

BE AWARE! – LANGUAGE EDUCATION OR COMMUNICATION?

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Introduction

When I wander through the town of Fredericton, I cannot help noticing the bilingual signs that line the streets of the New Brunswick capital. Can a driver in this town honestly say he does not know the French word for ‘Stop’ or the English word for ‘Arrêt’? Looking at the signs on buildings, public notices, and so much more that is in written form, one has an instant translation from one language into the other.

As a trainee language teacher, I remember one of my first tutors telling us how he encouraged his international language students in England to read the signs on places to better their English. While living in Bratislava, I learned the days of the week in Slovak by looking at the signs on shop entrances. From there, it was also easy to learn the words for ‘open’ and ‘closed’! Looking at the street signs, I soon came to know the Slovak word for ‘street’. When I came to live in Canada, I noted how much easier it would be for an English speaker to learn French and vice versa, having ready translations into the other language in many public places.

But more than mere noticing signs and other written text, I actively look at them. One can subliminally learn the words ‘Stop’ and ‘Arrêt’ fairly quickly, but beyond single words a more attentive disposition is required. I attribute success in my language learning to the *awareness* I bring to the endeavour.

Language Awareness

Language awareness is the noticing and analyzing of language phenomena in speech and writing. In language education, an official language awareness movement (the Association of Language Awareness) came into being in the early 1990s as a response to the perceived lack of linguistic content in language programmes and shortcomings in the linguistic preparation of language teachers. The movement’s journal, *Language Awareness*, delineates the aims and scope of language awareness as exploring the following: “the role of explicit knowledge about language in the process of language learning; the role that such explicit knowledge about language plays in language teaching and how such knowledge can best be mediated by teachers; the role of explicit knowledge about language in language use” (Burley, S. & Pomphrey, 2011.). Language awareness is a conscious effort to learn language through the analysis of one language *sui generis*, as well as to understand language systems at a meta-level.

The Communicative Era

The concept of awareness is not at all new to language education. This used to be the normative method of learning, entailing active noticing and identifying features of language. However, a change occurred in language education at the same time that education in general was moving away from learning as a cognitive endeavour to one of holism and social engagement. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to foreign or second language education came into being in the 1970s and has left a large imprint on the language teaching profession. Notwithstanding some reservations expressed since, the influence of the approach is likely to be long lasting. The attraction of the approach is explained by the proximity of the methods applied to the natural functions of language as a means of communication. The emergence of the communicative approach was a result of developments in education that reflected significant sociocultural changes in the 1960s. The move towards social construction of knowledge, together with the discrediting of behaviourism, led to a call for a method of learning that involved interaction and mutual understanding. In the case of language education, this resulted in methodology that deemphasised disciplinary knowledge of language and promoted communication. It based its methods on communicative performance rather than language competence.

Language competence vs. Communicative performance

The origins of the distinction between competence and performance lie with Noam Chomsky who “describes ‘competence’ as an idealized capacity that is located as a psychological or mental property or function and ‘performance’ as the production of actual utterances” (Bilash, 2009).

This distinction led to a controversy in the field of Second Language Acquisition with the advent of CLT. This controversy manifested itself in the tension between language learning as a discipline and language learning as communication. Language competence requires study in both formal and informal settings of how a language works. Communicative performance is the ability to transmit messages using recognised symbols, including language, and is demonstrated mostly in real life and informal interactions.

I see the controversy in the language teaching profession as arising from a confusion between language as social practice and language learning. Language is often considered central to cultural and social membership because of its association with identity and communication. Yet learning a language does not necessitate induction into a cultural tradition and neither is learning purely an exercise in communication. Communication does not equate to language, although language could well be the most important instrument of communication.

Any criticism of communicative methods in language education is mostly directed at the pure (strong) forms of the approach. Strong-form CLT assumes that the principles of learning a language as a child or through experiencing very long term exposure to language are applicable in every learning situation (Tan, 2005). Under

these conditions it has been shown that a language can be acquired through mere contact with it. But in many second language learning contexts around the world, the time available and the learning environment do not allow for learning through communication without cognitive attention to language.

Conclusion

Language awareness, whether in formal or informal situations, is necessary in most foreign/second language learning contexts. Attempts at communicating in the new language are important, but are not sufficient for language learning. Success in a communicative event must be accompanied by a certain 'uptake', i.e. internalizing, of features of the language used to aid in increased competence and better future performance in language production.

So, by all means, let's try to communicate in the target language; practice is always valuable. But be aware, we are still in the process of learning the language, and learning requires the language awareness that comes through attention to form and meaning. The next time you are having your early evening stroll in Fredericton or find yourself in a public place, pay attention to the bilingual signs and other literature in English and French. Note the word translations, compare grammars and spellings. Be aware! One can think of harder ways of learning a new language.

References

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Biography

John Attard has many years' experience teaching language at university and in the private sector in Europe and North America. He has a master's degree in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the University of Leicester, UK. He is currently doing a PhD in Education, with specialisation in language and linguistics, at the University of New Brunswick.