Everyone’s a Native Speaker!

Promoting Language Awareness in the Classroom

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We EFL teachers sometimes lament the lack of “native speakers” to be found in the foreign-language setting. As my title suggests, it may be time to take another look: we are surrounded by native speakers, no matter where we live and work. Everyone’s a native speaker! Not a native speaker of English, but certainly—in the Chomskyan sense—a native speaker with a wealth of insights and intuitions, unconscious understandings and (perhaps unexamined) expectations, about language and what it can and should do.

We, humans, are not only speakers of language, but creatures of language: on the one hand, language is a practical tool we adapt for an infinite variety of tasks; on the other, it is the semiotic backdrop for our interactions with the world. As adults, we constantly move back and forth between automatic, unthinking use of language and conscious, deliberate choosing among the options that the language offers us. Even the least literary of us has opinions about language, visceral reactions to the way it is used and a sense of ourselves as members of at least one linguistic community.

How relevant is this set of nuanced appreciations to the ordinary language classroom? It may sound like irrelevant luxury to the teacher whose desperate hope is that the students will learn to say something, indeed, anything, in the L2. I suggest that far from being a luxury, tapping into the well of knowledge that all our students bring to class—yes, even the poor ones, the untalented ones, the uninterested ones—may be a basic necessity when teaching people who are well beyond the critical period of easy acquisition. The challenge is to get students to think of themselves as native speakers; though they know a lot about how language works, they don’t know that they know. They don’t recognize their own expertise.

Language Awareness (LA) is a sub-field of applied linguistics that undertakes to mine native speaker knowledge in ways that make it relevant to language learning—to bring it to the surface, to make it a conscious tool available to learners, to introduce it into the discourse of the language classroom. The guiding tenet of LA is that explicit knowledge can, in judicious doses, promote the automatization of linguistic skill. Knowing about how languages work in general helps a learner who is studying how a specific language works in particular. The reasons for this claim are several: cognitive (metaknowledge is an essential tool for gaining new kinds of knowledge, and attention—or awareness—is crucial for gaining metaknowledge); psychological (becoming intrigued with language may increase motivation for learning how to use it); and pedagogical (giving students the metalinguistic perspective in addition to the sheer linguistic mass of the target language empowers them as autonomous
LA is more than practice and less than theory; it arises from the sometimes-uneasy conjunction of description, explanation, reflection and exploration. You do not have to load students down with grammatical metalanguage to do LA with them, and neither do you have to be a trained linguist, though any formal knowledge you have will come in handy for the sake of efficiency and accuracy. More important than terminology is, not surprisingly, awareness on your part: you must recognize that language is NOT what sits between the covers of the textbook, but rather a cultural, psychological and social artifact. Like art, or music, language has dozens of entry points, and numerous internal layers. LA does not privilege traditional grammar as being somehow the “best” way in; rather, it encourages all modes of inquiry. As Wright and Bolitho put it, “what LA attempts to do is to acknowledge, rather than avoid or ignore, this richness by … actively engaging [students and teachers] in linguistic questions” (1993: 300).

What is LA not? Language Awareness is sometimes derided as linguistics lite: a smattering of linguistics and traditional grammar study that may, at best, impart a certain intellectual zest to an ordinary EFL lesson. While the insights of linguistics certainly inform LA activities and discussions, LA is not merely watered-down theory. It is also not a way of simply sneaking more grammar exercises into the curriculum, though a frequent response to LA work is increased enthusiasm for grammar practice. It is not, similarly, vocabulary work under another name. LA is, rather, a dynamic condition of being alert to what we do with language, and what it does to us, in ways that illustrate the possibilities and choices of human language as a cultural, cognitive and semiotic enterprise.

LA enjoyed a great vogue some two decades ago in British TEFL circles, but never gained much currency in North American professional discourse. I developed a particularly strong interest in LA when working with several dozen ESL teachers in New York City last year. These were committed, hard-working and humane people—totally dedicated to the needs of the adult immigrant students they were teaching—who in many cases lacked formal training in either linguistics or pedagogy. It was an enormous challenge for many of them to provide their students with accurate and coherent explanations of how the systems of language (words, sentences, sounds, meanings, speech acts) work together to help speakers create meaningful utterances. In a six-week seminar I designed to promote their own LA, I hoped to encourage them to put their newfound knowledge to use in the classroom. They honed their new skills on the language of literature, mostly for efficiency’s sake, since we didn’t have time to collect real-world data ethnographically. Overall, they produced an impressive wealth of teaching material, much of it infused with the excitement that conscious explication of implicit knowledge often brings: as Molière’s hero, M. Jourdain, famously remarked, he’d been speaking prose all his life and he didn’t even know it!

There is no way to delimit the boundaries of LA sharply: many traditional language class activities can be said to raise awareness of how English works. An activity gains an LA dimension when it is used in class to encourage exploration of the language phenomenon illustrated by the content of the activity. One extra layer that an LA activity often carries is that after the target-language task is completed, the student’s attention is then drawn to the L1 for comparison, discussion, and deeper understanding; this attention does not necessarily mean translation per se, but rather an attempt to put into words some of the differences and
similarities between what the students already “know” in the L1 and what they have learned in the L2.

So, if you imagine a continuum stretching between “pure” Language Awareness activity on the one end, and “pure” communicative language activity on the other, LA-tending exercises may involve explicit reference to, or comparison with, the first language, which communicative exercises will almost certainly lack. In addition, metalinguistic knowledge is more central to LA than to a communicative activity; finally, the follow-up to the L2 task may ask learners to explore their native intuitions about the L1 rather than nuances of L2 praxis.

To give some specific examples of language practice activities that can serve as a basis for LA discussion, several instances of classroom material follow. The reader is encouraged to adopt and adapt these ideas; it is important for the instructor to work through such exercises beforehand in order to clarify what aspect of language is being addressed and how the material can be given an LA slant. It is difficult to guide others in the raising of their awareness when your own has not been raised first!

### Language Awareness I: Lexical Relations

For most learners, words are the stuff of language, as any teacher who has pleaded with a class to put away their dictionaries knows all too well. Dictionaries are, of course, essentially word-stores, and for all the lip service teachers and learners alike pay to learning theory, pedagogical innovation and critical discourse, it seems to me that “magical thinking” still lingers not far below such talk: *if only I could somehow have an instant gloss for everything I can say in my L1, I would be an instant speaker of the L2*. Indeed, Francois Gouin, a 19th-century French schoolmaster, earned a smattering of fame in linguistic history for his attempts to learn German by doing just that: he “studied” German by locking himself in a room for a year to memorize the 30,000 entries in a German dictionary. It is noteworthy that this method failed to give him any basic communication skills in German at all, even though he supplemented the dictionary with an entire grammar book and a list of several thousand morphological forms.

Still, the instinct that drives learners to the dictionary is not entirely wrong. Words are basic to language. What the novice speaker usually does not consciously realize is that it is not the word on its own that is useful, but the word as a nexus—a point of intersection—for several layers of denotative and connotative meaning. Though our students don’t put it this way, the questions *What’s the word for X?* and *How do you say Y?* are learner short cuts for *Give me the word and somehow I will magically have at my fingertips all the cultural, semantic, lexical, phonological and pragmatic nuances of that simple chunk of sound.*

Dictionaries work, to the extent that they do, because they relate words to other words; they fail, to the even greater extent that they do, because they recognize only a few salient nodes in the complex network of relationship that every word is suspended within. Thanks to the simplistic infrastructure of dictionaries, most students, and too many teachers and textbook writers, believe that relations among words include only “synonymy” (“means the same as”) and “antonomy” (“means the opposite of”) and possibly “family membership” (literal or figurative). Thus, lots of attention is paid to pairs like *hot/cold* and *house/dwelling*, and a bit to *cat/kitten* or *apple/orange*, and little-to-none to the many other ways words can
be interconnected. From this attenuated matrix, who could guess at the richness of connections that in fact binds our lexicon together?

Variety of relationships: A very simple, yet fascinating, word-level task for increasing language awareness can be seen in sample exercise A: students are asked to match a term in one column with one in the other column and to explain their reasons for making each connection. While this particular list was deliberately designed to include the widest possible set of connections (e.g., etymology, history of use, date of introduction into the language, register, synonymy, antonymy, connotation), you do not have to be a lexical semanticist to prepare an exercise of similar value. Just use what you already know about English, referring to a dictionary or popular reference book if necessary. The point of the exercise is not to get the students to replicate exactly your original set of connections, but to explore the variety of connections that can exist. It is unlikely that lower-level students will come up with a sophisticated list of relationships, but in my experience, they come up with richer lists than expected, every time (suggested answers at the end of the article)*.

Lexical collocation: Students are very attuned to the importance of the single word, but

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skirt</td>
<td>Carpet</td>
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<td>Fish</td>
<td>Couch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Splish-splash</td>
<td>Tiny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiasco</td>
<td>Apple</td>
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<td>Zoo</td>
<td>Wiener</td>
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<td>Huge</td>
<td>Sheep</td>
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<td>Dang</td>
<td>Gorilla</td>
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<td>Sofa</td>
<td>Off</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harvest</td>
<td>Pitter-patter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>Warm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamburger</td>
<td>Flask</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hot</td>
<td>Spoken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cough</td>
<td>Shirt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>Gosh</td>
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they often do not understand that lexical units may contain more than one word. A common and important element of vocabulary is the **collocation**: two words that typically occur together, in a fixed order and often with a somewhat figurative meaning, though not always. Recently, Michael Lewis’ Lexical Approach to EFL has emphasized the importance and ubiquity of collocation in everyday language (see, e.g., Asare, 2002, for a discussion of using it with Japanese students). It is satisfying, and often a lot of fun, to teach, practice and learn collocations; they offer students the kind of “instant fluency”—in a limited way—that Gouin sought when memorizing the dictionary.
Here is an example of an exercise that can be done orally, either as a discussion or a contest among groups (sample exercise B). This list deliberately includes many different kinds of collocations. An instructor could also edit the list to include only collocations that are used literally (men and women), that have rich cultural associations (Adam and Eve) or that retain only figurative meanings (rock and roll). When I did a version of this activity with a relatively low-level class of university students (I set it up as a contest, giving each team a go at completing the collocation), they came up with synonyms at first. The overpowering influence of “textbook English,” which limits semantic relationships to synonymy, was clearly at work. On the other hand, once the purpose was clear, it was very interesting to see it was often the student who was familiar with rock lyrics, not the most studious or bookish class member, who was able to complete the more literary or archaic collocations quickly (another lesson in the utility of all sources for improving one’s second language skills). After discussing the English collocations, we tried to find equivalents in Japanese, using semantic and cultural criteria for the comparison.
Language teachers suffer from the image of being nit-picking grammarians. Throughout history, language lessons have too often relied on overwhelming students with a complicated taxonomy of forms. Forms get a lot of attention in language classrooms because, compared to the complex rules governing appropriate usage, they are relatively straightforward. With only a few minutes of study, anybody can learn how to form a question in English. But think of how hard it is to learn how to use questions appropriately for all the purposes they are put to by native speakers! We use questions to find out information, express sarcastic disbelief, make people feel better, make people feel uncomfortable and unwanted, avoid talking about a given topic, encourage someone to continue talking about a given topic, express solidarity, express snobbery, show off, and demonstrate humble, or false, ignorance.

As we know, a perfectly well-formed question can be very incorrect indeed: “How old are you?” is NOT what you ask when being introduced to an adult; “Oh, really?” is not considered much of a response to “I love you”; “When are you going to have children?” is not the thing to say to a bride. As the field of pragmatics—the study of how speakers use utterances to do things with language—often illustrates, the forms of language are simple things compared to the ways they actually function.

It can be hard to teach functions because so much context has to be set up to make the functional impact clear. One way of getting around the problem of context is to use literature as a substitute for the real world: a novel is a kind of linguistic mini-universe in which characters use language for many of the same purposes that real people pursue in real life. Thus, a character may use language in a particular circumstance to speak sincerely or sarcastically, and it is up to the listener/reader to interpret the pragmatic force of his statements.

In the following exercise (sample exercise C), the instructor has created an activity using snippets of dialogue from a contemporary novel (Love Always by Ann Beattie). Of course, a full understanding of the correct answers can be found only by reading the novel itself; but you can see by looking at the way the exercise is written that it asks the learners to pay little attention to the syntactic structure of English sentences and quite a lot to the discursive structure of English conversation (the following material was prepared by Susan Bachner for a seminar in 2003 at the City University of New York).
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Language Awareness III: Register

A great benefit that literature provides the language student is exposure to realistic uses of register: especially in contemporary novels, it is quite common to find language that skillfully simulates the way speakers of English signal both formality and intimacy, and many of the levels between.

The following exercise asks students to recognize the signs of the intimate register (this activity is based on the wildly best-selling memoir Tuesdays with Morrie, about a middle-aged journalist’s visits with a former professor, who is dying of cancer) and then re-write the statements in different registers (the following material was prepared by Elaine Sohn for a seminar in 2003 at the City University of New York).

SAMPLE EXERCISE C: Thinking about Questions

Read these questions from different conversations in Love Always. Match each question in Part A with the reason (or function) of the question in Part B. (There are more questions listed than reasons. You can use a reason more than once.)

Part A: Questions

1) “You know what that is, don’t you?” Edward said. ______
2) “They just tell lies about people’s ages and stuff. That’s really pointless most of the time—like they’re really not going to find out your age if you went to Hollywood High, right?” ______
3) The little girl was pleading with them to buy her a Duran Duran album. “Is he the one who dresses like a girl?” the man said. ______
4) “… Take this, for example. Most people think Humphrey Bogart said, ‘Drop the gun, Louis.’ What did he really say?” ______
5) Nicole frowned “Lauren Bacall was married to him, wasn’t she?” she said. ______
6) “What did he say?” Lucy said. ______
7) “I think Derek McAndrew is cute,” Nicole said. “He your fave rave?” ______
8) “What’s ‘fave rave’?” Nicole said. ______
9) “He’s a tennis player, and he’s twenty-five years old, and they’re going to the Inn at Ojai and everything…” “Twenty-five?” Lucy said. ______
10) Nicole said, “I wonder if we’re going to have a tornado.” “A tornado?” Edward said. ______
12) “What does the cow say?” said the man. ______

Part B: Conversational Functions

a. start a new subject in the conversation
b. show disrespect, dislike
c. show shock, surprise
d. test to see if the other person knows the information
e. convince someone he or she already knows the information
f. find out new information
g. make sure you are correct in what you are thinking
h. tease someone
SAMPLE EXERCISE D: Register
The following sentences indicate the warm, intimate relationship between Mitch and Morrie. Re-write them to show how they might change if….

(a) you were talking to your teacher or your boss
(b) you were talking to your teen-age child
(c) your teen-age child was talking to you
(d) your boss was talking to you

1. “Come back and see your old professor,” Morrie said when I hugged him goodbye.
2. “Ah, Mitch, I’m gonna loosen you up. One day, I’m gonna show you it’s okay to cry.”
3. “No. Not yet. We still have work to do.”
4. “You should have heard this group last night, Mitch. Such a sound!”
5. “What was the question?”
6. “Things are not that simple, Mitch.”

Conclusion

It is very probable that you have done similar exercises with your students. To increase the Language Awareness quotient of a language practice activity, ask students to produce examples of similar items from the L1. This helps make them realize that they already “know” —at least instinctively—how to make use of lexical relations or speech acts or register in Japanese. Such discussion can help to de-mystify English by demonstrating that while the specifics differ, the principles are transferable across languages.

Besides making students more aware that what they already know can help them use the target language more successfully, such explorations can—in the case of Japanese students especially—weaken the common but over-simplistic notion that language work, whether reading, translation or listening, is somehow best effected at the level of the individual word.

Taking an exploratory perspective on the language you are teaching can have a positive effect not only on your learners but on your own actions and motivations as a teacher: encouraging your own curiosity to roam freely is sure to stir up the feelings of excitement about language that probably lured you into the language classroom in the first place. The more you know about the material you are teaching, the better; since we language teachers deal in the paradoxical nature of language every day—it is both the object of our instruction and the medium thereof—it must behoove us to recognize this duality from as many viewpoints as possible.
*Suggested answers to sample exercise A: Lexical relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skirt-Shirt</td>
<td>The descendants of a single word that had different pronunciations in two different dialect regions in Old English; in the north of England, the Old Norse-speaking Viking invaders’ word <em>skyrt</em>a loose garment for men was pronounced with [sk], in the south with [sh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish-Sheep</td>
<td>Morphologically similar in that they belong to the small class of English words that have identical singular and plural forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splish-splash Pitter-patter</td>
<td>Both onomatopoeic words, created to mimic sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiasco-Flask</td>
<td>The Romance and Germanic versions of a common root, Old German <em>flasche</em>, though the reason for their widely divergent current meanings is not completely clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoo-Gorilla</td>
<td>Historically connected: they are both recorded as entering English in 1847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huge-Tiny</td>
<td>Gradable antonyms (that is, there are several intermediate terms for sizes between these two endpoints)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dang-Gosh</td>
<td>Both euphemistic interjections, acceptable substitutes for the taboo original words ‘damn’ and ‘god’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofa-Couch</td>
<td>Essentially synonyms, perhaps with a subtle socio-economic difference in usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest-Carpet</td>
<td>Distant etymological cousins, both stemming from an Indo-European word meaning ‘flat, spread-out’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit-Apple</td>
<td>In a hyponymic relationship, i.e., one term names a category, the other a member of the category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburger-Wiener</td>
<td>Both eponyms, i.e., common nouns created from geographical names (Hamburg and Vienna, known in German as Wien)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot-Warm</td>
<td>Graded synonyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cough-Off</td>
<td>Display phonetic assonance, i.e., they rhyme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak-Spoken</td>
<td>Taxonomically related, belonging to the same verb conjugation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


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