

## **Language Awareness: Are Pre-Service English Teachers Aware of ‘Language Awareness’ and Its Implications?**

**Dr. Sezen Seymen Bilgin**

English Language Teaching Department  
Kocaeli University  
Kocaeli, Turkey

### Abstract

*The language awareness of teachers is defined as ‘the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively’ (Thornbury, 1997: x). English language teacher education curriculum involves several courses which focus on the language which aims to improve language awareness. The question is whether pre-service teachers know and think about language awareness and more importantly, what it means to them. This paper aims to investigate the knowledge of pre-service English teachers about what Language Awareness entails in a Turkish state university. The overall approach is qualitative, drawing on interviews conducted with the pre-service teachers. The paper concludes with discussion of the scope pre-service teachers have on Language Awareness.*

**Keywords:** language awareness, student teachers, English language teacher education, pre-service teacher education, met cognitive awareness

### **1. Theoretical Background**

‘Language awareness’ (LA) is a term defined as the ‘explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use’ by Association for Language Awareness (2012). In a broader sense, LA also aims to explore if pre-service teachers pertain also whether teachers-in-training have satisfactory LA in order to perform well in their teaching practice and when they start teaching in the classrooms (Svalberg, 2012; Ellis, 2012). The body of research reveals many aspects of LA that has been explored and yet, the aim of this study is not to present an overview of the aspects of LA. It is rather to present a scope of what language awareness means to pre-service teachers in this study.

#### **1.1 Teacher Language Awareness (TLA)**

According to Thorn by (1997), teacher language awareness is ‘the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively’ (x). This definition brings about the importance of the relationship between the subject-matter knowledge and how this knowledge is implemented by the teacher. Ultimately, most of the TLA research is based on the grammatical aspects of LA. Studies such as Andrews (2001, 2003) reveal the strong relationship between TLA and content knowledge. Those who explore language awareness of learners and consequently teachers assume that this strong relationship results in being better analysers and users of that particular language. Ultimately, the correct understanding of that language will contribute to those teachers’ effectiveness as teachers (Andrews, 2007). As much as research has focused on working teachers, the implications of the results resonate for pre-service teachers.

#### **1.2. Pre-service Teacher Language Awareness**

According to Wright and Bolitho (1993), ‘the more aware a teacher is of language and how it works, the better’ (p. 292). The body of research on TLA seems to abide with this argument. However, how do we negate this with teachers that are still in the process of training? Andrews (2007) asserts that the reason for the recent increase of attention in TLA could be related to the increased attention paid to ‘the knowledge-base of second language teacher education’ (p. 946). Studies by Freeman & Johnson (1999) and Andrews (2003) seek to elicit the boundaries of this knowledge base and how pre-service teachers can benefit from it. Another issue that is addressed is the professionalization of ELT, which in other words refer to the teacher as a professional (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999).

Moreover, Shulman (1999) argues that teachers should be regarded as professionals as they have to function in uncertain and complex situations and in order to overcome those inherent uncertainties; they have to take solid actions. Therefore, a teacher needs to be surrounded with a good knowledge of the language; subject matter per se. Consequently, the awareness that the teachers brings with themselves, their prior knowledge of the language, their attitudes, beliefs, expectations and affective patterns are entwined with their effectiveness as teachers. In a review of effective LA as a methodology in teacher training, Borg (1994) lists the demands of LA from language teachers in order to become effective in teaching. Borg firstly refers to the need of teachers themselves to be linguistically aware of the teaching content. If there is a deficiency in the awareness, this will affect the planning, implementation and evaluation of LA by teachers negatively. Another feature is that teachers should accept a fundamental understanding of LA in all its forms, which also means that language is a subject of study itself. Borg (1994) also notes that LA gives importance to thinking and discussion processes which should be observed in teachers' work. In order to achieve this, teachers should develop skills that will convey the understanding of subject matter into classroom practice. Lastly, Borg's (1994) summary of what LA demands from teachers. The table below identifies the foundation for identifying content relevant to LA-oriented training:

**Table1. Range of demands of LA as methodology (Borg, 1994, p. 65)**

Awareness of Language	Grammar Phonology Lexis Discourse
Awareness of Learning	Theories of learning Learner-centeredness Heuristics Collaborative learning Autonomous learning
Awareness of Teaching	<i>Developing skills in</i> Language analysis LA task design Managing interactive learning <i>Accepting notions of</i> Language as an object of study Teachers as facilitators Teaching as learning

The above demands sums up the features of LA that involves what pre-service teachers should have in order to implement effective language teaching. Another discussion for teacher LA is suggested by Andrews (2003) in terms of defining characteristics. The first one is LA's 'closeness of the relationship between knowledge about the language (subject-matter knowledge) and knowledge of language (language proficiency)' (p.85). This characteristic is particularly relevant during the instruction of the subject matter. The second one is the met cognitive nature of teachers' language awareness. This characteristic is basically related to the basis for the tasks of planning and teaching. According to Leech (1994) this process is what makes the knowledge base of the learner's than the teacher's. Lastly, Andrews (2003) claims that 'teachers' language awareness encompasses an awareness of language from the learner's perspective, an awareness of the learner's developing inter-language, and an awareness of the extent to which the language content of materials/lessons poses difficulties for students' (p. 86). It can be argued that a teacher who is able to understand how a language works will be able to understand what himself / herself and his/her students struggle with while dealing with the language.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research questions**

In this study, my aim is to explore the thoughts of pre-service teachers on language awareness through eliciting information for the below questions.

- What is language awareness according to pre-service English teachers?
- What does language awareness entail for pre-service teachers?
- What are the implications of this knowledge?

## 2.2 Research Design and Rationale

Survey conducted with 15 sophomore year student teachers who volunteered to take part in the study. None of the student teachers had previous teaching experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants and thematic analysis was employed in order to create themes that enable the researcher to point out the opinions of the pre-service teachers. Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used approaches in data analysis in qualitative research (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997) which aims to identify, analyse and report themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first step of data analysis was to employ initial code generating. Secondly, emerging themes were refined and arranged. Lastly, thematic network is constructed and the patterns were interpreted.

## 3. Findings

- Language awareness is necessary and important for all teachers.

Student teachers acknowledge the importance and the necessity of language awareness as follows:

ST1: In my opinion all of teachers must have language awareness.

ST2: LA is very important when the teacher use a language teaching method.

ST13: LA is very important especially for an English teacher.

As seen above, upon being asked about language awareness, student teachers assert that LA is a necessary asset for English teachers. In the following sections, what accounts for this necessity and importance is explored further.

- **Effective teaching**

From student teachers' perspective, LA is closely related to effective teaching. By effective, the arguments vary from finding the right method to being able to adjust teaching according to the needs of the students as ST1 states below:

*Because, it is one of the main things to make learning/teaching occurred in effective way. While choosing right method according to students' level, age, affective filter, language awareness in teachers must precede.*

As seen above, ST1 believes that LA is closely related to the effectiveness in that it manifests the teacher's ability to adapt himself/herself according to the various aspects of the students in their classrooms. In line with ST1, ST2 directly states that LA is closely related to effective learning for the students:

*LA is necessary so that the students learn effectively.*

ST13, however, has a more holistic attitude towards LA and what it entails for language teachers:

*They [English teachers] should know English well. They should be good at English and its linguistic features. If an English teacher does not know English well, she/he cannot teach anything. A good English teacher should know the language and how to teach it. Teachers themselves should have language awareness by using right language teaching methods.*

As seen above, ST13 states that LA is almost equal to having a good command of English. It is a prerequisite to be able to teach English efficiently to students. The awareness is not limited to the language knowledge – but it is rather related to the methodology that the teacher has to implement in a classroom. In other words, using the right teaching methods is an indication of being a teacher with satisfactory language awareness.

- **Teacher's language awareness is using correct methods**

One of the themes emerged from the data on what LA entails is the teachers' using correct methods for the correct purposes. This theme was briefly mentioned by some of the student teachers within the framework of effectiveness and yet the data show that it needs more exploration as stated by S3 below:

*Language teaching methods we have covered are related to the conscious learning so they play important roles while teaching. So if we choose the appropriate method to make students notice the language then it means we are aware of the language. And while we choose these methods, we should be careful about their developmental sequences.*

As seen above, ST3 argues that teachers' LA is absolutely necessary when it comes to choosing right methods. Another important point he/she makes is that, if a teacher is aware of the language, this means that that teacher enables the students to notice the language.

ST3 makes a clear reference to noticing in LA through choosing right methods for teaching. In line with ST3, ST6 makes more clear references to the relationship between LA and methodology in teaching:

*I think every method that we covered so far have certain features that made us become aware of the language. For example, TPR made the awareness that kinaesthetic learners learn better when they can walk around the class comfortably or Suggestopedia taught us that the physical environment can be very important. Those things made me aware how I can approach to teaching, ultimately to language.*

As seen above, ST6 indicates the contribution of methodology instruction provided at the teacher training programme by pinpointing teaching methods such as TPR and Suggestopedia. Additionally, ST6 regards knowledge of these methods as a gateway to his/her awareness to teaching and ultimately to language, which is significant. Similarly, ST8 thinks that LA, knowledge of the methods and teaching efficiency are interrelated:

*I think that LA is general knowledge about language and languages. It is connected to teaching methods. The more you know about the language, the better you can teach.*

In the extract below, ST11 refers to this relationship as well:

*Language awareness is learning language directly and by knowing what we are learning. Community Language Learning depends on language awareness.*

In addition to referring to the relationship between the knowledge of methodology and LA, ST11 points to another feature of LA, which is the awareness of one's own learning. ST11 states that LA is the process of learning a language "directly" and being in the consciousness of that process, which is as slightly different take on LA compared to other STs in the study.

#### • **Meta-linguistic awareness**

The last theme manifests the most commonly mentioned theme emerged from the data – the relationship between the LA and meta-linguistic knowledge of a teacher. One of the most detailed descriptions of how this relationship is formed is stated by ST4 as follows:

*LA is being able to recognise forms, structures, types of speech...etc. in a language. It is easy in a theoretical base because since we have such a comprehensive term, being eclectic in our understanding on applying the approaches is the most sensible way. Because forms and patterns can easily be learnt with GTM or Audio-Lingual while noticing speech types, accents...etc. can be acquired through Communicative Language Teaching but being able to practice this eclectic understanding can raise some problems since lecturer alone cannot create necessary environments for all these approaches to blend in easily. But if we overcome such problems, it is very easy to overcome such application problems and raise LA in language teaching.*

In the extract above, ST4 states that LA is an umbrella notion which involves knowledge and implementation of correct methods effectively. In addition to this, he/she elaborates on which method is effective to teach particular forms in language. According to ST4, the only problem one can face is the ways a teacher can blend all these methods and features of language effectively. Nevertheless, ST4 also believes that raising language awareness of teachers might help to overcome that problem. Similarly, ST5 believes that LA is being familiar with language aspects:

*It's about being aware of and familiar with language aspects and the ability to treat the language accordingly. That works especially while teaching a specific language. It gives guidelines by creating some kind of inner criteria while teaching a language or studies it. I guess seeing, teaching and also learning a language from a whole approach is about language awareness. In the light of the methods we have studies so far the relationship between LA and language teaching is to approach the language by considering all its concepts, the skills and how that is managed. Language teaching, learning and acquisition are shaped by that LA.*

In extract above, ST5 considers LA as a constant give-take relationship that one is in. In other words, when a person learns a language this is closely related to that person's inner perception of the aspects of that language. This is the way a person "treats" that language. Thus, the only fair way to treat the language is to be aware of the "inner criteria" that a person has about it. The way you construct that inner understanding follows the path of learning a language yourself as a teacher by using different methods that will enable you to acquire the language. These methods should aim to teach all concepts, skills and the management of the learning/teaching process. Consequently, the teacher will accomplish in providing acquisition for his/her students. In the following extract ST9 defines LA in terms of realising the features of a language:

*LA is the ability to realise the differences or changes in languages. Some learners may have higher language awareness than other students. Teachers should aim to develop language awareness. To do so, students should be encouraged by various activities such as role playing, unscrambled sentences...etc.*

According to ST9, LA is an “ability” that can be improved by the teacher by using different activities as long as that ability makes students to realise the differences and changes in language. ST10 takes it to a relatively different angle:

*LA roughly means what you know about language. However knowing and awareness are different things. For example, you may know something but you cannot use it with your knowledge. If you know how and where to use the language, this means that you have LA.*

As seen in the extract above, ST10 has a similar attitude towards what LA entails. However, he/she makes a distinction between “knowing” and “awareness” on the grounds that knowledge itself is not enough to be able to use a language effectively. For effective language usage, one needs to have an awareness of the language. Below statements by ST12, this distinction is also mentioned in terms of implicit and explicit grammar instruction:

*It's a meta linguistic awareness knowing the usage of language. To say, explicit grammar instruction gives students a direct focus on the structures of language. In deductive teaching, the grammatical rules are taught explicitly which makes the students aware of the language structures. But in inductive teaching, there aren't any explicit instructions. The teacher wants from students to notice the grammatical structure themselves.*

The extract above indicates that ST12 considers LA as the metalinguistic awareness which is also directly related to the usage of the language. This student teacher focuses on the approach a teacher could take to teach structures whether he/she teaches deductively or inductively. It could be derived that ST12 considers LA as the sufficient command of the forms of the language and mainly focuses on the way a teacher follows in order to create awareness for the language regardless of the approach used. ST15 also refers to the relationship between LA and its relation to met cognitive awareness:

*LA can be defined as knowing how the language is structured, how it works. I don't think many teachers in Turkey tend to use only GTM in lessons. They cannot achieve without making their students have met a linguistic awareness and internalize what they've learnt.*

It can be derived from the extract that ST15 strongly believes that LA is equal to have deep knowledge on the language. Then, he/she automatically deduces that one of the methods teachers in Turkey use to enhance this knowledge is to employ Grammar Translation Method in classroom. However, she/he also thinks that GTM is not enough to carry out teaching subject knowledge and create awareness for their students. LA of structures can be achieved only by internalizing what they learn along with the presentation through GTM.

#### **4. Implications**

The evidence obtained from this study appears to reflect many of the characteristics stated in the LA and TLA studies conducted previously. A number of conclusions and discussion of those conclusions can be drawn within the size of the participant group. The most commonly stated opinion by the pre-service teachers is the relevance of language awareness and metacognitive knowledge. Pre-service teachers believe that teachers should be knowledgeable about the linguistic content they teach. Ultimately, this will enable them to create and awareness for their students. If they do not have that knowledge, they will not be able to convey this to their students. The relationship between teachers' metacognitive knowledge and LA has been prominent research topic in LA literature (Andrews, 2003, 1999, 1997; Brumfit, 1997; Leech, 1994). This knowledge and how it is perceived by the teachers as not just knowledge of subject matter but rather, as stated by pre-service teachers above, it also involves an additional cognitive dimension of thoughts upon both subject matter knowledge and how it is conveyed to students.

Pre-service teachers believe that they have to be critical towards the language content and the methods they use in the classroom. How GTM and/or Communicative Language Teaching manifests differences are repeatedly referred. This notion is line with previous studies that discuss the criticism towards the methodologies that emerges LA as a different methodology that has to be implemented by teacher training programmes (Borg, 1994; Bolitho, R. & Tomlinson, B., 1995; Hawkins, E., 1999; Ellis, 2012). Several student teachers reveal that sticking to one method in teaching will only limit their ability to provide LA for their students in that while they can present structures using GTM, they also need to refer to Communicative Language teaching. However, there is research indicating that the blend of these methods might not be sufficiently effective while employing LA for the students. For instance, Borg (1994) states that the fact that LA method accepts the language as the object itself,

some teachers who practice communicative language teaching to the fullest will not get used to it as formal language study is not desired in CLT. While doing this, LA promotes a critical view of the language in that teachers constantly feel the need to review their beliefs about language and, therefore, make modifications if necessary. Pre-service teachers make references to the importance of the responsibility of the teachers in order to create language awareness in their students. They imply that teachers need to develop an understanding of the kinds of tasks which encourage language exploration and interpretation. This view is supported by studies by Borg (1994, 2009), Andrews (2001, 2003), Ellis (2012), Venuti (2015). This implementation suggests that especially process-oriented LA promotes the reflection on students' own learning and interpretation. Reflections and implementation are to be carried out by employing tasks that encourage exploring one's boundaries of language competence by offering exercises that will require thinking and creativity.

Pre-service teachers also state that in order to create language awareness in their students they are to help learners to become more effective learners. The nature of LA is discovery oriented for various reasons. Therefore, the student teachers in this study imply that they would not be regarded as the only resource for the input in the classrooms. They expect that learning is to be the result of the students' own explorations and discoveries, rather than relying on teachers' input only (Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2007).

## 5. Conclusion

As stated at the beginning, the aim of this paper is to present the opinions of sophomore year pre-service teachers' opinions on language awareness and what it entails. When I started this research, I did not expect the participants to have a clear image on language awareness as a term. However, the data suggest that pre-service teachers hold very clear and on point opinions on LA. Based on this realisation, it can be argued that language awareness as a methodology could be included in teacher training programmes, not only for professional usage in their teacher careers, but it could also be beneficial for developing pre-service teachers' own language awareness.

## 6. References

- Andrews, S. (1994). The grammatical knowledge / awareness of native speaker EFL teachers. In M. Bygate, A. Tonkyn and E. Williams (eds) *Grammar and the Language Teacher* (pp. 69–89). Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- Andrews, S. (1997). Met linguistic awareness and teacher explanation. *Language Awareness* 6(2&3), 147–61.
- Andrews, S. (1999). The meta linguistic awareness of Hong Kong secondary school teachers of English. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Southampton.
- Andrews, S. (2001). The language awareness of the L2 teacher: Its impact upon pedagogical practice. *Language Awareness*, 10(2&3), 75–90.
- Andrews, S. (2003). Teacher Language Awareness and the Professional Knowledge Base of the L2 Teacher, *Language Awareness*, 12:2, 81–95, DOI: 10.1080/09658410308667068.
- Andrews, S. (2006). The Evolution of Teachers' Language Awareness, *Language Awareness*, 15:1, 1–19, DOI: 10.1080/09658410608668846.
- Andrews, S. (2007). Researching and Developing Teacher Language Awareness: Developments and Future Directions. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 945–959). New York: Springer.
- Bolitho, R. & Tomlinson, B. (1995). *Discover English* (2nd Ed). London: Heinemann.
- Borg, S. (1994). Language awareness as methodology: Implications for teachers and teacher training, *Language Awareness*, 3:2, 61–71, DOI: 10.1080/09658416.1994.9959844.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, pp. 77–101.
- Brumfit, C. (1997). The teacher as educational linguist. In L. van Lier and D. Corson (eds). *Encyclopaedia of Language and Education*, Volume 6: Knowledge about Language (pp. 163–171).
- Darling-Hammond, L. and Sykes, G. (eds) (1999). *Teaching as the Learning Profession*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ellis, M. E. (2012). Language awareness and its relevance to TESOL. *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL*, 7, 1–23.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. (1999). Towards a new knowledge-base of second language teacher education. Paper presented at the International Conference on Language Teacher Education (ILTE), CARLA, University of Minnesota.
- Hawkins, E. (1999). Foreign language study and language awareness. *Language Awareness*, 8(3&4), 124–142.
- Holstein J. A. and Gubrium J. F. (1997). Active Interviewing, in Silverman, D. (ed). *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, pp. 113–29. London: Sage.
- James, C. (1996). A cross-linguistic approach to language awareness, *Language Awareness*, 5:3–4, 138–148, DOI: 10.1080/09658416.1996.9959903.
- Leech, G. (1994). Students' grammar—teachers' grammar—learners' grammar. In M. Bygate, A. Tonkyn and E. Williams (eds). *Grammar and the Language Teacher* (pp. 17–30). Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- Little, D. (1997). Language awareness and the autonomous language learner, *Language Awareness*, 6:2–3, 93–104, DOI: 10.1080/09658416.1997.9959920.
- Shulman, L. (1999). Foreword. In L. Darling – Hammond and G. Sykes (eds). *Teaching as the Learning Profession* (pp. xi–xiv). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Svalberg, A. M-L. (2012). Language Awareness in language learning and teaching: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 45/3: 376–388. [http://journals.cambridge.org/rep0\\_A86mFuz6](http://journals.cambridge.org/rep0_A86mFuz6).
- Svalberg, A. M-L. (2007). Language Awareness and Language Learning. *Language Teaching*, 40/4: 287–308.
- Thornbury, S. (1997). *About Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, T. and Bolitho, R. (1993). Language awareness: A missing link in language teacher education? *English Language Teaching Journal*, 47 (4), 292–304.
- Venuti, I. (2015). Met a linguistic Knowledge, *Language Awareness and Language Proficiency*. *US-China Foreign Language*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 34–43 doi:10.17265/1539-8080/2015.01.004.