Multilingualism Matters: Learning Languages via the LAA

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Abstract

This article focuses on current theoretical research in second language education and on how the Language Awareness Approach is key to fostering multilingualism. Language acquisition methodologies, in theory and practice, are undergoing constant change. By considering the necessity of communicating the message in different contexts, without ignoring the sociocultural aspects of the environment, as well as the ability to intuitively find solutions to the structure of the language in a correct form to convey proper meaning, the Language Awareness Approach provides a comprehensive approach to language learning and teaching. Through the Language Awareness Approach, students become highly motivated self-learners, expertly analyzing the syntax of their native language as well as that of the second language. By doing so, a second and third language is easily learned. As students become more skilled in understanding how language works, they can internalize the new language and make it their own.

Keywords: multilingualism, applied linguistics, language awareness approach, motivation

1. Introduction

Theories of language are undergoing constant change to better serve the needs of students learning a second language. Newer approaches demonstrate that levels of language considered to be separate, such as grammar and vocabulary. However, linguists presently suggest that they are closely interrelated in the construction of meanings and of texts. Furthermore, they are interconnected in both skills, the oral and the written (Carter and McCarthy 1997). This description in part addresses the Language Awareness Approach, which has also proven to be ideal as it not only fosters bilingualism, but also biculturalism in the classroom. Before introducing the LAA, we will discuss two of the main methodologies that are commonly used in second language education: the Structuralist and the Communicative methodologies.

1.1 The Structuralist Approach

The Structuralist Approach was first defined in Ferdinand de Saussure's book *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. Saussure presents the idea that language is composed of two systems: the language system and the actual act of speaking. Saussure indicates that the language is structure and a self-contained whole. The base of this theory is syntax. He leaves out the sociocultural aspects of the language: "De Saussure supports that "only the distinction between syntagmatic and associative relations can provide a classification that is not imposed from the outside. The groupings in both classes are fixed by language; this set of common

relations constitutes language and governs its functioning". He adds that "syntagmatic and associative solidarities are what limits arbitrariness and supplies motivation" (p. 132), highlighting the grammatical structure as the theory's main objective. Therefore, this methodology has led into a text-based approach since grammar and its structure are its focus. Europe adopted primarily this method of language instruction and is still widely used today.

1.2 The Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach, also known as communicative competence, originated in 1967 in the United States with Noam Chomsky. This methodology arose from the area of sociolinguistics that emphasized that the need for communication in a specific context is an opportunity to practice the target language to solve the problem of communication. "Communication is the key" is its moto.

It was in response to Saussure's Structuralist Theory, that this new movement emerged. This approach to language learning, as described by Jack Richard "looks at the broader implications of considering speakers and hearers as social beings, operating within a context that is at the same time personal, conceptual and interpersonal" (1983: Introduction). Therefore, the Communicative Approach is widely known for its communicative objective, as it can be deduced from its name, as opposed to its grammatical structure of the language itself.

1.3 The Language Awareness Approach

The third methodology that will be discussed is the Language Awareness Approach which arose in the 1970's. This approach offers a balance between Ferdinand de Saussure's Structuralist Approach and Noam Chomsky's Communicative Approach, where critical thinking and the internalization of language serve as resources to help students learn and understand the language on the short and long run.

Pedagogically, Language Awareness is viewed as closely related to text awareness. Carter mentions that "the emphasis on language in use and in context entails a view of language and as a social and cultural medium" (2003, 253), classifying the approach as a holistic view in theory and practice. Therefore, the Language Awareness Approach considers language and cultural awareness to be indistinguishable.

Consciousness-raising (C-R) is another term that is used to refer to the Language Awareness Approach. It refers to a deliberate an attempt to draw the learner's explicit attention to features of the target language, particularly to its grammatical features. This idea may be akin to Saussure's Structuralist Approach, still widely used in Europe; however, Rutherford insists that it differs: "Consciousness-raising is a means of attainment of grammatical competence…whereas 'grammar teaching' typically represents an attempt to instill that competence directly" (Rutherford, 1987, p.24). Also, Consciousness-Raising treats an explicit focus on grammar as necessary but not sufficient for developing grammatical competence whereas traditional grammar teaching treats it as necessary and sufficient. Furthermore, Consciousness-Raising acknowledges the learner's active role in grammar construction; traditional grammar teaching considers the learner 'tabula rasa, a blank slate. Finally,

traditional grammar teaching is concerned mainly with syntax, while Consciousness-Raising is concerned with syntax and its relation to semantics.

The Language Awareness Approach uses grammar as an explicit component to internalize language, but not as the only resource. This is where critical thinking plays a key role in the process of learning the language. This approach allows students to analyze the language in the "real world" without being limited to the classroom. The idea around this approach is that instructors provide the students with strategies to become self-motivated and equipped to analyze language when being in contact with it and "solve the problem" of communication using critical thinking. Bolitho states that a key element of the Language Awareness approach is that learners "discover language for themselves'" (2003: 251). Hawkins indicates that the Language Awareness Approach encourages students "to ask questions about language" and as a result "gather their own data from the world outside school" (1984: 4-5). As a result, students learn to think for themselves and become problem-solvers in a specific context where language must be used.

2. Findings

Because of the tools that the Language Awareness Approach provides learners, this methodology has also proven to raise the students' self-esteem in numerous studies. As L² learners become proficient in solving the structure of the language in a specific communicative situation, they think critically when analyzing the structure of the language and produce the output. As a result, they become self-motivated and continue to practice language in context. Bolitho states that "the effect of all this on trainees' self-esteem, as they become their own experts rather than relying on received knowledge, cannot be underestimated" (2003: 255). Therefore, the students become motivated for the following two reasons: First, the students can use analysis to produce output of language in a given context. Second, they internalize the language as a result of this process of analysis and not mere memorization. These two outcomes will have a positive effect on the language learners, thus encouraging them to continue their learning process and fluency.

The Language Awareness Approach runs parallel to the definition of language and its purpose. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition is "the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community." It is then that it can be said that language comes naturally and that it is embedded in us (Kumaravadivelu 2006, p. 156). Steven Pinker states that people take for granted this natural ability or gift of understanding and producing language: "As you are reading these words, you are taking part in one of the wonders of the natural world. For you and I belong to a species with a remarkable ability…That ability is language…The ability comes so naturally that we are apt to forget what a miracle it is*" (Pinker, 1994, p.15). Since language is a natural process in human beings, the Language Awareness Approach uses this natural ability and combines it with language skills, attitudinal education and metacognitive opportunities. This leads the students to reflect on the process of language acquisition and its usage.

In short, the Language Awareness method provides a more holistic view between Saussure's Structuralist theory of incorporating grammar in the classroom and Chomsky's Communicative

Approach having communication as its primary objective. The Language Awareness Approach, therefore, uses the analysis of grammatical structures with critical thinking to achieve effective communication, thus serving as a natural resource for human beings. Besides fostering bilingualism due to transferring the student's skills from their first language to the target language using critical thinking and its internalization process, the LAA has also proven to be ideal to foster biculturalism due to its methodology and shifting from one correct answer to different answers due to diverse cultural contexts.

Instructors play an essential role in the motivation of the student. This role of teachers is clearly the key to creating a positive environment in the classroom while providing the tools that encourage the development of critical thinking skills necessary to analyze language in a communicative situation. The *Sprachgefühl* or 'feeling of language' is an important mark of the motivation and success of the students when learning a second language. According to Tomlinson, The Language Awareness Approach "opens doors to these affective dimensions in ways which might make all the difference to learners" (2003: 256). Furthermore, this methodology combined with effective instruction and positive reinforcement, and emotive involvement, increases neural paths in multiple areas of the brain, thus achieving the multidimensional representation needed for a profound process of language (256).

The Language Awareness Approach encourages student-centered classrooms and helps the teacher to present material according to student readiness" (1995: 49). The usage of previously used examples and building on that content, to learn new information, metaphorically speaking, works as the foundation to place bricks, with new information, reinforces the previously learned materials, making it so much more meaningful and permanent. The use of pair or group work for "collaborative discoveries about the language and content in different contexts is also helpful. Furthermore, utilizing information from authentic sources with attention to form, content and pragmatics (Module 2: Building Language Awareness, 2013) is imperative, as it is important to simulative n real-situation environment inside the classroom, paying close attention not only to language, but also to the different sociological and cultural contexts of where the language in spoken.

2.1 Resources Integrating the LAA

How should the theory be put into practice? Sometimes it can be complicated. However, the following resources should be helpful to integrate the Language Awareness Approach in the classroom:

1. Creating classroom materials.
2. Using textbooks only as resources.
3. Encouraging thinking and analyzing using the Socratic Dialogue.

   - Helping the students find the answer, making them think: metacognition.

   - Making them reflect on their own language.

- Shifting from an emphasis on one right answer to multiple interpretations.

1. Asking learners to discuss how topics could be dealt with differently from both, a linguistic and a cultural perspective. ((Module 2: Building Language Awareness, 2013).

3. Conclusion

In short, language acquisition methodologies are undergoing constant change. By considering the necessity of communicating the message in different contexts without ignoring the sociocultural aspects of the environment, as well as the ability to intuitively find solutions to the structure of the language in a correct form to convey proper meaning, the Language Awareness Approach provides a comprehensive approach to language learning and teaching. Bolitho explains it the following way:

The Language Awareness Approach "opens doors to these affective dimensions in ways which might make all the difference to learners" (2003: 256). This methodology combined with effective instruction and positive reinforcement, and emotive involvement increase neural paths in multiple areas of the brain, thus achieving the multidimensional representation needed for a profound process of language (Bolitho, 256).

By parting from the idea that language learning is part of the human's innate and natural ability and by the use of critical thinking, the Language Awareness Approach is becoming a popular methodology for language acquisition in the world, to learn a language in the long run due to its effective internalization process. Furthermore, the LAA also fosters biculturalism as it helps learners understand language in its cultural context(s).

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