

# A Language Awareness Approach to English Language Teaching in Joint Programs in China

Yi Lin

Business English College, Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade  
linyisusan@gmail.com

## Abstract

Language awareness isn't a new concept in teaching English as a second language yet remains to some degree of peripheral importance both in class and in evaluation. Over the years language teaching seems to have made great progress through communicative approach in a way that learners have a more complete picture before learning everything of the language. Joint educational programs are accordingly on the rise in China to provide second language learners earlier exposure to the language and culture beyond the classroom. These are achieved either by staff and students interchange or collaborative e-learning.

The paper presents some reasons of why a language awareness approach is important in English teaching, particularly in joint programs where students are supposed to spend years ahead in an English-speaking country; and the applicability of developing that 'awareness' in class before the students' transition from a Chinese educational model to a Western one.

The author intends this paper to provide an initial stage in a broader research effort to investigate the possibility of employing a language awareness approach, both in terms of methodologies and assessment instruments, to English teaching programs in China.

## Keywords

Language awareness, cultural awareness, joint programs

## Introduction

The growing use of English as an international

language has given rise to the increase in language teaching programs in mainland China. Joint educational program is an experimental model supposed to develop students' linguistic competence by providing them a real and earlier exposure to the language and the culture. It usually involves students exchanging program (as a dominant practice) and collaborative e-learning (as an aid). In the years the model did prove helpful in instilling a better sense of culture awareness and confidence in students on the program than those who are not.

Yet the students' transition from a Chinese educational model to a Western one is not always as smooth as expected despite the best of educators' intentions. More often than not students tend to feel the incompetency of communicating effectively either in class or in daily life — it takes them months or even longer to acquire that 'right sense' in a foreign land. One reason is that the teaching method in the home country remains somewhat unchanged. A large number of teachers in China still lecture in a fast-food feeding way which is very much how themselves were taught years ago, "like instant noodles, just feed them, and then have the response and do some evaluation"(Andrew, 2007, p.81), an approach that doesn't help closing the divergence between the two different educational models at all. The absence of teachers' conscious effort to raise student's language and culture awareness is another reason. Too detailed focus on grammar and lexical features than language in use lead to the misapplication of students' knowledge and skills. They pay more attention to language as a subject rather than put it in a social-cultural context

thus their knowledge *about* the language and culture as a whole becomes undeveloped. This can spell trouble if they are soon to live and study in a Western educational mode. The article discusses the possibility of employing a language awareness approach in English teaching in joint programs in early stage with an aim to ensure a smoother transition.

## 1. Existing problems and their causes

One of the prevailing problems reported by exchange students who spend their initial days in an English-speaking country is that the English they are hearing and reading are way different from what they learnt in classroom. Their language and communicative competence fail to match their scores at home school. A feel of inadequacy comes when they can make all the correct sentences following the grammar rules but cannot communicate in the appropriate manner – not knowing the message conveyed by or embedded in the words they have learnt, not sure how to carry on a topic, not understanding the humor, and thus not effectively involved in the everyday talking with native speakers. The phenomenon of ‘incompetent school-leaver’ is by the writer’s observation a result of the absence of language awareness.

Defective language learning is often attributed to defective syllabus design, in which students don’t learn the language properly because we don’t teach the right things, or because we organize what we teach in the wrong way. Joint program is a positive attempt and we can make it more effective by getting down to the possible reasons of their initial ‘incompetency’.

### 1.1 Deep-seated exam orientation

Since 1987 it is a course requirement at most colleges and universities in China that students should pass a nation-wide language exam CET (College English Test) without which they cannot get their degrees. This is motivation enough for teachers to teach English as a ‘meta-language’ (language used when language itself is being discussed or examined) and students to learn in that way — to have an explicit

understanding of the ins and outs of how grammar works, to cram as large a working vocabulary as possible within a short time. An advantage of the mandatory test is that it is systematic and standardized hence more objective in terms of assessment. But the overweighed focus on language form rather than imaginative play of it, on meanings of words in dictionaries rather than on the communicative value in real-life exchanges has substantially marginalized the social and cultural context behind the language. Being put at stake is learners’ ‘reactiveness’ in communication – the ability to realize certain internal goals or plans of the other speaker through interaction (Young and Milanovic, 1992:405), which happens to be the key to successful conversation continuity.

### 1.2 Uncustommized course materials

Given the significance of CET, course materials are designed and carefully selected to incorporate the notions, topics, and vocabulary that might be tested in the exam. Despite of our best intentions of exchanging programs we fail to keep updated with the particular needs of students involved in the program that our choice of course materials and teaching methods are not very much tailored to build up their language awareness and cross-cultural communication competence. Many of the materials we choose for teaching remain organized around grammar elements with an ‘unrelenting format’ (Harmer, 2001, p.6) and sometimes ‘full of speech acts and functions based on situations which most foreign-language students will never encounter’ (Altan, 1995, p.59). An often quoted case is the whole-sentence utterance in textbook like ‘*How old are you?*’ or ‘*How much do you earn for a year?*’ which focus on grammatical correctness and factual information but adds up to nothing but appallingly impoliteness putting in a real situation. A direct result is learners’ ignorance of ‘colloquial English’ in its true sense and their tendency to speak in written English. Students fail to pick up special uses of standard structures which are important for daily communication. (e.g. ‘*Do that again and I’m going home.*’ as a threat; or ‘*Come on, it’s not going to happen in a million*

years!’ as a statement of remote possibility.) But the students in joint program are supposed to personally *be* in that foreign land and speaking English will constitute a large part of their life, so we have to identify and teach to their specific needs, focus on raising their awareness, enhancing their communicative competence instead of making perfectly right non-sense following the grammatical rules.

### 1.3 Unchanged teaching methods

Apart from course material selection, it’s true that English has been taught in China as a meta-language – students are taught to, and are actually good at labeling, defining and explaining the language forms, especially in their mother tongue (Chan, 1999). It is a plaguing practice that teachers tend to explain each and every thing, as explicit and exhaustive as possible, in the classroom. Most activities carried in classroom operate around a mechanic presentation—practice—production model (Harmer, 2001, p.6) which dries learners’ development of a healthy spirit of enquiry. Students study in a highly uncontextualized way and are seldom required to express their feelings or share their life experience, let alone making aesthetic responses. Whilst some points of grammar are difficult and need to be studied in isolated way before students do interesting things with them, we can condense that period to make more time for creative activities conducive to boost enthusiasm and spontaneity. Because a major principle of language awareness is that learners learn best when affectively engaged and willingly investing energy and attention.

## 2. A language awareness approach

### 2.1 Defining language awareness

Language awareness refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language (Carter, 2003). The concept began to gain currency in the 1980s as a reaction to the then prevailing prescriptive approach which focuses on forms and atomistic analysis of a language. Two distinctive features of language awareness is that: First, it

studies language in a larger social, cultural and ideological framework rather than typifying a language by meticulous study; Second, language awareness is an attribute gained through learners’ motivated attention to a language in use (Tomlinson, 2003). It’s a developmental process achieved by learners own experience and discovery of how language works.

### 2.2 Why a language awareness approach?

A language awareness approach can be constructive because it is a departure from the traditional top-down transmission of language knowledge that requires least active thinking in learners. Instead, language awareness can be developed only by learners themselves though paying *deliberate* attention to language usage. Hawkins views language awareness building as a ‘dynamic and intuitive’ process (Hawkins, 1984:4-5). What teachers do in taking a language awareness approach is to challenge learners to ask questions, sparkle their interest and involve them in exploring themselves of how language works. In a classroom where learners notice for themselves the features of a certain language, they become ‘positive and curious’ learners (van Lier, 2001) and the self-gained realization will be registered and more internalized than achieved in a traditional classroom. This will be particularly helpful for individuals whose purpose for learning is not test-oriented but communicating in an English-speaking country and ultimately become a proficient speaker.

## 3. What can a language awareness approach offer and what are the limits?

### 3.1 Course materials

Hutchinson is partially right in stating that the selection of materials probably represents the single most important decision that the language teacher has to make (1987:37). Course books to a certain extent constitute the guideline of teaching plan and are in most cases the basis of assessment at the end of semester. An inspiring textbook will make both teachers and students more aware of the nature and function of the language they are teaching and

learning (Chan, 1999). Incorporating a variety of texts in course books, combined with an interactive atmosphere in classroom (i.e. sharing experience, exercising imagination, encouraging aesthetic responses), can greatly increase learners' motivation.

The educational mode in China is that students are used to being fed virtually everything from grammar to vocabulary. They tend to take whatever is there in the textbook and think 'this is English', not knowing and not keen to know different varieties of English and creativity in language using. It is very necessary to 'unfreeze' their yet-not-so 'frozen' mode of learning and corresponding modifications are called for in both course materials and in evaluation, to reorient students' focus and preventing them from isolating language knowledge and skills from out-of-classroom experience.

It is encouraging that textbooks in China are already moving towards that end. A popular textbook in mainland China — *the Integrated Course of College English* — encompasses different themes close to real life (such as environmental issues, social changes, animal intelligence, life stories of celebrities) in a variety of genres from exposition, journalism to essay and drama scripts. Within each unit can be found tailored tasks like brainstorming questions in pre-reading, discussion workshops, poems or songs that are related to the topic in after-reading. These activities are conducive in raising language awareness because the materials themselves are a tangible reminder that English is a living language with different varieties and its usage can be very creative and changes with time.

### 3.2 Changes demanded on language teachers

Vincent argues that 'we need to find topics and tasks that will engage learners physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually in learning the new language' (1984: 40). A broader language awareness approach brings in textural, social and cultural factors. It does not help if they can repeat a goodly number of irregular verbs by heart but not knowing enough to call a cab; nor is it any good if they become 'fluent fools' (Brislin and Yoshida:

1994:48) who can speak a language fluently yet knows nothing about the culture. This calls for a teaching continuum that motivates both language and cultural awareness. Take the teaching of *Family Album*, a multimedia course teaching English on an example of American everyday life. 'What do you find about the difference of American behaviors from Chinese?', or 'How would you react in such a situation?' are more valid awareness-raising questions than 'Why is the preposition omitted here? Isn't it grammatically incorrect to do so?' Language awareness in a wider sense constitutes culture awareness, an awareness to give students the confidence and initiative to extend the boundaries of their puzzles beyond what they are learning in classroom, and to bring it to real life. 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 (Bolitho, 2002).

A language awareness approach values highly the creative use of language, and even higher on the active engagement between learner language data (Hughes, 2010). Teachers should have not only *knowledge* of the language (namely grammar, lexis, syntactic), but also the *awareness* to think from the learners' perspective so that they can make informed choice of in-class activities to inspire learners' affective response and enhance their sensitivity to its usage. They should not be too ambitious that students will find it frustrating thus dampen their enthusiasm nor too easy that they would lose interest.

Our exchange programs do including native speaker teachers teaching in China who have the superiority in terms of 'knowledge' but not the 'awareness' since their own culture and language are invisible to them and they tend to take what they know for granted. So there's an invisible gap between what they take for granted students should know while they don't. Non-native teachers on the other hand, have the 'awareness' but tend to focus too much on feeding what they think students don't know.

Since the balancing point is hard to find give

students' varied levels, their language awareness (the sensitivity to notice the difference) appears all the more important. What teachers can start doing is, say, to provide more chances for learners to acquire through their own ways the contextual meanings and effects of words or expressions; offering real-life situations and giving more play to spontaneous speech; encouraging them to be reactive to, or contribute to, the topic development or expansion. (e.g. involve them in solving problems; require them to respond in meaningful fashion, either individually or in groups or pairs, such as following written or oral instructions or taking notes; encourage them to infer meaning from context or body language – all with an aim to help them practice skills they will need in the real world.) The possession of such abilities may enable them to get beneath and above the façade of a language to have a wider understanding of the target culture as well.

### 3.3 Testing and evaluation

While it's obviously important that tests should be fair, valid and reliable, the main purpose of testing and evaluation is to provide opportunities for learning, both for the students who are being tested, and for the professionals who are administering the tests (Tomlinson 2005). And the way of testing should be an impetus for learning for the right purpose, in the right direction.

A common concern of critics of the existing English tests in China is that the exams might be valid and reliable but the students learn very little of communicative value during their preparation for them and while taking the exams. That somewhat spells the reason for a not-so-smooth transition for exchange students. And a call for an alternative assessment is never absent from the debate. Bachman argues that 'language testing occurs in an educational and social setting, and the uses of language tests are determined largely by political needs.' (Bachman 1990:291) and the CET could very possibly be one of them. The price of designing a reliable, fair and objective test is that the task types are becoming rigidly limited to multiple choice, substitution and matching of words

and phrases. Candidates are not asked to do anything which we would normally do when not reading for a reading (or listening) examination. In extreme cases specific classes are held to speculate test-takers to do the right choice by applying techniques of probability. In such ways learners gain nothing from their preparation for the test other than examination readiness.

Radical changes have been held back because it is not easy to design a standardized assessment which replicates 'real' use of language whilst ensuring reliability and fairness for as huge a number of candidates as there is in China. However it is not that hard to start from joint program which itself is an experimental module with limited number of students. The key question is, even when both teachers and learners are aware of the fact that language acquisition occurs when and *only* when they are affectively engaged, how can we formally assess such a dynamic process?

If classroom tasks can typically replicate features of real-world communication, then assessment should be able to do the same. In the oral English tests in our joint program, for example, students are asked to draw lots of the scenes that may happen in real life and perform it out within given time. Students show more mobilization and less anxiety of last-minute cramming in being tested this way. Another way of assessment in the joint program I am teaching is through a longitudinal project requiring students to develop new language skills through completing a project and write a report at the end of the semester. The Business English project encompasses the learning of both business and language skills. It requires learners to work in team marketing a product in the given eight weeks and write an English SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis at the end of the semester. This entails choosing the right product they think will sell; making marketing strategies; actually selling their products (or ideas); recording what they did; and making an oral presentation based on their written report.

The evaluation format proves effective in raising language awareness in that it makes useful inferences about the test takers' communicative

language ability. Students are *using* the language in real sense to plan and report things they've been doing. No suitable course books can help the students to prepare, and no past papers for them to practice taking. And the oral presentation is more easily resonated in classroom since they have been through the similar thing. Even the preparation for the end-of-semester presentation is time well spent because it assesses knowledge in ways that relate to real-life usage of language.

The drawbacks of such assessment, if carried on a national scale, is the difficulty in establishing an ensured fair and standardized assessment framework nationwide for written and oral presentations, as well as the huge workload of teachers. So presently it stays with the limited amount of students in joint programs. But the issue remains on what format should assessment take that will separate learners' previous knowledge and ability from those acquired during the language awareness course (Tomlinson, 2003) so that we can be confident that the approach is worth all the expenses to carry on a larger scale? And how often should the learners be tested to measure the developmental nature of language awareness? Can we use samples of typical performances rather than one-off tests at the semester end to assess that development?

## Conclusion

Much time and expertise has been devoted to make language learners more competent in communicating since English became a world language. The writer is supposing language awareness, as a means of helping learners to help themselves (Tomlinson, 2003) can become a principle and objective in all language lessons if adopted by curriculum developers, materials writers and teachers. The best method varies from one teaching context to another. We certainly cannot expect a language awareness approach can, once and for all, prepare the students perfectly ready for the years ahead. But since the aim of joint program is to build students' communicative competence and faster adaptability, at least it can give a shove in the right direction.

## References

- Andrew, S. (2007). *Teacher Language Awareness*. Cambridge: CUP
- Altan, M. Z., (1995). Culture in EFL contexts: Classroom and coursebooks. *Modern English Teacher* 4/2: 58-60.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: OUP
- Bolitho, R. (2003). Ten questions about language awareness. *ELT Journal Quarterly*. 57/3
- Brislin, R. Yoshida, T. (1994). *Intercultural Communication Training: An Introduction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Buck, G. (2001). *Assessing Listening*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Carter. R. (2003). Key concepts in ELT: Language awareness. *ELT Journal*. Oxford: OUP
- Harmer, J. (2001). Coursebooks. A human, cultural and linguistic disaster?. *Modern English Teacher*, 8/4: 5-10
- Hawkins, E. (1984). *Awareness of Language: An Introduction*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hutchinson, T. (1987). What's underneath?: An Interactive View of Materials Evaluation. *ELT Textbooks and Materials: Problems in Evaluation and Development*. Basingstoke: Modern English Publications.
- Tomlinson, B. (2003). *Developing Materials in Language Teaching*. London: Continuum Press
- Tomlinson, B. (2005). Testing to learn: a personal view of language testing. *ELT Journal Quarterly*. Oxford: OUP
- van Lier, L. (2001). Language Awareness. *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: CUP.
- P.K.W. Chan, (1999). Literature, Language awareness and EFL. *Language Awareness Quarterly*. 8/1: London: Routledge Press
- Young, R and Milanovic, M, (1992). Discourse Variation in Oral Proficiency Interviews *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 403-424, Cambridge: CUP