

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254921432>

# Ten questions about language awareness

Article in *ELT Journal* · January 2003

DOI: 10.1093/elt/57.3.251

---

CITATIONS

96

READS

3,959

6 authors, including:



**Hitomi Masuhara**

University of Liverpool

10 PUBLICATIONS 227 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



coursebook evaluation [View project](#)

# Ten questions about language awareness

Rod Bolitho, Ronald Carter, Rebecca Hughes,  
Roz Ivanič, Hitomi Masuhara, and  
Brian Tomlinson

*This paper originated at a recent IATEFL conference in Slovenia, where Rod Bolitho and Ron Carter spoke on Language Awareness. They later came together with the colleagues named here to explore some of the reasons why Language Awareness has to some degree remained on the periphery of mainstream practices in language teaching and teacher education. The article was written interactively over an extended period of consultation by the authors, and explores questions concerning the theory and practice of language awareness, its descriptive orientations, its relationship with critical social dimensions, and its connections with current theories of language teaching and learning.*

## Introduction

In this paper each author takes responsibility for certain questions, and has drafted and re-drafted answers to them, taking on board comments from co-authors, but without feeling a need to reach total consensus on all points. Roz Ivanič added a critical Language Awareness dimension to some of the questions, mainly numbers 1, 2, 4, and 7. We hope that this unusual approach to writing an article captures something of the dialogue we have had over the past months. A number of issues concerning the history and background to the Language Awareness movement are assumed by the contributors here. Readers wishing to explore these issues should consult the *Key Concepts in ELT* (Carter 2003) which appeared in *ELT Journal* 57/1.

*In the first part of the paper (Questions 1–6) we offer core definitions of Language Awareness in teaching and learning, and in theory and in practice.*

## Q1 – How would you define language awareness?

Brian Tomlinson

Language Awareness is a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work. It is also a pedagogic approach that aims to help learners to gain such insights.

A key element of a Language Awareness approach is that learners ‘discover language for themselves’. Hawkins (1984: 4–5) says it involves challenging ‘pupils to ask questions about language’, encouraging learners ‘to gather their own data from the world outside school’, and

helping learners to develop a 'growing insight into the way language works to convey meaning.' Tomlinson (1994: 123) views Language Awareness as something 'dynamic and intuitive', which is 'gradually developed internally by the learner.' And Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995: iv) see Language Awareness as helping to develop 'a healthy spirit of enquiry', and as establishing the classroom as a place where 'the only views of language that matter are the ones that teachers and learners have built up in their heads.'

However, van Lier (2001: 347) draws attention to the 'traditional end' of the Language Awareness movement, which 'might include explicit teaching of form, metalinguistic rules, and terminology'. It is important to distinguish between a teaching approach which advocates giving explicit knowledge to the learners, and a Language Awareness approach, which is actually a reaction against such top-down transmission of language knowledge. Language Awareness is not taught by the teacher or by the coursebook; it is developed by the learner. Language Awareness is an internal, gradual, realization of the realities of language use. It is driven by the positively curious learner paying conscious attention to instances of language in an attempt to discover and articulate patterns of language use.

The term 'Critical Language Awareness' (C.L.A.) refers to the same approach, but with a focus on the relationship between language and social context. In C.L.A. the awareness that might be developed includes awareness of the ways in which language represents the world, and reflects and constructs power relations. (See Clark and Ivanič 1999).

**Q2 – What are the principles, objectives, and procedures of a Language Awareness Approach?**

Brian Tomlinson

The main principle is that most learners learn best whilst affectively engaged, and when they willingly invest energy and attention in the learning process. Another principle is that paying deliberate attention to features of language in use can help learners to notice the gap between their own performance in the target language, and the performance of proficient users of the language. This noticing can give salience to a feature, so that it becomes more noticeable in future input, and thereby contributes to the learner's psychological readiness to acquire that feature (Pienemann 1985; Tomlinson 1994).

The main objective is to help learners to notice for themselves how language is typically used so that they will note the gaps and 'achieve learning readiness' (Tomlinson 1994: 122–3). Other objectives include helping learners to develop such cognitive skills as connecting, generalizing, and hypothesizing, and helping learners to become independent, with positive attitudes towards the language, and to learning the language beyond the classroom.

The first procedures are usually *experiential* rather than analytical, and aim to involve the learners in affective interaction with a potentially engaging text, so as to be able to achieve their own mental representation of the text, and to articulate their personal responses to it. Then the learners are asked to focus on a particular feature of the text, to work with others to identify instances of this feature, and to make discoveries and articulate generalizations about its use. They are then encouraged to test

their generalizations by searching for other instances in other texts. On-going research is then encouraged which involves seeking further instances and reconsidering the generalizations which have been made. Throughout the process procedures are used which maximize the potential of interactive collaboration between the learner and other learners, between the learners and the teacher, and between the learners and proficient users of the language. See Tomlinson (1994) for specifications, and an example of procedures.

C.L.A. has the additional objective of encouraging learners to explore *why* the language they are learning may have come to be the way it is: what socio-political factors have shaped it. C.L.A. involves recognizing that language use has consequences for identity, and that learners may have socio-political reasons for choosing to use some of the resources of the language rather than others.

**Q3 – What are the relationships between Language Awareness and existing theories of language?**

Ronald Carter

Theories of language are currently undergoing rapid change. The relatively new disciplines of discourse analysis, pragmatics, and, especially, corpus linguistics are pushing back existing frontiers and compelling new descriptions of language. There is inevitable resistance to the insights generated by these advances because they entail revision to existing theories, and challenge powerful institutional bases built up in teaching and research in linguistics. Most existing theories have foundations in an atomistic view of language which works from separate levels of language organization, such as grammar and lexis and phonology, and which engages first, and sometimes only with the smallest and most systematizable units.

New approaches to language demonstrate that levels of language considered to be separate, such as grammar and vocabulary, are in fact closely interwoven in the construction of meanings and of texts, both spoken and written (Carter and McCarthy 1997). Pedagogically, therefore, Language Awareness is seen as inseparable from text awareness, and the emphasis on language in use and in context entails a view of language as a social and cultural medium. Consequently, points of entry into texts are more holistic, consider language and cultural awareness to be indistinguishable, and accordingly underline that there can be no such thing as a neutral description of language.

**Q4 – What are the relationships between Language Awareness and existing theories of language learning?**

Hitomi Masuhara

Language Awareness offers opportunities for affective engagement, personal investment, and the raising of self-esteem (Donmall 1985: 7). Support comes from researchers (e.g. Schumann 1997) who argue that affect gives values, reasons, and motivation for learning. This process of recognizing patterns and consistency, according to neuroscientists, is also one of the main fundamental functions of the brain (Damasio and Damasio 1993). The cognitive emphasis of Language Awareness makes justifiable use of the inherent noting-analysis-integration capability of language users. (See also Q7.) This echoes with SLA research that acknowledges the importance of attention in explicit learning (Ellis 1995; Schmidt 1995). Neuroscientists, however, identify two separate but complementary routes of explicit and implicit learning (Bloom and Lazerson 1988). Acquisition of automatic language skills depends on

rich, meaningful, repeated exposure to comprehensible input without conscious awareness. Heightened awareness in explicit learning seems to operate in a complementary way, and strengthens the vital role of implicit awareness arising from language experience. Tomlinson (1994) exemplifies the process of how 'noting the gap' provides indirect but influential effects on language learning, and how the readiness of learners can be heightened by providing an *experiential* phase before explicit analysis.

These two complementary routes—the implicit and the explicit—are also evident in the critical literacy framework proposed by Kalantzis and Cope (2000). This framework consists of the following sequence: Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practice. Situated Practice refers to the 'experiential phase', and Overt Instruction refers to explicit analysis. The element which is specific to critical literacy is Critical Framing—the discussion of cultural, social, and political explanations for, and consequences of, particular language choices. Transformed Practice also has a 'critical' dimension: it implies that the result of the awareness-raising work will not just be improved language use, but also language use which is more sensitive to issues of culture, identity, and equity.

**Q5 – What are the relationships between Language Awareness and existing theories of language teaching?**  
Hitomi Masuhara

In language teaching methodology, I see two main strands: deductive and inductive. Language Awareness approaches are essentially inductive. What distinguishes Language Awareness from inductive methods (such as some strands of Natural Approaches, the Audiolingual Approach, or Total Physical Response) is that Language Awareness approaches do not typically exploit a syllabus based on a prescribed inventory of language items. A number of published materials suggest and exemplify such Language Awareness teaching approaches (e.g. Bolitho and Tomlinson 1995; Tomlinson 1994, and van Lier 2001: 350–1).

Language Awareness approaches, like Task-Based Approaches and the Process Approach, reflect the research findings that, in both L1 and L2, language acquisition occurs when and *only* when the learners are ready (Pienemann 1985). If this is the case, the predetermined language syllabus loses its authority, and leaves room for exploration with more holistic language teaching approaches.

One key question is: How can we formally assess such a dynamic process, and the learners' acquired ability as the end-product of a course? This question embodies at least three further issues: target, format, and timing of the assessment. Firstly, as the target of the assessment, are we to evaluate the results of the learner's analysis (i.e. product), or the evidence of competence in following the analytical procedures (i.e. process)? Secondly, what kinds of format should Language Awareness assessment take that will separate the learners' previous knowledge and ability from those acquired during the Language Awareness course? Thirdly, when and how often should the learners be tested to measure the developmental nature of language awareness?

**Q6 – What are the relationships between Language Awareness and existing models of teacher education?**

Rod Bolitho

Pre-service training courses usually include a Language Systems component (often taught by specialists in grammar, phonology, semantics, etc.) and (for non-native teachers) a Language Improvement component, designed to ensure that they have the required level of proficiency. But neither proficiency in a language nor knowledge about that language are sufficient on their own to equip a teacher to teach it. Trainee teachers need to be able to analyse language, to apply different strategies for thinking about language (analogizing, contrasting, substituting, etc.) in order to be able to plan lessons, to predict learners' difficulties, to answer their questions, and to write and evaluate materials. Only if they are able to think for themselves about language will they be able to do all this.

All this implies working within a model of teacher education which promotes independent and critical thinking. Many teachers will recall the difficulty they have experienced in applying the theoretical knowledge of language systems acquired on their pre-service training course to real classroom situations. The model which has most in common with a Language Awareness approach is Reflective Practice, a process which allows trainees to use their own experience of language and language learning as a starting point for questioning and reflecting, thereby establishing a strong basis for learning selectively about language, and applying this learning in planning for classroom action. Language can be approached in this way, inductively, on a teacher education course, and can have an impact (this would be an interesting area to research) on the language proficiency of non-native speaker trainees. The effect of all this on trainees' self-esteem, as they become their own experts rather than relying on received knowledge, cannot be underestimated.

*Having examined and argued for basic paradigms, we now move to a more exploratory series of questions, including the key issue of affect, and attempt to establish an agenda for future practice.*

**Q7 – What is the role of affect in a Language Awareness approach?**

Rod Bolitho

Engagement with a foreign or second language almost always provokes an emotional response in learners. That response may be rooted in deep-seated attitudes to what the target language stands for (common, for example, in learners in post-colonial countries the world over), in prejudices about the country and the people of the country concerned, or in simple problems of identity (the difficulties and frustrations which learners experience in trying to be themselves in a foreign language). These issues are seldom addressed overtly in language classrooms. And there is more: why is it that girls initially achieve more success than boys in foreign language learning? Could it be that many girls have a more positive, less inhibited attitude towards a new language? What is a 'feeling for language' (German: *Sprachgefühl*), and what does that mean in mother tongue as well as second language learning? These are some of the affective factors which may lead to success or failure in language learning, and yet how often are they fully aired or investigated in classrooms and training rooms? How much time is spent on playing with language, especially once learners get older, and on challenging the cultural and national stereotypes which every language carries? A Language Awareness approach opens doors to these affective

dimensions in ways which might make all the difference to learners struggling cognitively with grammatical and lexical difficulties.

Sensitivity to affect in teachers may influence lesson and course design in a profound way through choice of texts and activities, and may help them to 'unblock' failing learners by encouraging them to respond affectively as well as cognitively to language inputs of various kinds.

Affective engagement with language in use also has the considerable advantage of stimulating a fuller use of the resources of the brain. Positive attitudes, self-esteem, and emotive involvement help to fire neural paths between many areas of the brain, and to achieve the multi-dimensional representation needed for deep processing of language.

**Q8 – What are the main justifications for using a Language Awareness approach?**  
Rebecca Hughes

As already noted, Language Awareness approaches place high value on the creative and situated use of language, and value even more highly the active engagement between learner, language data, and the learning process. This means that for the practising teacher there are two main practical benefits for language pedagogy.

First, Language Awareness approaches can provide a tangible, more holistic and teacher-friendly framework for aspects of the Communicative Approach. Second, a Language Awareness approach can provide balance to the more form-focused, atomistic approaches. Hughes and McCarthy (1998) deal with the pros and cons of sentence versus discourse level approaches to teaching grammar. As teachers, we have all been in the situation where the learner wants to know 'why' they can/cannot say something. Given time-constraints, learner expectation, and very often a teacher's own sense that they are expected to know 'the answer', *ad hoc* attempts at formalization tend to prevail. Very often, a broader 'language awareness' discussion brings in textual, contextual, socio-political, and attitudinal factors as well as semantic or syntactic ones. This broader understanding can give us the confidence to extend the boundaries of that puzzling beyond words and clauses in the classroom as well, and also into a creative dialogue with our students. Language Awareness approaches fulfil an important practical role for the teacher. They can provide logical extensions of, and links between, two strands of language teaching and learning which still dominate our classrooms, and exist in a generally not very creative tension: those approaches which place the learner at the centre of the learning process, and those which value an explicit focus on language structure.

Nevertheless, there is work to be done within the Language Awareness movement to ensure that the distinctive qualities of the approach are better targeted and more widely understood. In particular, its scope in relation to other approaches, its strengths and weaknesses in relation to different learning styles, and issues of classroom and syllabus constraints in different international teaching contexts, need to be considered.

**Q9 – What can be achieved through Language Awareness work?**

Rod Bolitho

At classroom level, Language Awareness offers a chance to discuss language (instead of life in a suburban family, for instance) in terms which learners can relate to and understand. For beginners in a language, this may mean using the mother tongue to discuss aspects of the new language, such as the difficulties they are encountering, contacts with L1, etc. ‘What is the overall message of the text?’ and ‘whose interests are served by this text?’ are more valid awareness-raising questions than ‘Why is this tense incorrect in line 9?’ Through Language Awareness work, learners engage with message, medium, and the relationship between the two. This enables them to draw on their existing experience of language, and of the world (resources which are too often ignored by teachers, especially in beginners’ classes) to make sense of a new language. Language Awareness is not a method; it cannot do everything (it doesn’t facilitate spontaneous responses in unplanned discourse, for example). It is an approach which, once understood by teachers and learners, enables them to ‘get beneath the surface’ of a language in ways which knowledge-based approaches alone can never achieve. The result, in an ideal world, is that language classes become educational: learners develop the capacity to think critically about language, and about the target culture. I have also spoken to non-native teachers of English who have asserted that engaging in Language Awareness work in English has led to important new insights about their mother tongue. Perhaps this touches on the greatest potential value of Language Awareness work: it can open up attitudes to language and language learning by helping teachers and learners to see the limitations of closed categories, and by encouraging shared enquiry about language, rather than blind acceptance of existing ‘expert’ linguistic knowledge and analytical frameworks.

**Q10 – What is the Future of Language Awareness?**

Brian Tomlinson

My fear is that our approach to Language Awareness will be misunderstood as part of the back-to-grammar movement. My hope is that Language Awareness, as a means of helping learners to help themselves, will influence curriculum developers, materials writers, and teachers. Encouragingly, a number of national textbooks have been produced recently which use a learner-centred Language Awareness approach (e.g. in Namibia, Norway, and Singapore) and a number of global courses recently published in the United Kingdom now include Language Awareness sections.

I would like Language Awareness to become one of the main objectives of teachers’ and learners’ courses rather than a supplementary section of them. I would like ‘language’ to include all aspects of language in use (and not just grammar), and I would like ‘awareness’ to become both a principle and an objective in all language lessons. What I would like to see in the future is a commonly used approach in which:

- some lessons are experiential, with the learners unaware that they are developing implicit awareness by focusing on features of a text in order to achieve an intended outcome;
- other lessons are both experiential and analytical, with the learners being helped to begin the exploration of features of a text which they have just experienced;



- other lessons are analytical, with the learners being asked to articulate and refine discoveries they have previously made;
- in all lessons the learners are asked to think for themselves, and are encouraged to become more aware;
- learners may also become more 'critical', in the sense of being more questioning, and better equipped to challenge language conventions, language attitudes, and language policies when it is in their interests to do so.

Idealistic, perhaps. But it could happen as more and more teachers become aware of the potential value of a Language Awareness approach.

*Final revised version received June 2002*

## References

- Bloom, F. E.** and **A. Lazerson.** 1988. *Brain, Mind, and Behavior* (2nd edn.). New York: W. H. Freeman.
- Bolitho, R.** and **B. Tomlinson.** 1995. *Discover English*. New edn. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Carter, R.** 2003. 'Key Concepts in ELT: Language awareness'. *ELT Journal* 57/1: 64-5.
- Carter, R. A.** and **M. McCarthy.** 1997. *Exploring Spoken English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, R.** and **R. Ivanič.** 1999. 'Raising critical awareness of language: A curriculum aim for the new millennium'. *Introduction to Critical Language Awareness: Special Issue of Language Awareness* 8/2: 63-70.
- Damasio, A. R.** and **H. Damasio.** 'Brain and Language' in G. D. Fischback (ed.). 1993. *Mind and Brain—Readings from Scientific American*. New York: W. H. Freeman.
- Donmall, B. G.** (ed.). 1985. *Language Awareness*. NCLE Papers and Reports 6. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.
- Ellis, N. C.** 1995. 'Consciousness in second language acquisition: A review of field studies and laboratory experiments'. *Language Awareness*. 4/3: 123-46.
- Hawkins, E.** 1984. *Awareness of Language: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, R.** and **M. McCarthy.** 1998. 'From sentence to discourse: Discourse grammar and English language teaching'. *TESOL Quarterly*. 32/2: 263-87.
- Kalantzis, M.** and **B. Cope.** 2000. 'A multiliteracies pedagogy: A pedagogical supplement' in B. Cope and M. Kalantzis (eds.). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.

- Pienemann, M.** 1985. 'Learnability and syllabus construction' in K. Hyltenstam and M. Pienemann (eds.). *Modelling and Assessing Second Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Schmidt, R.** (ed.). 1995. *Attention and Awareness in Foreign Language Learning*. Honolulu: Hawai'i: Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, University of Hawai'i.
- Schumann, J.** 1997. *The Neurobiology of Affect in Language*. Boston: Blackwell.
- Tomlinson, B.** 1994. 'Pragmatic awareness activities'. *Language Awareness*. 3/3: 119-29.
- van Lier, L.** 2001. 'Language Awareness' in R. Carter and D. Nunan (eds.). *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## The authors

- Rod Bolitho** is Assistant Dean of International Education at the College of St Mark & St John, Plymouth. He teaches on the M.Ed. programme, and is a consultant to national textbook projects in Russia and Belarus. His main interests are in trainer-training, language awareness, and materials design. He is co-author or author of a number of articles and books, including (with Brian Tomlinson), *Discover English* (Heinemann).
- Ronald Carter** is Professor of Modern English Language at the University of Nottingham. He has published widely in the field of applied linguistics and language education. Recent publications include *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (ed. with David Nunan) (Cambridge University Press 2001).
- Roz Ivanič** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language at Lancaster University, and currently chairperson of The Committee for Linguistics in Education. Her publications include *Writing and Identity*

(Benjamins 1998); *The Politics of Writing* (Routledge 1997) (with Romy Clark); *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context* (Routledge 2000) (with David Barton and Mary Hamilton).

**Rebecca Hughes** is Senior Lecturer in the School of English Studies and Director of the Centre for English Language Education, University of Nottingham. Her publications include: *English in Speech and Writing* (Routledge 1996) and *Teaching and Researching Speaking* (Pearson 2002).

**Hitomi Masuhara** is Senior Lecturer in Lesser-Taught Languages at Leeds Metropolitan University, and Secretary of the Materials Development Association. Her recent publications

include the *ELT Journal* Survey Review 'EFL Courses for Adults' Vol. 55–1, and two chapters in the forthcoming book, *Developing Materials in Language Teaching* (Continuum 2003).

**Brian Tomlinson** is Reader in Language Learning and Teaching at Leeds Metropolitan University. His books include *Openings, Discover English* (with Rod Bolitho) and *Materials Development in Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press 1998). His new book, *Developing Materials in Language Teaching*, is published by Continuum Press in 2003. He is also the Founder and President of MATSDA (The Materials Development Association).

**Email: Rod Bolitho: INTED@marjohn.ac.uk**