

# Critical Thinking in Language Learning and Teaching

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This paper focuses on current theoretical research in second language education and on how the Language Awareness Approach, specifically, is key to successful second language teaching. LAA methodology gives students the tools and confidence to internalize the second language for the long term. Through the Language Awareness Approach, students become highly motivated self-learners, expertly analyzing the syntax of their native language as well as that of the second language. As students become more skilled in understanding how language works, they are able to internalize the new language and make it their own. Eventually, students do not have to “change the chip to the target language” when they walk through the classroom door.

*Keywords:* applied linguistics, second/foreign language education, language acquisition methodology, critical thinking, Language Awareness Approach, bilingual-bicultural education

“Clearly, language awareness facilitates the process of noticing or consciousness-raising on the part of the learners. It is then possible that such a process of noticing could activate the learners’ intuitive heuristics, ultimately enhancing their state of readiness to internalize the grammatical system of their L<sup>2</sup>.”

—Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 203

Learning how to communicate has been present since the beginning of times. Today, in our globalized world, it has become a necessity to be fluent in more than one language. With English being the world language, Spanish is increasingly becoming more popular. As a result of this, there is a greater demand to become fluent in the language. In the United States, Spanish is the most taught second language and it is third worldwide. Due to these reasons, the need to learn a second language is becoming essential. Research shows that people that know another language also understand individuals better, which is a great resource for group work and leadership. Finally, knowing languages and cultures helps get a higher salary. Whether the motivation to learn a second language is personal growth, credit for a class or a higher pay, the need for acquiring the language via different methodologies exists.

Theories of language are undergoing constant change to better serve the needs of students to learn a language. Newer approaches demonstrate that levels of language are considered to be separate, such as grammar and vocabulary. However, linguists presently suggest that they are closely interrelated in the construction of meanings and of texts. Furthermore, they are interconnected in both skills, the oral and the written (Carter & McCarthy, 1997). This introduces the Language Awareness Approach. Before analyzing this theory, we will discuss two of the main methodologies that are still used in second language education, the Structuralist and the Communicative Methodologies.

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The Structuralist Approach was first defined in Ferdinand de Saussure's book *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. Saussure presents the idea that language is composed of two systems: the language system and the actual act of speaking. To him, the language is a structure and a self-contained whole. The base of this theory is the syntax of the Spanish sentence. He leaves out the sociocultural aspects of the language: De Saussure supports that "only the distinction between syntagmatic and associative relations can provide a classification that is not imposed from the outside. The groupings in both classes are for the most part fixed by language; this set of common relations constitutes language and governs its functioning". He adds that "syntagmatic and associative solidarities are what limits arbitrariness and supplies motivation" (p. 132), emphasizing the grammatical structure as the theory's main objective. Therefore this methodology has led into a text-based approach since grammar and its structure and its main focus. Europe adopted primarily this method of language instruction and it is still used today.

In contrast to the Structuralist Approach, the Communicative Approach emerged in 1967 with linguist Noam Chomsky's influence in the United States. It is also known as communicative competence. This methodology came about from the area of sociolinguistics that emphasized that the need for communication in a specific context is an opportunity to practice and learn the language being studied. "Communication is the key" is its motto.

The Communicative Approach came as a reaction against the Structuralist Theory which had "a text-based approach rather than a focus on the processes involved" (Richards, p. 41). This movement, as described by Jack Richards "looks at the broader implications of considering speakers and hearers as social beings, operating within a context that is at the same time personal, conceptual and interpersonal" (1983, Introduction). Thus, the Communicative Approach is widely known for its communicative objective and not for the grammatical structure of the language itself.

The third methodology that will be discussed is the Language Awareness Approach which emerged in the 1970's. This approach offers a balance between Ferdinand de Saussure's Structuralist Approach and Noam Chomsky's Communicative Approach where critical thinking and the internalization of language serve as resources to help students learn and understand the language on the short and long run.

Pedagogically, Language Awareness is viewed as closely related to text awareness. Carter mentions that "the emphasis on language in use and in context entails a view of language and as a social and cultural medium" (2003, p. 253), classifying the approach as a holistic view in theory and practice. Therefore, the Language Awareness Approach considers language and cultural awareness to be indistinguishable.

Consciousness-raising (C-R) is another term that is used to refer to the Language Awareness Approach. It refers to a deliberate attempt to draw the learner's explicit attention to features of the target language, particularly to its grammatical features. This idea may be akin to Saussure's Structuralist Approach, still widely used in Europe; however, Rutherford insists that it differs: "Consciousness-raising is a means of attainment of grammatical competence...whereas 'grammar teaching' typically represents an attempt to instill that competence directly" (Rutherford, 1987, p. 24). Also, Consciousness-Raising treats an explicit focus on grammar as necessary but not sufficient for developing grammatical competence whereas traditional grammar teaching treats it as necessary and sufficient. Furthermore, Consciousness-Raising acknowledges the learner's active role in grammar construction; traditional grammar teaching considers the learner "tabula rasa", a blank slate. Finally, traditional grammar teaching is concerned mainly with syntax, while Consciousness-Raising is concerned with syntax and its relation to semantics.

Thus, the Language Awareness Approach uses grammar as an explicit component to internalize language, but not as the only resource. This is where critical thinking plays an important role in the process of learning the language. This approach allows students to analyze the language in the “real world” without being limited to the classroom. The idea around this approach is that instructors provide the students with strategies to become self-motivated and equipped to analyze language when being in contact with it and “solve the problem” of communication through the use of critical thinking. Bolitho states that a key element of the Language Awareness approach is that learners “discover language for themselves” (2003, p. 251). Hawkins mentions that the Language Awareness Approach encourages students “to ask questions about language” and as a result “gather their own data from the world outside school” (1984, pp. 4-5). As a result, students learn to think for themselves and become problem-solvers in a specific context where language has to be used.

Because of the tools that the Language Awareness Approach provides learners, this methodology has also proven to raise the students’ self-esteem. As L<sup>2</sup> learners become proficient in solving the structure of the language in a specific communicative situation, they think critically when analyzing the structure of the language and produce the output. As a result, they become self-motivated and continue to practice language in context. Bolitho states that “the effect of all this on trainees’ self-esteem, as they become their own experts rather than relying on received knowledge, cannot be underestimated” (2003, p. 255). Therefore, the students become motivated for the following two reasons: First, the students are able to use analysis to produce output of language in a given context. Second, they internalize the language as a result of this process of analysis and not mere memorization. These two outcomes will have a positive effect on the language learners, thus encouraging them to continue their learning process and fluency.

The role of affect in a Language Approach should always be to encourage students to become self-motivated analyzers of language to solve the problem of communication. However, in order to do that, research shows that instructors in the classroom play an essential role in the motivation of the student. This role of the instructor is clearly the key to creating a positive environment in the classroom while providing the tools that encourage the development of critical thinking skills necessary to analyze language in a communicative situation. The *Sprachgefühl* or “feeling of language” is an important mark of the motivation and success of the students when learning a second language. According to Tomlinson, the Language Awareness Approach “opens doors to these affective dimensions in ways which might make all the difference to learners” (2003, p. 256). Furthermore, this methodology combined with effective instruction and positive reinforcement, and emotive involvement increased neural paths in multiple areas of the brain, thus achieving the multidimensional representation needed for a profound process of language (p. 256).

Finally, the Language Awareness Approach runs parallel to the definition of language and its purpose. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition is “the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community.” It is then that it can be said that language comes naturally and that it is embedded in us (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 156). Steven Pinker states that people take for granted this natural ability or gift of understanding and producing language: “As you are reading these words, you are taking part in one of the wonders of the natural world. For you and I belong to a species with a remarkable ability... That ability is language ... The ability comes so naturally that we are apt to forget what a miracle it is” (Pinker, 1994, p. 15). Since language is a natural process in human beings, the Language Awareness Approach uses this natural ability and combines it with language skills, attitudinal education and metacognitive opportunities. This leads the students to reflect on the process of language acquisition and its usage.

Another aspect of the Language Awareness Approach is its key feature of creating student-centered classrooms, and helps the teacher to present material according to student readiness (1995, p. 49). In short, the Language Awareness method provides a more holistic view between Saussure's Structuralist theory of incorporating grammar in the classroom and Chomsky's Communicative Approach having communication as its primary objective. The Language Awareness Approach therefore, uses the analysis of grammatical structures with critical thinking in order to achieve effective communication, thus serving as a natural resource for human beings.

In conclusion, with the increasing demand of learning Spanish as a second language in the United States and throughout the world, language acquisition methodologies are undergoing a constant change. By taking into account the necessity of communicating the message in different contexts without ignoring the sociocultural aspects of the environment, as well as the ability to intuitively find solutions to the structure of the language in a correct form in order to convey proper meaning, the Language Awareness Approach provides a holistic approach to language learning and teaching. By parting from the idea that language learning is part of the human's innate and natural ability and by the use of critical thinking, the Language Awareness Approach is becoming a common methodology in the United States and in the world, to learn a language in the long run due to its effective internalization process.

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