
On the Linguistically Responsive Teacher in Tertiary Education

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Abstract:

This article contributes to the debate among applied linguists regarding the importance of teachers' linguistic awareness (TLA) in the teaching of foreign languages. While this debate relates to teaching practices in the pre-university stage, this article focuses on linguistic awareness in tertiary education, more specifically in English departments in Morocco. The article starts with outlining the various dimensions of this concept with references to the major levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics). Then it deals with three basic questions: what is being done? What could be done? And what should be done? for TLA to be adopted in the teaching of English in Morocco. To support the arguments put forward here, 24 university teachers were interviewed to obtain information relating to their linguistic awareness as well as the ways TLA is exploited in their classrooms. 16.66% of the subjects showed strong TLA and stated that they strive to exploit it individually in their teaching. 29.16% have a good working background in linguistics, but they do not know how to exploit it in their classrooms. More importantly, 54.16% of the informants do not feel that they have such background and tend to teach English without any reference to knowledge about language. The article concludes that Moroccan teachers of English are called to develop and exploit TLA with a view to achieving better learning outcomes, in line with proposals provided herein to redress this situation in Morocco.

Keywords:

Teachers' linguistic awareness, foreign languages, levels of linguistic analysis, teaching, tertiary education

أهمية الوعي اللساني لدى مدرسي اللغات الأجنبية بالمغرب

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الملخص:

يساهم هذا المقال في النقاش الدائر في أوساط الباحثين في اللسانيات التطبيقية بشأن أهمية الوعي اللساني في تدريس اللغات الأجنبية. وبينما تركز مناقشة هذا الموضوع على جوانبه في مرحلة ما قبل الجامعة، يبحث هذا المقال مفهوم الوعي اللساني في صلته بالتعليم العالي في المغرب، وتحديدًا في أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية في جميع أنحاء البلاد. نعرض بدايةً مختلف أبعاد هذا المفهوم ومدى أهميته بخصوص مختلف مستويات التحليل اللساني (الصواتة، والصرف، والتركيب وتحليل الخطاب)، ثم نجيب عن ثلاثة أسئلة أساسية في هذا الصدد: ما يجري القيام به؟ ماذا يمكن القيام به؟ وماذا يجب فعله؟ من أجل اعتماد الوعي اللساني في تدريس اللغات الأجنبية بالمغرب. ولدعم الحجج المقدمة هنا، تمت مقابلة 24 مدرسًا جامعيًا على مدار أربعة أشهر (نوفمبر - فبراير 2020) لاستيقاء معلومات تتعلق بوعيهم اللساني والسبل المعتمدة في استثمار هذا الوعي في فصولهم الدراسية. بينما أبدى 16.66٪ من المشاركين وعيًا لسانيًا قويًا يسعون بشكل فردي لاستغلاله في فصولهم، فإن 29.16٪ من المستجوبين لديهم خلفية جيدة في اللسانيات لكنهم لا يعرفون كيفية استثمار هذه المعارف في لغتهم التربوية داخل الفصل. والأمر المثير للاهتمام هو أن 54.16٪ لا يشعرون أن لديهم خلفية عملية في اللسانيات ويميلون إلى تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية دون أي استعانة واعية بالمعارف اللسانية المتاحة. ويخلص المقال إلى دعوة مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة المغربية إلى تطوير وعيهم اللساني واستغلاله في أساليب التدريس الخاصة بهم لتحقيق نتائج تعليمية أفضل وفق اقتراحات يقدمها البحث لتصحيح هذا الوضع في السياق المغربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الوعي اللساني، تدريس اللغات الأجنبية، التعليم العالي، مستويات التحليل اللساني،

أساليب التدريس.

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Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the arguments put forward for the significance of explicit knowledge about language in the teaching of foreign languages (Ellis, 1994; Andrews, 2006; Lucas & Villegas 2011; Jmila 2019, 2020). While the discussion of this topic focuses on its aspects in pre-university classes, this paper investigates its relevance in tertiary education in Morocco, specifically in English departments across the country. It answers three basic questions in this regard: what is being done? What can be done? And what should be done? The answers to these questions are advanced to argue that teachers of English at the university are called to develop and exploit their linguistic awareness in their teaching methods to achieve better learning outcomes. To support the claims advanced here, 24 university teachers have been interviewed over a period of four months (November – February 2020) to elicit information relating to (1) their linguistic awareness and (2) the way they exploit such awareness in their classes. While 16.66% of the subjects showed solid linguistic awareness and strive individually to exploit it in their classes, 29.16% have a good background in linguistics but do not see how to use such knowledge in their pedagogical language in the classroom. More interestingly, 54.16% do not feel that they have a working background in linguistics

and tend to teach language courses without any reference to knowledge about language. Given the merits of linguistic awareness reported in the published literature, chief of which are outlined here, suggestions (pre-service and in-service) will be made in this paper to redress this situation in the Moroccan context.

Linguistic awareness

In an earlier article (Jmila 2019), I highlighted the relevance of Teacher's Language Awareness (TLA) along the following lines. This concept has attracted the interest of quite a few researchers in recent years (e.g. Cenoz 2017, Andrews, 2006; Berry, 2014; Borg, 2011; and Svalberg, 2012). TLA is part of teacher knowledge which explores the teachers' knowledge about language systems. Andrews (1999: 163) argues that the language teachers need to "reflect upon [...] knowledge of the underlying systems of the language, in order to ensure that students receive maximally useful input for learning". Thornburry (1997) provides a thorough definition of the concept which is more relevant to TLA in L2 education. He defines it as "the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively" (p.10). Wright (2002) also argues that "a linguistically aware teacher not only understands how language works, but understands the student's struggle with language and is sensitive to errors and other interlanguage features" (p. 115). Similarly, Andrews (2003) demonstrates that TLA has a number of defining characteristics: (a) it involves both knowledge of subject-matter (knowledge *about* language) and language proficiency (knowledge *of* language); (b) the language awareness of the teacher is metacognitive in nature, since it involves a cognitive aspect of reflection upon both knowledge of language and knowledge about language, and (c) TLA focuses on language from the learners' perspective and their developing interlanguage as well as an awareness of the degree to which the language content of lessons causes difficulties for learners.

Linguistic awareness is specifically important in the Moroccan context of higher education for a set of considerations, chief of which is that English departments are not supposed to serve the function of a language center, where the focus relates to language proficiency (knowledge *of* language). They are named Departments of English Studies, which implies that though the objective remains to upgrade students' English proficiency (communication skills), much of these skills should be developed through the use of knowledge about language (metalinguage drawing on the various levels of linguistic analysis). To the extent that this claim is valid, a linguistically aware teacher should satisfy the roles below:

- They should serve as a *user* of the language they teach;
- They should serve as an *analyzer* of the language they teach;
- They should serve as a *pedagogically competent* agent to teach that language.

The second and third characteristics above require the metalinguage and metacognition that enable the teacher to reflect TLA in their teaching praxis. More specifically, it is this capacity that enables teachers to develop students' critical thinking, to analyze the language that they are teaching and reflect on the adequate pedagogical means to facilitate learning. A corollary of this endeavor would be the positive outcomes that can be seen along the following lines:

- Students would find it easier to reflect on their own learning;
- Students would find it simpler to draw conclusions on their way of learning the language;
- Teachers would find it easier to develop sensitivity to interlanguage features and include them in their lesson plan and teaching activities.

Below we will detail the major aspects of linguistic awareness that underlies the achievements of the outcomes above. We explain and exemplify such awareness at the phonological, morphological,

syntactic and pragmatic levels, outlining the benefits of TLA-driven teaching.

Phonological awareness

As Bolitho et.al (2003) note, teachers usually find themselves in in the situation where students wish to know *why* they can or cannot say something in English. Given time-constraints, learner expectation, and very often a teacher's own sense that they are expected to know "the answer", teachers tend to resort to ad hoc formalization of "the answer". Examples of answers you would hear in a grammar class would include the following:

- It's an exception!
- It's like this. Learn it as it is!
- Whenever you see this, then such and such is the case!

These are examples of knowledge *of* language (communication skills). There are linguistic forms that do not follow from the apparent rules of grammar, and teachers usually flag them as pitfalls for students to avoid them. Consider the example below relating to question tag formation that students are taught in Semester 1, where (a) is ill-formed(*):

- a) *I am your friend, *amn't I?*
- b) I am your friend, *aren't I?*
- c) I am your friend, *am I not?*

Teacher's explanation drawing on knowledge *of* language (teacher as a *user* of language) would be one of the below:

- It's an exception
- It's like this. Learn it as it is.
- Whenever you see *I am*, then the tag is *aren't I?* or *am I not?*
- Never use *amn't I?*

If we content ourselves with this explanation, we would encourage the student to memorize this exception without understanding it. So, this is not good enough; and it's not good enough

for the teacher to be simply a language user. Let's have a look at the explanation that satisfies the second characteristic of TLA.

Teacher's explanation drawing on knowledge *about* language (teacher as an *analyzer* of the language they teach) would be along the following lines. /m/ and /n/ in *amn't* are both nasal stop sounds, and /n/ and /t/ are also similar in that they are both articulated by the tip of the tongue (alveolar). The sound system of any language is subjected to constraints that prohibit speakers from pronouncing adjacent identical segments. Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP) is a universal principle that blocks any rule that would generate adjacent identical segments (Yip 1988, McCarthy 1986a). Consider the English pairs below:

pirate	pira[s]y	
vacant	vacan[s]y	
honest	*hones[s]y	hones[t]y

Failure of the rule generating this category of English nouns is attributed to OCP because it would create identical sounds [ss]. The same explanation hold why it is that the generation of *amnt* has been blocked. Notice that the sequence *mn* is also blocked in *autumn*, *column* and *condemn*, in all of which *mn* is pronounced as [m]. That is, the violation of OCP here is resolved by deleting the sound that creates a prohibited sequence. However, due to the fact that *amnt* involves a morphological operation, [m] has been replaced by [r] to resolve OCP violation.

Teacher's explanation could also draw on knowledge of students' learning in the courses they have taken, are taking or will take (teacher as *pedagogically competent* to teach that language). For example, this explanation holds also for the deletion of consonants in, for example, *handsome* and *handkerchief*, which students have learnt in a class of Speaking. Also, the same explanation would be valid for the pronunciation of syllabic consonants in *little*, *button* and *bottom* that students have learnt in a class of Speaking. These facts of pronunciation

could be explained along the same lines, with reference to phonotactic constraints. For this to happen in a class of grammar, the teacher should have phonological awareness that enables them to reflect their capacity to use, analyze and teach language.

Benefits of TLA in this respect:

It should be noted that TLA-driven teaching involves many benefits as can be seen below:

- It develops in students the capacity to divide words into admissible and non-admissible sequences of segments, a practice which is certainly better than memorizing exceptions without understanding them.
- It upgrades students' capacity to identify phonotactic constraints in syllable parts, which would consolidate students' knowledge of the sound pattern of English, and apply such knowledge to develop their speaking skill.
- It develops students' metalanguage because they are studying rather than simply learning language. This would enhance students' perception that they are studying in a department of English Studies, rather than a language center!
- Reference to knowledge *about* language develops students' awareness of the links between content and language courses, and of the fact that language is a package, rather than dissociated set of skills,
- It enables students to reflect on their own learning, drawing on the analytical insights provided by the teacher, which would qualify them to engage in more advanced practices of language use and analysis in the future,
- Teachers would find it easier to develop sensitivity to *interlanguage* features and include them in their lesson plan and teaching activities.

These benefits clearly indicate the relevance of TLA in the teaching of English in the departments of English across the country. Let us now turn to morphological awareness.

Morphological awareness

The capacity to use the knowledge of word formation rules is obviously conducive to the development of students' vocabulary stock, in terms of both breadth and depth. Teacher's morphological awareness, especially word-building (both inflection and derivation), would qualify them to develop in students the skill of constructing and deconstructing words, thereby learning the meanings of the building blocs of words (roots and affixes). Morphological knowledge (especially morphological analysis) would qualify students to successfully guess the meaning of newly encountered words (Carlisle and Stone 2003), which directly contributes to the development of their vocabulary stock. Also learners' performance in the four language skills is largely determined by the breadth of their vocabulary. Therefore, the development of vocabulary stock is closely linked to morphological knowledge. Hickey et. al (2014) conducted an analysis of Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices) and concluded that Standards are based on a very clear "relationship between morphological knowledge, vocabulary growth and reading comprehension." (p.101)

The major findings in this piece of research are given below:

- Capacity to divide words into affixes and roots is better than memorizing what a word means.
- Capacity to identify similar words that share these roots or affixes, widen and deepen their vocabulary stock.
- Students would find it easier to draw conclusions on their way of learning the language. By way of example, if students are made aware that the suffix *+en* derives the verb from color and size adjectives, such as *blacken*, then they would conclude that the same process is needed to build words like *whiten* and *harden*, or at least they would recognize these words when they

are encountered in reading comprehension.

These findings indicate that morphological awareness would enable students to reflect on their own learning. It also enables teachers to develop sensitivity to morphological features of English and include them in their lesson plan and teaching activities. Again, teachers can engage in highlighting these aspects only if they have developed the required level of TLA. The same holds for syntactic awareness.

Syntactic awareness

I had my first-year students repeatedly asking me the following questions (Jmila 2019):

- Why is (a) correct and (b) incorrect in the pairs below:
 - (a) Why do you think she left early?
 - (b) *Why do you think did she leave early?
 - (a) Who do you think killed Bill?
 - (b) *Who do you think that killed Bill?

These examples may be solved by ad hoc prescriptive answers to students, such as “If you have a complex sentence, then make the inversion only in the first clause.” Also, “after question formation, remove *that* after the infinitive”. However, answers like these do not encourage students to develop their critical thinking, nor do they encourage teachers to analyze the language that they are teaching or reflect on the adequate pedagogical means to facilitate learning.

Let me underline a very important distinction here. Linguistics is concerned with the description of language structure (syntax, phonology, morphology) language use (sociolinguistics, pragmatics) and language learning (psycholinguistics). It is not aimed at solving problems of language teaching. Problem solving is the job of the teacher. The teacher is required solve the problem of what to teach and how to teach the second language (pedagogy). However, the teacher cannot do this whimsically in an ad hoc fashion. Every technique used in teaching should be related to underlying principles (knowledge about language), derived from linguistics. This makes teaching a principled problem-solving activity; and this is where applied linguistics comes in.

This implies that the language teacher is not interested in the application of linguistics or any other discipline; he is interested in solving language teaching problems. Now, are university teachers called to play the role of the applied linguist? The answer is “YES”, simply because the university is a research-driven institution, and university teaching staff are named “teacher-researchers”. The claim that I am making here finds support in the conclusion drawn by Ellis (1990, p.175): 'Teachers are concerned with both how knowledge is acquired and crucially, with the learners' ability to make use of this knowledge'. For this to happen, linguistic awareness is crucial.

Another important aspect of TLA is pragmatic awareness.

Pragmatic awareness

Andrews (2001) reports a student asking his English teacher in Hong Kong “Miss Wong, why do we have to use the passive voice in our daily life?” and the teacher did not know how to handle that student’s questions, due to her inadequate TLA. While teaching the rule of passive formation is quite easy and students can quickly master it, reflective questions like the one asked by this student requires the teacher to have at least basic knowledge in pragmatics, rhetoric, text linguistics and discourse analysis to answer his question, and encourage student to reflect on their learning along similar lines.

Achugar et al. (2007) claims that a focus on genre helped teachers understand the mismatch between the kinds of texts students are expected to write in history classrooms and those they are assigned to read. Subsequently, in-depth training to deconstruct texts at the sentence level allowed teachers to analyze textbook passages and primary source documents and to incorporate this kind of language analysis with lesson plans successfully. The major benefits of pragmatic awareness are given below:

- Pragmatic awareness brings in textual, contextual, socio-political, and attitudinal dimensions to language courses, which would enable students to have a broader understanding of what they are learning. Such understanding can give them the

confidence to go beyond the boundaries of words and phrases, and behave like students of English studies, rather than simply learners of English.

- Pragmatic awareness provides links between teaching language structure and placing the learner at the center of the learning process, enabling them to reflect upon their learning.
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Complexity of change in belief and practice

So far, we have exposed the relevance and benefits of linguistic awareness in classroom practices regarding the teaching of English. Let's now talk briefly about the challenges in practice.

What is being done

In an article by Graeme Couper (2014) that I always give my Master students (MTEFL) to read and discuss in the Phonology class, the author shows how teachers lack the confidence to teach pronunciation and consequently neglect it in their language classes due to their lack of knowledge of phonology. He concludes that teachers should receive better guidance and support, both preservice and in-service, for the same reasons, more or less, that I have outlined so far in this paper. It should be noted that in the context of New Zealand, there is (1) preservice training for teachers, (2) in-service training, and (3) educational standards that are enforced and monitored continuously. In our context, Morocco, there is no formal preservice training for university teachers; there is no on-the-job training, and there are no formal standards to observe.

Therefore, for me to have an idea about the extent to which LA is at play in the departments of English studies in Morocco, I conducted informal interviews with some colleagues in Moroccan universities over a period of four months (November- February 2020) to elicit information relating to (1) their linguistic awareness and (2) how they exploit such awareness in their classes. While 16.66% of the subjects showed solid linguistic awareness and strive individually to exploit it

in their classes, 29.16% have a good background in linguistics but do not see how to use such knowledge in their pedagogical language in the classroom. More interestingly, 54.16% have little background in linguistics and teach language courses without any reference to knowledge about language.

Many factors seem to underly this unfortunate situation. First of all, university teachers of English have varied backgrounds, including but not limited to cultural studies, literature, translation, gender studies, education and linguistics. They tend to do research, after recruitment, in their areas of interest, ignoring the importance of TLA. Secondly, there are no clearly defined national standards that would encourage teachers to develop their teaching skills in certain specific directions. Thirdly, university teachers do not benefit from any in-service formal training promoting TLA, nor are they subjected to any evaluation or control that would motivate them to take TLA seriously.

What can/should be done

Competence in an L2 is primarily a matter of implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge 'is the declarative knowledge of the phonological, lexical, grammatical and pragmatic features of an L2 together with the metalanguage for labeling such knowledge (Ellis 2005). It is held consciously, is learnable and verbalizable and is typically accessed through controlled processing when learners experience some kind of linguistic difficulty in the use of the L2. Therefore, university teachers are supposed to strike a balance between explicit knowledge as analyzed knowledge and as metalingual explanation. This is because the former entails a conscious awareness of how a structural feature works while the latter consists of knowledge of grammatical metalanguage and the ability to understand explanations of rules. This, in turn, can only be achieved if the teacher is engaged in research to develop the required awareness that would help them carry off their teaching duties properly. Remember a linguistically aware teacher is (1) user (2) analyzer and (3) pedagogically competent.

In the absence of pre-service and in-service training for university teachers of English, individual efforts would fall short of the

desired pedagogical competence that should be developed. TLA is a useful tool to monitor output in the classroom, which, itself, serves as a source of input. Knowledge about language is a reliable resource for teachers to making decisions about what and how to teach any content about language. More importantly, linguistically aware teachers would enable students consciously use and evaluate different learning style in order to both reflect upon and develop their own learning.

Concluding remarks

Having argued that TLA is a necessary component for successful teaching, university teachers, regardless of their background, can develop it through the following means:

- Online networks of communication could allow teachers (in-service) to interact electronically with each other about language-related issues, in order to develop TLA and exploit it in their classroom practices.
- A good deal of language courses' coordination time should be devoted to TLA, and how it is reflected in teaching methodology, teaching material and lesson plans.
- Regular workshops on TLA should be organized for faculty and doctoral students, focusing on morphology, syntax, phonology and pragmatics. Teachers would be encouraged to apply this knowledge in their classroom practices in order to build in students the confidence needed to talk about key features in the material they are exposed to.
- TLA-sensitive Departmental Standards should be established to guide the activities above.
- Finally, this article leaves many loose ends for further research. TLA is such an under-investigated area and involves many topics that university teachers and doctoral students can research such as the following:
 - a) The role of subject-matter knowledge in instruction, what it is that L2 teachers need to know about language in general and the

target language in particular in order to teach, and the amount and type of subject-matter knowledge needed to teach different levels of learner;

b) The relationship between teacher's cognition, classroom practice and learning.

c) The relationship between the declarative and procedural dimensions of TLA, and between TLA and general teaching competence;

d) How TLA might best be developed for university teachers with little or no background in linguistics.

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