

The Role Of Critical Language Awareness in Teaching English as a FL.

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Abstract:

In a foreign language context, critical language awareness (CLA) as an approach to language teaching is approved to play a crucial role in enhancing language acquisition. Yet, in spite of adopting a communicative approach to second language teaching, English teaching situation in the Maghrebi countries including, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Mauritania, seems to reflect a version that does not include the critical awareness component within its priorities. In other words, in spite of recognizing the importance of language awareness within focus on form trends of communicative approaches, awareness is believed to be regarded but a descriptive level of English language. Contrarily and by adopting a critical pedagogy in English teaching methodology, the Maghreb, reflecting somehow a shared sociocultural context, can adjust language instruction towards raising learners' consciousness about the linguistic and/or cultural Self and Other at both the descriptive and the explanatory level. This article attempts to trace the main claims within critical language awareness methodology, with much focus on Fairclough's Model. The attention is to be shifted then to Literature as a highly recommended authentic material to settle 'Knowledge about language', another designation of language awareness, among others.

Key words: Discourse analysis, Critical discourse analysis, Critical language awareness, Cultural awareness, Otherness.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of discourse analysis to the scene, the conceptualization of many notions has shifted towards considering the dynamic, situational, relational as well as discursively constituted and constitutive nature of language, culture and related concepts (van Dijk 2011). The first efforts have led language analysts to the description level; a matter which critical discourse analysts were not satisfied with and urged them to seek for an explanatory upper level analysis that could account for questions of language and power relations. This type of analysis is based on a fundamental claim that places language at the center of social practices with which it is dialectically constituted (Fairclough 2013a).

Considering language use from a critical view has also been transplanted to the field of language teaching giving rise to concepts such as Critical Language Awareness (henceforth CLA) which displaced that of Language Awareness (LA). According to Fairclough (2014:7), 'critical language study highlights how language conventions and language practices are invested with power relations and ideological processes which people are often unaware of'

CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS

In the context of language teaching, introducing language awareness refers to the process by which learners become aware of language forms and functions. Carter sees that 'language awareness refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language' (2003:64). Raising learners' awareness of language forms and functions has roots in Chomsky's (1965) Language Acquisition Device (LAD) theory which claims that human beings are born with a language detecting mechanism that enables them to analyze and internalize language rules from an external data. It is an ability that has been neglected by structural approaches to language teaching which are judged, in addition to focusing on language forms at the expense of their functions, to be unsuccessful to lead language learners to effective communication (Widdowson 1990). A shift towards communicative approaches was then a necessary step towards balancing

between form and function and making use of such innate capacity language learners are claimed to be born with. It is within this new language teaching paradigm that LA can be integrated (Fenner 2001).

Put another way, the main claim of LA approach does not check an answer to what to teach: form or function, as their combination is undiscussable. Rather, its main focus turns around elevating language learning process (being L1 or L2) to a conscious level via an explicit formal instruction (James & Garrett 2014). It is only in this way that first and second language learners come to adjust their already possessed language knowledge or internalize a new one both appropriately and successfully. The first efforts to implement such a strategy in language teaching took place in British Schools in 1980's in an attempt to find a solution to first and second language failure (Fairclough 1995). It is, then, the beginning of an era where the teacher is assigned with a new role; a role that may seem to those who miss a full understanding of CLA methodology a retiring one. But, in fact, it is not.

EXPLICIT FORMAL INSTRUCTION

One fundamental claim within Language Awareness Approach (LAA) is that language learning occurs only when learners are aware of language forms and functions. In the same context, raising language learners' awareness cannot take place within a traditional grammar instruction model (Knapp, Seidlhofer & Widdowson 2009). This model is criticized for focusing mainly on mechanical drills and repetitive activities which lose their effect when learners stop rehearsing them. It is a type of instruction that doesn't consider any active presence or agency to language learners, nor does it fit the discursive nature of language and culture; as fundamental concepts in language teaching.

Accordingly, instead of drawing rules or regulations (for a better discursive term) to language learners, language teachers are supposed to search techniques to enable learners to extract these regulations by their own (Hinkel & Fotos 2002). On the other hand, adopting a task-based instruction where the focus is on meaning seems more appropriate since its aim is to prepare language learners for effective communicative situations. However, without including a focus on form component, this task-based mode of instruction seems to develop learners' language fluency at the expense of language accuracy (Skehan 1998).

Initially the shift towards communicative approach to language teaching has adopted a strong version of task-based instruction which argues that 'communicative interaction in the language is necessary and sufficient for language acquisition, and that a focus on form is unnecessary' (Nunan 2004: 93). However, 'The CLT emphasis on fluency without great regard for accuracy and quality in L2 production has led to dissatisfaction among large numbers of methodologists and practitioners alike' (Hinkel 2005: 627). As a result, there was a necessary shift towards adopting a weak version of task-based instruction which comes to be called a focus on form task-based instruction. This latter seeks to raise language learners' attention over both language form and meaning (Skehan 1998).

Nevertheless, once drawing learners' attention more to language forms and functions at a descriptive level seems insufficient; especially after the increasing number of CDA advocates who call for situating language forms and functions within broad social and cultural settings. They claim for an upper explanatory level of awareness by 'developing consciousness-raising tasks that focus not just on linguistic features but on how the choice of particular linguistic forms encodes socio-political meanings in texts' (Ellis 2003: 333)

LANGUAGE AWARENESS And CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

In spite of being used interchangeably in a large body of literature (Fairclough 1989), LA and Conscious-Raising (henceforth CR) refer to different designations. According to James (1996), LA must be reserved to concern that language knowledge that is already possessed by the language learner, but of which he is not aware. On the other hand, CR refers to the state of being aware of a language knowledge area that has not yet been internalized. Drawing on this assumption, LA is assigned to the mother tongue (MT), being somehow a Known one, and CR is reserved for the target language (L2) being the one learners are trying to internalize.

'LA involves encouraging and helping knowers to refine and enlarge their capacity for language use, to exploit more fully the combinatorial and expressive potential of that cognitive system or 'calculus' (their language) that they have mastered intuitively... CR is by contrast for language learners, who are not yet in command of these formal repertoires and consistent intuitions' (James 1996: 140-141)

However, James (ibid) soon claims that drawing a distinctive line between first and second language can hardly take place. As a result, both terms come to take place in both contexts 'it would be tempting to argue that LA work is exclusively for knowers in MT classrooms, and CR exclusively for learners in FL classrooms...however... both are effective in both MT and FL classrooms' (ibid,141-142). Within the same context, Hawkins shows how both operations take place in a complementary model. 'Only by getting outside the MT and operating ... in another language, can the MT be seen objectively' (Hawkins 1984 cited in James 1996:142)

LANGUAGE AWARENESS vs CULTURAL AWARENESS

Much discussion has taken place and still does about what could be appropriate conceptualizations to Language and Culture terms (Kramsch 1998, Hinkel 1999). With the arrival of discourse analysis, the view comes to be clearer (Fairclough 2013b). However, the questions shift from discussing the nature of these concepts towards considering ways to handle their discursive nature while trying to design language teaching syllabi (Ellis 2003). Among areas of discussion is the relation of language to culture; a component that has long been ignored, especially during the era of structuralist approaches. Now, there is a wholly agreement that language teaching process is concerned with language in use (McCarthy 1991); a context that is generally referred to as culture (Byram & Risager 1999). Still, by reference to van Dijk (1998), one should bear in mind that drawing boundaries of a given stretch of discourse is never possible. Accordingly, Language in use has to be considered within a synchronic and diachronic transnational view of language and culture. Saying this would make things complicated. However, Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000:11) claim that 'Discourse analysis of context entails the linguistic and cognitive choices made relevant to the interaction at hand'

Considering language from a sociocultural view does not imply a reconsideration of contextual elements only. It also brings to the surface more comprehensive expressions like that of cultural awareness 'Cultural awareness is sometimes defined as sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behaviour -both our own and other groups'- on language use and communication' (Gay, Guijarro & Hernandez 2009). Although the relation between language and culture is still experiencing an egg-and-chicken debate, the term language awareness is often understood within that of cultural awareness (Buttjes & Byram 1991), a concept to which Fairclough (2013b) refers as social consciousness. At last, regarding the interwoven relation between language and culture, it seems that language teaching needs to assign equal importance to both concepts: language awareness and cultural awareness.

Calling for a critical pedagogy, Fairclough states its rationale as: 'struggle against domination has varying degrees of success, and one factor in success is the theoretical and analytical resources opposition has access to' (1995:221). Fairclough (1995) also adds that considering the powerful force language exerts on people especially in this era, adding a critical factor to LA becomes a requisite. It is that sense of criticality (Byram 2008) that language learners need to develop while raising their level of consciousness about language forms and functions. Fairclough criticizes language awareness programmes and materials for being 'insufficiently 'critical'. That is, they have not given sufficient attention to important social aspects of language, especially aspects of the relationship between language and power, which ought to be highlighted in language education' (2014:1).

In short, Critical Language Awareness supplies language learners with both a description and an explanation. As such, it equips them 'with a resource for intervention in and reshaping of discursive practices and the power relations that ground them, both in other domains and within education itself' (Fairclough 2013a:529).

NEW ROLES FOR BOTH LANGUAGE TEACHERS And LEARNERS

As mentioned earlier, turning the focus to raising learners' CLA, hence shifting the attention to learners rather than teachers, does not offer language teachers a relaxing space. On the contrary, one assumed condition within the whole operation is that language teachers themselves are supposed to work on their critical language and cultural awareness (Andrews 2007); a matter that changes language teaching process's considerations to include: Critical discourse analysis, communicative activities, learner, consciousness-raising instruction, among others (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000). The teachers' new role then is to think how to merge harmoniously all these ingredients in one pot; a task that does not seem to be an easy one.

On the other hand, raising the learning process to a conscious level gives a chance to language learners to reconsider not only their linguistic choices, but also their already existing knowledge and social relations (Fairclough 2014). CLA is not restricted in a language form or function, nor is it a certain language skill (Cummins 2000). It is a state of mind; a perspective that if realized on the ground, it would be too fruitful. Within this view, a language learner is not a passive agent, a *tabula rasa* to be filled by the teacher's pen being right or wrong. Rather, he is a responsible social actor who systematically manages his own choices in and outside school walls (Fairclough 1995, Walraven 2000). The role of teachers consists, then, in

'empowering their students ...to deal with communicative situations outside the classroom in which institutional power is weighed against them, preparing them to challenge, contradict, assert, in settings where the power dynamic would expect them to agree, acquiesce, be silent' (Fairclough 1989:235)

ARE WE AWARE OF OUR MOTHER TONGUE?

To answer this question, we really need to ask ourselves, as language users, different sorts of questions: Do we really know all that concerns our mother tongue? Are we, belonging to a given social group, linguistically and culturally alike? Are all our actions and words consciously controlled? Does not come a moment where we feel unaware of what we really did or said? In fact, to answer these questions we can simply say that: There are parts of our mother tongue that we do know and we are not aware of. There are also parts that we don't know. We also share some parts with others whom we might have never met (van Dijk 1998). There are also parts that we do know, but unconsciously (Berting 2010, Shaffer & Kipp 2013). It is upon such a rationale that CLA should address language learning from a general view since considering such phenomenon (language) from a discursive perspective leaves no fixed territory-based, social, or individual linguistic postures. Each one of us exists somewhere in the linguistic continuum, sharing or not certain discourses with another individual belonging or not to his/her geographical or cultural territory (Gee 2005). It is this perspective of language and culture that should be considered while trying to elevate learners' CLA; a view that questions whether expressions like that of mother tongue or foreign language do exist at the first place 'The language being learnt is usually a FL, but it could also, in principle, be the MT' (James Op. cit., p.141)

Accordingly, successful language pedagogy should state as a premise that there are no strict boundaries between languages and cultures as they are, in spite of their distinctive features, all classified under universal language and culture (Risager 2006). In fact, it is this prerequisite that makes dialogue between them possible (Kramsch 1993). Another premise concerns the relationship between discourse and power. Van Dijk (1997: 273) notes that 'every instance of language use makes its own small contribution to reproducing and/or transforming society and culture, including power relations'. Accordingly, how language exerts and reflects power relationships should be considered at different levels starting with that triggered by an immediate cultural constraint being linguistic or linguacultural (i.e. the verbal aspects of culture, drawing on Risager's (2006 & 2007) use of the word). Language power relation can as well be considered at another level which transcends or violates the former ones (linguistic and linguacultural) to pass a certain ideology (Fussell & Kreuz 2014). Now, being restricted to a literature terminology, it seems that whether it is an L1 or L2 practice, a language learner gains language critical awareness only if he is able to situate a stretch of discourse at all the aforementioned levels of critical analysis (Fairclough 2014). Yet, as Fairclough states one should bear in mind that awareness by itself is not enough, it 'needs to be turned into action' (2014: 305)

A MODEL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

According to Fairclough (1989), a model suitable for language education is the one which adopts a socially constituted and socially constituting nature of language. As opposed to non-critical approaches which focuses only on a passive transmission of text (formal aspects), critically-oriented model of language education assigns equal importance to Text, Interaction, and Context. The main problem with the aforementioned instrumental view of language education is that it restricts itself within 'the transmission of knowledge and skills, whose content is assumed to be unproblematic and whose social origins are ignored' (ibid, p.238). As such, it leads to 'legitimized and naturalized orders of discourse being presented as legitimate and natural' (ibid, p.239). However, insisting on adopting a critical stance to language teaching, Fairclough claims that education 'is not just passing things on (though it is partly that); it is developing the child's critical consciousness of her environment and her critical self-consciousness, and her capacity to contribute to the shaping and reshaping of her social world' (ibid, p.238-239)

TWO MAIN PRINCIPLES

The model proposed by Fairclough is based on two guiding principles:

- 1- Marrying awareness and practice: developing children's potential language capabilities depends on a marriage of purposeful discourse practice and critical language awareness.
- 2- Building on experience: critical language awareness should be built upon the existing language capabilities and experience of children. (ibid., p.240)

Put another way, the first principle comes to affirm the claim that language learners are not passive ones. It is learning by practising; by being engaged in or concerned with a given purposeful discourse; that is 'a discourse they (learners) themselves engage in as producers or interpreters for real purposes, rather than what they might do as an exercise, or what others do' (ibid., p. 241). The second principle appeals for building on experience i.e. building on something known or already possessed to proceed towards the unknown. The experience language learners already have can be categorized within: what, how and why knowledge about a self discourse 'Children (and people generally) have a common-sense understanding not only of how to do what they can do linguistically, but also of such matters as which discourse types or subject positions are available to them and which are not, how their language is socially (de) valued in comparison with that of others, and so forth' (ibid., p.242). In short, these principles confirm the claim that awareness of the Self is a prerequisite to become aware of the Other's 'consciousness about the social determination and effects of one's own purposeful discourse is an effective route to critical awareness' (ibid, p.241)

AWARENESS, PRACTICE And STRUGGLE

Language awareness is not the final aim of critical language pedagogy. According to Fairclough (1995), it is a prerequisite for effective citizenship and democratic entitlement. He also claims that awareness exists in a dialectical relationship with two other processes: practice and struggle. First, so as to set CLA enterprise effectively, 'links should constantly be made between work on the development of language awareness and the language practice of the learner' (ibid, p.226). As mentioned previously, such a practice must take place within a purposeful discourse, that is 'tied in to the learner's real wishes and needs to communicate with specific real people, because this is the only way for the learner to experience authentically the risks and potential benefits of particular decisions'(ibid.). On the other hand, engaging learners in the struggle to contest practices of domination that are usually implicit in the academic discourse is another necessary step 'Oppressed people will not recognize their oppression just because someone takes the trouble to point it out to them; they will only come to recognize it through their own experience of it, and their own activity in struggling against it' (Fairclough 1989: 234)

STAGES OF AWARENESS

The CLA model for language teaching suggested by Fairclough is the result of applying critical discourse analysis in language teaching. Say it differently; both CLA and CDA are based on the same assumption: Power relations do manifest in discourse (Fairclough 1989). One of the main procedures through which language learners can emancipate themselves from such dominating practices is to become critically aware. Fairclough (1989) adds that learners are said to be critically aware if they

develop metalanguage to talk about: text, interaction and social context. These metalanguage areas correspond to the three main stages of critical discourse analysis: Description, interpretation, and explanation. Subsequently, the first two stages represent the first level of awareness which is 'awareness of MR (members' resources) in production and interpretation' (ibid., p.240). The last stage represents the second level of awareness which is 'awareness of the social determinants of MR' (ibid.)

In an attempt to facilitate things for language teachers, Fairclough suggests a three-part cycle. However, by adding a fourth element to the cycle it ends to be a four-part one.

- (i) Reflection on experience: children are asked to reflect upon their own discourse and their experience of social constraints upon it, and to share their reflections with the class.
 - (ii) Systematizing experience: the teacher shows the children how to express these reflections in a systematic form, giving them the status of 'knowledge'.
 - (iii) Explanation: this knowledge becomes an object of further collective reflection and analysis by the class, and social explanations are sought (ibid, p.242)
- The fourth element added to the cycle is the outcome of the first three ones. It is at this level that language learners develop an emancipatory discourse.
- (iv) Developing practice: the awareness resulting from (i) – (iii) is used to develop the child's capacity for purposeful discourse. (ibid.)

LITERATURE AS AN EFFECTIVE RESOURCE FOR CLA

In language teaching, it is generally assumed that literature is a very rich resource of both language forms and functions. However, when coming to classroom situations, literary texts are rarely among language teachers' chosen resources especially when it comes to second language literature (Kramsch 1993). According to language teachers, this is due to the fact that literary texts are dense with forms and functions not only in terms of quantity, but in terms of how these are coupled as well, a matter which is usually beyond the level of students. As such, they think that linguistic competence is a prerequisite to deal with literary discourse (Shrum & Glisan 2015).

A number of scholars including Fenner (2001) and Kramsch (1993) have argued for the importance of literary texts in raising language learners' language and cultural awareness. According to them, literature sums up whole lives, enabling learners to meet different linguistic and cultural practices. It also shows how different world views are legitimated and passed through as natural as those of the language learners. Bruner sees that (1986)

'(T)he function of literature as art is to open us to dilemmas, to the hypothetical, to the range of possible worlds that a text can refer to. I have used the term "subjunctivize," to render the world less fixed, less banal, more susceptible to recreation. Literature subjunctivizes, makes strange, renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value open to reason and intuition of freedom, lightness, imagination, and yes, reason. It is our only hope against the long gray night' (1986: 159)

Referring to the quotation above, literature exemplifies the discursive nature of language. It teaches language learners that discourses are not fixed entities; not obvious nor vague. They are bound to a given context which is as well susceptible to change. As opposed to non-literary texts, which hold loyalty to rules and norms, literature breaks conventions and deviates from the rules (van Dijk 1985). Experiencing the context-bound discourse structures (van Dijk 2008), language learners can start to question not only the linguistic and cultural Other but also those of the taken for granted Self, arriving by consequence to an explanatory level, that is usually neither recognized nor looked for in a non-literary text.

However, this relativistic stance evoked by literary texts must be carefully dealt with. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) calls for accepting an epistemic relativism and a rejection of a judgmental one 'although epistemic relativism must be accepted – that all discourses are socially constructed relative to the social positions people are in – this does not entail accepting judgmental

relativism – that all discourses are equally good’ (p.8). As such, Fairclough (2013a: 355) appeals for ‘a search for grounds for determining whether some representations constitute better knowledge of the world than others’. One way to attain this aim is to develop within language learners of an emancipatory discourse via adopting a critical language awareness model to language pedagogy.

To guide language learners towards language and cultural awareness, we suggest that language teachers make use of both: Literature and Fairclough’s CLA Model. This can take place by adopting literary texts as a resource in Fairclough’s model. In this way, the complexity of literary forms and functions, teachers usually complain about, can be dealt with in an explicit, fluid, and easy manner. The choice of literary texts should of course take into account different criteria relating to the learner, teacher, and the classroom context in general (Kramsch 1993). By combining literature and Fairclough’s Model, language pedagogy can handle the what, how, and why questions. It can also disclaim the view that regards the mastery of form a necessary prerequisite to comprehend the function; appealing hence for a binary bottom-up and top-down version of language pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

The implications drawn from CLA methodology can be applied to EF classroom, especially along the recognized efforts adopt a learner-centered approach. However, its version seems to reflect a non-critical view of language. This is highly recognized through the absence of both teachers’ and learners’ awareness of TL linguistic and non-linguistic conventions. This argues for not only communicative language pedagogy, but a critical one; a pedagogy that aims at raising both linguistic and cultural awareness among instructors and learners. An ad hoc methodology and appropriately-designed materials should be selected for the same purpose. In the main, the following implications for teaching English as a foreign language in the Maghreb:

- 1- A critical approach pedagogy should adopted with the aim of developing language learners’ language awareness. This latter should be directed towards setting a two-level change of certain orders of discourse within a systematic way.
- 2- Setting a CLA pedagogy necessitates a reconsideration of both What, How, and Why components.
- 3- Language teachers should develop concomitantly their language and cultural awarenesses in FL .
- 4- Syllabi should be revised to include such ingredients as interactive model of instruction.
- 5- Regarding the dynamic, context-bound and discursive nature of both home and host discourses; language teachers should adapt the adopted material to suit the critical discourse analysis view of language.

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