

## TOPICS

- Teaching grammar through grammar noticing and awareness.
- Deciding what to teach: the target language.

## Grammar: Language awareness



### REFLECTIVE TASK 2

Go to the following links:

<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/> and <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/>

I'd like you to browse these two pages and find strategies, tips or whatever that you might find useful at a later stage.

Some reflective questions about your search:

- Do you think some of the plans and activities found integrate grammar in context?*
- Do you think these activities will help you develop lessons where language is seen as a whole?*
- Do you find these activities and lessons communicative? In what ways?*
- How could you adapt them to your own students?*

Traditional grammar teaching has been widely criticized for its long and often difficult teacher explanations, drills and boring mechanical exercises. In the 1970s, under Chomsky's influence, new teaching methods appeared that replaced grammar exercises with meaningful communicative activities.

The result was a number of teaching strategies which aimed at raising students' awareness of important linguistic features and making them notice the relationship

among these features, so that, in time, learners can construct their own grammar from personal exploration and trial-and-error- activities.

Thus, this methodological approach encourages students to pay attention to and notice different aspects of the language, often spontaneously in the course of a communicative lesson. Language awareness allows learners to learn rules for themselves rather than have them imposed on them without really understanding them. Raising students' language awareness has reported many positive results over the traditional ways of teaching grammar. Let's read more about this.

## Raising students' language awareness

(adapted from J.M. Bourke, English Teaching Forum, Volume 46)

One way to think about language awareness is that everyone is a learner, since even teachers have to continue to explore language all through their career; we can say that developing language awareness is a lifelong process.

The personal exploration of the L2 helps the learner find out how language works and so enriches and extends his knowledge of the language. Here we are talking about focus on language itself, reflecting on the language, noticing and understanding how language is formed and used. This is language awareness.

From the point of view of our teaching when we talk about developing students' language awareness or, as some authors define it- consciousness-raising - we mean helping learners effectively explore, internalize and gain greater understanding of the target language or new language.

This means to say that in order to facilitate students' learning process, we should make them become actively involved in discovering aspects of the language. They are not given the rule, but rather are helped to work inductively from the structured input we give them to the discovery of meaning and understanding of form.

When the teacher shows , explains and demonstrates how the language works , he/ she is allowing the student to see for himself how language can be used, thus helping him to arrive at his own understanding. In this way because we orientate the process of learning, we may call it a process- oriented approach.

In more traditional approaches, students were given mechanical activities to complete without first having been shown and/or explained meaning or use of the language. This type of language teaching was proved to be ineffective. It consisted of developing some mechanisms which have little to do with language use.

This is what happened several decades ago with the product- oriented approach. We can still see it happening in some English classrooms and in some structural grammar books. The underlying teaching concept was ‘implanting through practice without explaining or teaching first.

Now we know that teachers can raise learners’ consciousness of the form and function of the language they want to teach. The following techniques have been found to be especially useful and effective and can be sequenced as follows:

1. The student is exposed to the new language where the initial focus is on the meaning. The teacher shows and explains the use of the new vocabulary or grammar structure. The new language is shown or presented in context.
2. The teacher explains meaning of the new language. The context helps to make learners understand meaning, the student notices and understands the target language and the context in which it occurs.
3. The teacher checks meaning comprehension and provides all the necessary information that may be required paraphrasing the information. Teaching grammar needs special attention, as grammar cannot be expected to be guessed by learners. We will come back to this concept later.
4. Only after these teaching steps the student is ready to start doing controlled activities, that is to say guided drills.

This process contrasts markedly with the traditional approach in which one is told the rules and has to drill and memorize them.

I am not saying that drilling and memorizing should be avoided, what we mean is they should never be the only teaching strategies used; they can only serve to complement and consolidate the above mentioned steps.



Summing up, what we want to point out is that language teaching is no longer seen as a fixed inventory of structures and lexis contained in a syllabus or text book in a disintegrated linear fashion. Instead it is seen as a dynamic process in which learners themselves are actively involved.



According to Nunan (1998) this approach to language teaching:

- ◆ Provides opportunities for learners to explore the relationship between grammar and communicative discourse in authentic material
- ◆ Makes the relationship between form and function transparent
- ◆ Encourages learners to become active explorers of language
- ◆ Encourages learners to explore relationships between grammar and discourse.

Let us take an example.  
We cannot walk into class and say:

*'Today we are going to learn Conditional Sentences'*

Most probably, this term won't mean anything to the majority of students and it wouldn't at all help to go into a detailed grammatical explanation of what Conditional tenses are. Evidence seems to show that these explanations wouldn't make students learn how to use them for real communication.

Whereas, if you walk into class on a rainy day and you tell you students:

*'I don't have an umbrella with me and look how it rains! When we finish our class I'll have to go out in the rain and I'll get wet through!'*

*'Oh, dear! If I had my umbrella I wouldn't get wet!, I wouldn't ruin my new shoes, look at them, they are new, and so on and so forth.'*

You have created a realistic context for the teaching of Conditionals. This technique greatly facilitates teaching grammar use. Once students have been exposed to meaning and use, it will be much easier for the teacher to make them focus on form. You start to elicit more examples always focusing on oral work; you can provide them with some cues for them to form sentences about hypothetical situations in their context, etc. Once everyone has had the chance to say something using **If I...** you may then copy some of those sentences on the board and invite some students to add others. With all those examples you ask them: *Is the first verb in the present or past? Is the second verb in the present or past? What forms do we use to talk about something hypothetical? What kind of verb do*

*we have after if?* As you can see, the answers to these questions, that is, ‘the rules’ will come from your students. You will guide them with your questions but in fact they will explain the rule themselves rather than you telling them how to form it. You can do it of course, but only after they’ve tried. Your explanation will be a confirmation of their suggestions. **In your lesson plans, you’ll be expected to apply grammar and language awareness as in the example above.**



### REFLECTIVE TASK 3

- a. *Does the article above confirm or restructure your own ideas?*
- b. *Are there any useful concepts you’d like to explore?*

#### Other ideas for language awareness

Suppose we have noticed that our students tend to read a text word by word, or feel the need to understand or even translate every word in order to process a text. We decide that we want to carry out some training activities to introduce the strategy of *predicting* as a way of improving both speed of reading and text comprehension.

In a first session we play a videotape without sound and ask the students to guess what is happening and what the speakers are actually saying. Instead of a videotape, we could use a photostory or a cartoon in which we have deleted the captions and the words in the speech bubbles.

We elicit from the students what has helped them to guess; then we play the videotape again, but this time with the sound on and discuss why some guesses were incorrect.

Then, through a guided discussion, we try to elicit why and how we are able to make predictions; we try to turn the clues from the video into more general categories of information, for example, setting, topic, general knowledge of the world, specific cultural knowledge, linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge. In this way, we try to make the point that there is a difference between the *input*, which is provided by the video, and the *background* and *expectations* that we bring to the task of decoding it. Also, we introduce the concept of *strategy* as a *conscious plan or action that we can undertake to solve a problem*, and we actually call this strategy “predicting”.

In a second session, we discuss with the students whether or not they think the strategy of predicting can be used when reading a text, in L1 and/or in L2; through a brief discussion or questionnaire, we try to find out if, when and how they actually use the strategy, and why they use or don't use it. In this way, we get a clearer picture of which aspects of the strategy we can safely take for granted and which ones we need to present and practise in the following stages.

We ask the students to do a few exercises of the "cloze" type, in which the task of filling in the gaps gradually becomes more complex. We can demonstrate how we actually go about one of these tasks by talking aloud while we try to solve the problem. Or we can ask one or two students to talk aloud and describe how they do one of the tasks just as they are doing it.

Then we elicit the criteria the students have used for predicting the missing words. In this way we help students to generalize. Depending on the level of our class, we can actually name and define these criteria: we are able to fill in gaps in a text thanks to our orthographic, grammatical, semantic, contextual and socio-cultural knowledge. We stress the fact that these criteria always work together, and in real time, in the reader's mind. And, again, we try to make the point that the visual, that is, typographical, information is only part of what we need to decode a text - the other, vital part being what we bring to it.

Finally, we lead the students to evaluate their attitudes to reading: if we can predict, do we really have to read a text word by word? Is it really necessary to understand every single word in a text? On the other hand, can we always fill gaps in comprehension by using predictions? Or are there cases where other strategies should be used?

Again depending on the level of our students, we could have a third session, where we can extend the strategy of predicting to text coherence, that is, to the logical organization of specific types of texts. For example, we can give the students the first part of a paragraph and three possible continuations and ask them to discuss and choose the most suitable one. Or they can read the beginning of a paragraph and argue with us and their partners about the way they think the paragraph will develop.

Then we briefly discuss with the students if they think some or all of these strategies could be useful in their current reading and studying tasks, in L2 in L1, or even across the range of their school subjects.

In the following lessons, when students meet a particularly difficult reading task, we remind them of the predicting strategy, encourage them to use it and give them the support they need.

From time to time, we also try to discuss the students' use of the strategy: how often have they used it? Has it been effective? With what kind of texts? For what

purposes? What sort of problems have they met in using it? And we try to make them appreciate that if they have improved their performance or if they have increased their confidence in reading and studying, this may be due to the use of one or more *strategies*.

Retrieved from <http://www.learningpaths.org/papers/paperawareness.htm>



#### REFLECTIVE TASK 4

- What do you now understand by language awareness?
  - Is language awareness the same as conscious learning?
  - What does language awareness have to do with it?
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- How can teachers start by raising their students' awareness? Choose the points below that you think will best answer this question.
    - a. By giving them grammar exercises?
    - b. By giving them lists of new words?
    - c. By making them explore examples of language in context?
    - d. By guiding them to infer rules?
    - e. All of the above?
  
  - How can teachers make students apply their newly acquired grammar? Choose from the options below.
    - f. by providing situations where they can apply the new grammar into communicative use?
    - g. by providing controlled practice?
    - h. By giving them solving-problem tasks?
    - i. All of the above.

*So, what really concerns us now is how we can help learners to develop the ability not only to understand but also use grammatical patterns to produce meaning.*

*There is a great difference between learning about grammar and being able to use this grammar to express oneself.*

## Deciding what to teach: the target language

**Now** that we have a taster of language and grammar awareness/noticing we can move on. The lexis and grammar structures that will be taught should be clearly stated in the lesson plan. This is the language which is new for the students, the language which the teacher is going to introduce, explain, demonstrate and teach.



### The syllabus

The target language is contained in the syllabus which is not just a bureaucratic requirement that needs to be complied with. The syllabus is at the core of the course and it provides organizing and guiding principles.

You may need to (re)read:

- Davies and Pearse: chapters 1-2.
- Pinter: chapter 7.
- Moon: chapter 8.



### **REFLECTIVE TASK**

Based on the readings above, how do I see myself as a teacher in charge of organising the contents of my teaching? What do I need to take into account? How flexible should I be? To what extent am I a creative person who can make changes as I go?