	Procedure
Consider transfer value of LA work.	Trainees reflect on process undergone & discuss applicability to their teaching.

Using oral recall, trainees retraced their steps and began to consider the thinking that lay behind the activities. They talked about the process they passed through, engaged in debate, clarified their perceptions and carried out a deeper evaluation of LA work.

A potential danger of any language work on teacher training courses is that trainees see it as interesting and useful for their own language learning, but fail to see that it represents an innovation that could be introduced in their own teaching. The group raised doubts as to the length of time LA activities take, especially when compared to the apparent directness offered by deductive teaching methods. The suitability of LA work at elementary levels was another concern. Despite these stated reservations, the fact that trainees engaged in such 'articulation' (Freeman,

1996), with conscious introspection of teaching practices was a sign that they were involved in a deep consideration of the issues. By the end of the discussion, all trainees showed a willingness to experiment with LA. Given that I was dealing with very new, and potentially destabilising material, this was a more than satisfying start.

Task 5. Designing LA Tasks

Objective	Procedure
Facilitate transfer.	Using the dialogue in Appendix 3, trainees work in small groups to design an LA task to raise Ss awareness of embedded Qs.

This final activity required trainees to design an LA task, an activity referred to as 'optional' by Wright and Bolitho (1993, p. 297). I take the view that despite the usual time pressures on INSET courses, we cannot assume that the insights trainees acquire will result in innovations in teaching practice. In addition, asking trainees to produce an LA task should give them a more profound understanding of the principles that underlie the approach. Furthermore, it provides practice in designing tasks that are interesting, relevant and pitched at the right level, all of which engage key teacher competences.

The dialogue was taken from *Interchange 2* (Richards, Hull & Proctor, 1995), a widely used course book which was known to the majority of the group. I hoped that by using this familiar source the design of an LA task would be more meaningful, with the link to everyday teaching being more overt. The dialogue includes a number of embedded questions, another complex area of English grammar apparently suited to inductive treatment.

The worksheets produced by trainees can be seen as the *product* to validate the *process* of awareness raising the group passed through. From a trainer perspective, it was very helpful to see trainees produce tasks, as when, for example, one pair began to prepare traditional direct/indirect question transformations, it was evident they had not grasped the essence of LA and needed reorientation. Lamb (1995) refers to the danger of trainees completely misinterpreting input on INSET courses, and asking trainees to create tasks was a very useful way to detect such problems.

Included in Appendix 3 there is an example of one of the group's work. The questions set help students notice salient aspects of embedded questions, particularly word order, and highlight their use as markers of social distance. Of course, we should not always expect to receive work of such good quality as learning how to use an LA approach is likely to take time. However, receiving this example of a well-designed LA task was personally very satisfying.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined two approaches to the teaching of subject knowledge on both PRESET and INSET courses for English teachers. I have identified a number of limitations associated with a product approach and have described my attempts to incorporate process-oriented language work on a COTE course. This was focused more on developing trainees' ability to investigate language rather than to give them discrete pieces of knowledge to take away. The quality of the LA tasks produced indicates that trainees made important progress in seeing how they could use LA tasks in their own teaching. Whilst the activities focused only on the use of the article system, I feel it empowered trainees to independently investigate the language areas they highlighted in Task One of the session.

Appendix 1. The Language Awareness Worksheet.

**'Romans' lay siege to house
by Simon de Bruxelles**

Michael Maltin does not need to see the film *Gladiator* to appreciate the might of the Roman legions. He has experienced it at first hand.

Mr Maltin, 80, flew fighters during the Second World War but nothing prepared him for bombardment by a Roman siege machine as he sat in his garden. (5)

A wooden ball the size of a grapefruit flew more than 150 yards through the air and scored a direct hit on his roof, smashing through to the attic.

The weapon was fired by the Ermine Street Guard who re-enact Roman battles. They were staging a fundraising display in the Gloucestershire village of Woodchester. (10)

Mr. Martin's wife said the ball was caught by a gust of wind. 'I'm not upset about it at all. In fact, I thought it was a superb display and what happened here was the highlight of the day'.

(taken from the *Times*, 14 June 2000)

The Definite and Indefinite Article

Read this newspaper article and focus on how the definite (the) and indefinite (a) article are used.

Classify each use into one of the following categories:

1. Specific and definite reference
2. Specific and indefinite reference
3. Generic reference (to a class of thing)

For example in line 1 the film *Gladiator* should go into category 1.

Then look at the examples of definite reference. Is it definite because:

1. There's only one of the thing referred to (it's unique)?
2. The thing is being referred to for a second time?

Appendix 2. The Answer Key

Classification

Line	Use
1	Definite specific reference to a count noun
1	Definite specific reference to a count noun
2	Definite specific reference to a count noun
3	Unique reference/proper noun with phrasal definite article
4	Indefinite specific reference to a count noun
6	Indefinite specific reference to a count noun (ball)
6	Definite specific reference to a count noun
6	Generic reference to a count noun (grapefruit)
7	Definite reference to a non-count noun (ie. definite through shared knowledge)
7	Indefinite specific reference to a count noun
7	Unique reference (i.e. there's only one attic in the house)
8	Definite specific reference to a count noun mentioned initially in line 4 (siege machine-weapon)
8	Unique reference/Premodified proper noun
9	Indefinite specific reference to a count noun
9	Unique reference/Premodified proper noun
11	Definite specific reference to a count noun mentioned initially in line 6 (ball)
11	Indefinite specific reference to a singular count noun
12	Indefinite specific reference to a singular count noun
13	Unique reference (there can only be one highlight in this context)
13	Definite specific reference to a count noun

The Nature of 'Definiteness'

All the definite nouns fall into the first category, except those on lines 8 & 11, which become definite through second mention.

Appendix 3. LA Worksheet Produced by Trainees

Read the following conversation.

A: Excuse me, officer. could you tell me how often the number 6 bus comes?

B: You just missed it ma'am, but there's another one in half an hour.

A: Oh no! Then could you tell me where Adam Street is?

B: Two blocks east and one block north, ma'am.

A: Thank you. And just one more thing. Do you know where the nearest restroom is?

B: Right behind you ma'am. See that sign?

A: Oh! Thanks a lot.

Look carefully at the questions speaker A asks.

(1) What phrases does she use to introduce her questions?

(2) After the question word, is the word order affirmative, or interrogative?

(3) What is a more direct way of asking these questions?

(4) Why do you think she chose to ask her questions in this less direct way?

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