

Language Awareness in an English Classroom in Japan

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Language is so natural a possession and so much involved in our everyday lives that we tend to forget its very presence. Referring to a child's literacy acquisition, Luria (1946) writes that, "[i]n this period a word may be used but not noticed by the child, and it frequently seems like a glass window through which the child looks at the surrounding world without making the word itself an object of his consciousness and without suspecting that it has its own existence, its own structural features." The aim of this paper is to introduce one idea of what it means to *be aware of language* and how *making the glass window opaque* (Street, 1996) could contribute to English classrooms in Japan.

1. Introduction

The word *terrorism* has caught our attention since the 9.11 incident. "We will fight against *terrorism*," "We will never yield to *terrorism*" and other brave words have often been heard by some world leaders to declare their firm position to *terrorists*. People who have access to the media are expected to believe that *terrorism* is an evil that needs to be eradicated from the earth for the good of all humankind. Referring to this word *terrorism*, below is a newspaper article written by an American lawyer based in Saudi Arabia.

[T]he word is so subjective as to be devoid of any inherent meaning. At the same time, the word is extremely dangerous, because people tend to believe that it does have meaning, and they use and abuse it by applying it to whatever they hate as a way of avoiding rational thought and discussion and, frequently, excusing their own illegal and immoral behavior... Perhaps the only honest and globally workable definition of "terrorism" is an explicitly subjective one—"violence that I don't support." Anyone who reads both the Western and Arab press cannot help noticing that the Western press routinely characterizes as "terrorism" virtually all Palestinian violence against Israel... while the Arab press routinely characterizes as "terrorism" virtually all Israeli violence against Palestinians... [T]he world—and particularly the United States—must recognize that "terrorism" is a word, a subjective epithet, not an objective reality and certainly not an excuse to suspend rules of international law and domestic civil liberties.

(Whitbeck, 2004)

If native speakers have a risk of being criticized for their usage of a word like this, non-native speakers obviously have a higher risk than native speakers.

This paper focuses on the concept of *language awareness* as one of the factors of becoming a successful learner of second or foreign languages (L2). In the past decade, English education in Japan has been placing emphasis on communicative language teaching and cultural understanding but it is a great mistake to assume that a dictionary, a grammar book, a guidebook of the target culture, and a fair amount of oral practice would give one a complete understanding and mastery of the language. Presenting classical views of the nature of language, this paper attempts to introduce one idea of *language awareness* that could possibly contribute to language learning and cross-cultural studies in the classroom.

2. The Concepts of *Language Awareness*

2-1. Overview

It is difficult to *be aware of language* because we literally live in it. As Yashiro *et al.* (1998) says, to ask a person about language is to ask a fish about water. We take it so much for granted that we do not dare to explain about it.

The case applies especially in a country like Japan. To take a macro-look at the scene of language education in Japan, however hard teachers try to convince students of the importance of English, as a world language (Crystal, 1997), or the importance of Japanese, as our source of identity (Saito, 2004), their necessity and immediateness are not as serious as in other countries where there are many languages spoken within a country (e.g. Switzerland, India, South Africa, etc.) or where L2 learning is a key to social mobility and wealth (e.g. many developing countries). Important terms in those countries, such as *language planning*, *language policy*, or *official language*, may not give many Japanese a clear understanding of what they mean. The most recent case when such terms caught public attention may be the governmental discussion in 2000 about whether to legitimize English as the second official language of Japan.

To take a micro-look at a classroom level, many learners might agree “that performance in complex skills (riding a bicycle, playing a musical instrument, typing, etc.) rely largely on automatised actions and that focusing explicit attention while performing such skills tends to destroy their smooth performance” (Van Lier, 2001) and this idea applies to language learning as well. In other words, there might be a belief that the more you become unaware of speaking the L2, the more advanced a learner you are. Such a tendency does not make learners go deeper than the surface level of language and makes light of its roots, where the cause of all the cross-cultural miscommunications and misunderstandings lie.

2-2. History and Definitions

Language Awareness was first conceptualized in the UK in 1982 with an assumption that some level of awareness about linguistic use, knowledge and learning is beneficial for the language learners. The National Council on Language in Education (NCLE) set up a Language Awareness Working Party and formulated its definition as, “a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life” (Donmall, 1985). In 1986, a National Consortium of centres for Language Awareness (NCcLA) was set up, and in 1992, an Association for Language Awareness was founded. After a number of conferences in Wales, England, Ireland, and also in Canada, an international journal, *Language Awareness*, has been published.

Fairclough (1989) has introduced the concept of *Critical Language Awareness* (CLA), focusing on the ideological part of language use and on the relationship between language and power. His claim was that English education in Britain had been too task-oriented, using language *effectively*, for *effects* such as *conveying* meaning. Actual language use, however, is not just a matter of performing tasks but also a matter of expressing and constituting and reproducing social identities and social relations. He asserts that increasing consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others is the first step towards emancipation. Clark and Ivanic (1997) have stated the purpose of CLA as, “to present the view that language use is part of a social struggle, and that language education has the opportunity to raise learners’ awareness of this.”

Andrews (1998) has introduced the concept of *Language Exploration and Awareness* (LEA) and claims that before students gain critical insights into language;

students need first of all to become more aware of language in general and how it varies, changes, and “works” in their worlds...[S]tudents who have successfully completed a language exploration and awareness approach to language learning will rely less on externally imposed authority in language. Instead, they will assume more personal responsibility and authority as they develop linguistic confidence, precision, and proficiency.

As seen above, *language awareness* does not mean paying special attention only to metalinguistic knowledge and the practical skill of language use, but to understand the nature of language and the relationship between language and our social lives.

3. Past Studies on the Nature of Language

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but very much at the mercy of the particular

language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir, 1939)

[T]he child’s first social relationships and his first exposure to a linguistic system (of special significance) determine the forms of his mental activity... Language, which mediates human perception, results in extremely complex operations: the analysis and synthesis of incoming information, the perceptual ordering of the world, and the encoding of impressions into systems. Thus words—the basic linguistic units—carry not only meaning but also the fundamental units of consciousness reflecting the external world. (Luria, 1976)

The concepts people live by are derived only from perceptions and from language, and since the perceptions are received and interpreted only in the light of earlier concepts, man comes pretty close to living in a house that language built, located by maps that language drew. (Smith, cited by Andrews, 1998)

The above statements all stand on the view that language determines our perception of the world. It is our language that shapes the world and it is our perception that gives meaning to what we see. Such view has been studied not only in linguistics but also in various fields, such as philosophy, psychology, or anthropology.

Dating back further in connection with what have been said, the names of the great Greek philosophers, Socrates (B.C.469~399) and Plato (B.C.427~347) would come up. Athens then was “a center of unprecedented advances in intellectual inquiry...and one of the opinions most commonly expressed was skepticism about whether morals, politics, and religions involved anything more than arbitrary conventions...whether there is any non-arbitrary criterion of truth in these matters” (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). Socrates introduced *the art of rhetoric*, a rational persuasion by public speaking, entirely cut off from any religious revelation, presenting the concept of *reasons* as their guidelines of behavior. His disciple, Plato, suggested his famous image of “the typical human condition as being like that of prisoners chained up facing the inner wall of a cave, in which all they can see are mere shadows cast on the wall,” to present his claim that perception in the physical world is only belief or opinion and not definite knowledge. Philosophers who have

followed suit in their idea are not few, and up to the late 20th century, the idea that people can know the world only “as it appears to [themselves]” still lives.

The characteristic of 20th century existentialist philosophy is with the subjective, how things appear in human consciousness, rather than with scientific truth about the physical world. It stands on the thesis that there is no objective basis for anything and the subjective is only what exists, the origin of what is known as *cultural relativism* in the world today. Watzlawick *et al.* (1974) writes that “anything is *real* only to the extent that it conforms to a definition of *reality*... [*R*]eal is what a sufficiently large number of people have agreed to call *real*... *Truth* is not what we discover, but what we create.” Suzuki (1973), a linguist, writes that, “[a] problem is not something that is there but something that emerges when a perspective is set.”

On the other hand, however, linguists such as Piaget (1965) and Brown (1973) suggested the concept-first theory and defined language as the structure for understanding. Brown’s idea is that children have the concept “house” before they can say the word and the child matches the word “house” to the already formed concept of “house.” Thus, the acquisition of lexical semantics by children is largely a matter of trying to match words to already formed concepts.

Perls (1988), a therapist of Gestalt Psychology, introduces the concept of, “a rose is a rose is a rose and nothing else.” His claim was that confusion is “a clash between social existence and biological existence” but the former is only an image that the patient himself has created, and therefore confusion could not possibly exist in the first place. All we have is our biological selves and knowing through senses is the only way to know *what is* rather than knowing through language and thought.

Cole (1990, 1996) introduces the word *cultural psychology* and defines language as a cultural artifact that mediates between the subject and the object. He claims that human beings live in the double world of “natural” and “artificial;” “natural” is the human body (*subject*), “artificial” is the physical world that we live in (*object*), and language is the medium of these two. This view, in one sense, goes along the line with Luria’s Glass Window Theory introduced in the abstract of this paper. Language is the window through which we look outside. Suzuki (1973) also compares language to a window and writes that, “it is natural for people to have different scopes and ranges of the world if the size, the shape, the color, and the reflection angle of the window differs.” Yashiro *et al.* (1998) also writes that, “we all wear sunglasses of different colors.”

After decades of ethnographic work in Africa, Bloch (1998) has come to the conclusion that an accurate description of an object or any type of knowledge could never be put into language because transferring anything into a linguistic medium is not a simple reproduction but a process of innovation. He claims that once knowledge is put into words, words will then have only a distant relationship to the knowledge referred to. Therefore, the description of the way things look, sound, feel, smell, taste and so on – drawing on the realm of bodily experience and detaching the

knowledge from linguistic thought—is the most accurate account than any sentential logical reasoning can achieve, a claim in accordance with Perls (1998). Bloch says that much of knowledge is fundamentally non-linguistic and that non-linguistic knowledge can be rendered into language and thus takes the form of explicit discourse, but changes its character in the process.

Street (1997), a researcher of literacy, describes the nature of language as a dynamic of social interaction and constant response to the demands of the social environment. He cites Gee (1991) that it is a myth to believe “meaning is something that is packaged in nice little bundles (words and sentences) and conveyed down in a tube-like channel to someone else who simply undoes the package and takes out the morsel of meaning.” Bakhtin and Kress, cited by Street, writes that “language is always something that is actively constructed in a context, physically present or imagined, by both speaker/writer and hearer/reader through a complex process of inferencing that is guided by, but never fully determined by, the structural properties of the language.” Street continues;

If language is always contested, negotiated and employed in social interaction, then the appropriateness of particular uses and interpretations have likewise to be opened to debate: it becomes impossible to lay down strict and formal rules for all time and the authority of particular users—whether teachers, grammarians or politicians—becomes problematised...[Language] learners should be facilitated to engage in debates about the nature and meaning of language, rather than be treated as passive victims of its ‘structural properties.’

4. Implications of the Studies in an English Education in Japan

4-1. Macro-Level (Language Policy)

In the last decade, *globalization* has been a word in fashion and its magical connotation has driven all Japan to restructure their system. In the field of secondary English education, the Minister of Education has officially announced that;

...the [current] situation demands the sharing of wisdom among different peoples for the resolution of worldwide issues that face humanity such as global environmental problems... In such a situation, English has played a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues. For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world’s understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further

developing our nation.

(Toyama, 2003)

The announcement does seem to ignore all these past studies, referring only to the practical level of language, or the surface level. Even in the light of international studies, “the use of a single language by a community is no guarantee of social harmony or mutual understanding, as has repeatedly seen in world history (e.g. the American Civil War, the Vietnam War, the current conflict in Korea, etc.); nor does the presence of more than one language within a community necessitate civil strife, as seen several successful examples of peaceful multilingual coexistence (e.g. Finland, Singapore, Switzerland, etc.)” (Crystal, 1997).

As was said earlier, placing the utmost goal of language studies on the practical level, the acquisition of effective communication skills, is dangerous because the chance to analyze the causes of miscommunication is deprived. Suzuki (1973) states that, “it is possible to learn the *definition* (surface) of a word but that does not mean that the *meaning* (roots) of the word has also been learned.” As we have seen so far, however, teaching a meaning is almost impossible in that the meaning of a word is not universally set.

Cross-cultural understanding, or *intercultural communication* are also trendy words that English education officials like to use, and all censored textbooks contain some kinds of culture that is unfamiliar for many Japanese. It is relatively easy, however, to introduce an unfamiliar culture that is stereotyped as, “Americans are like this,” and “Europeans are like this,” a culture that is known as *overt culture* (Suzuki 1973, Tanaka 1997, Yashiro *et al.* 1998, Takahashi, 2000). There is, of course, a danger of stereotyping a culture in that individuality within a culture is ignored and everything that does not fit in the category would be defined as an exception. (e.g. Japanese are often said to value harmony whereas Americans value individuality, but there are Japanese who value individuality and Americans who value harmony.) Moreover, learning about non-English culture in English itself has its limits and dangers. Learning about the customs of Arab women in English, for example, does not have any benefit in learning it through English over learning it through Japanese (Takahashi, 2000). On the contrary, giving only a small portion, instead of the full picture, may give learners an incomplete understanding and an unbalanced view of the target culture.

The importance of grammar, communicative skills, and knowledge about culture could never be denied in L2 learning, but if language itself were subjective in nature, teaching it as it is does have so many risks. As one idea of what to value for the policymakers and what to present as a language teacher, *language awareness* could possibly be one.

4-2. Micro-Level (Language Classroom)

We take so much credit in the definition of a word and tend to overestimate its value, especially in classrooms. The classical grammar-translation method could have never worked without each

student having a dictionary by their side, and even in the communicative approach popular today, a dictionary must be of great help when they get stuck in a situation like, “how do you say this and that in English?”

Defining a word is only *one way* of making *one discourse* visually and audibly explicit and we call this discourse a *meaning*. Therefore, this *meaning* is not something to be received or given from a word but rather what people assign or attach to the word. We do not get but give meanings to words, and because we are not likely to connect or associate a meaning with a word beyond our experience, language is open to multiple interpretations, even within the same culture.

Suzuki (1973) writes that adjectives are apparently derived from personal experience. An adjective always need a comparison in order to make sense although people are not always aware that they are making a comparison from their past experience. An adjective *tall* could never exist unless speakers have the concept of *short* but what is *tall* and what is *short* vary among cultures and individuals. Therefore their meanings vary, although their dictionary definitions would be something like “*se ga takai*,” and “*se ga hikui*” in Japanese. A man would be considered *tall* in Japan if he had a height of 180 cm (6 feet) but probably not in other countries where the average height of a man is higher than that of Japan.

As another example of how one word has different meanings, Andrews (1998) draws the word *queuing*. The definition in a dictionary is, “standing in line,” and we consider it the fairest way for a number of people to wait for something. It is a seemingly simple social convention but he says this practice is built on more complex cultural values. Andrews writes that;

[C]ountries valuing time stand in line for services; cultures not valuing time don't...

In some Arab countries, where women hold a social position subordinate to men, it is common for men to cut in front of women at ticket windows and other places where queues form a practice totally unthinkable in North America.

Saito (2004) writes that here lies the difficulty of translation. Expressions in Japanese like “*Sassi ga yoi*,” “*ki ga kiku*,” “*sinsetsu no oshiuri*,” “*arigata meiwaku*,” or “*hito no ki mo siranaide ii ki na mono da*” are all common Japanese expressions but their direct translations do not make sense in other societies where people do not have the virtue of behaving beforehand or an unpleasant experience of excessive kindness (Suzuki, 1973).

Not only content words but also proper nouns reflect what people in a culture value. The capital of the United States is Washington D.C., the international airport of New York is John F. Kennedy Airport, a bridge in Philadelphia is Benjamin Franklin Bridge, and there are many anonymous towns, streets, and public facilities called Jefferson, Lincoln, or Roosevelt all over the United States. As you can see, they are all named after historical heroes. Whereas in Japan, the names of

public sites are usually connected more with the location itself. We do not have public sites called *Tokugawa Ieyasu* or *Oda Nobunaga*, but instead, Tokyo in *kanji* represents capital in the east, Narita Airport is an airport in Narita City, Yokohama Bay Bridge is a bridge in Yokohama, and so on. Galtung (2003) writes that Japanese are more conscious of geography and nature whereas Americans are conscious more of the people themselves.

Language sometimes plays a major role in the maintenance of prejudice. By introducing the word *black*, Suzuki (1997) explains how a dictionary gives authority to a word and how our “shared illusions” are formed. *Black* is only a color among the many but our history tells that it is more than that. He refers to Shakespearean literature, stating that the word often referred to a devil or an evil, and that in the most prestigious dictionaries, such as Oxford or Webster, the word is defined in the same way. Suzuki warns that *white* students who take complete credence in these dictionaries may well get the strongest justification in having a sense of superiority over *black* people, and *black* students vice versa.

Allport, cited by Andrews (1998), points out that “some of the labels we apply to people are stronger in their emotional connotations than are others,” and introduces the concept of *labels of primary potency*.

For example, we may say a woman is an expert speaker, a thorough student, and a faithful employee. When we add that she is also a blind person, then the feature of blindness outweighs all of the other features... [L]abels of primary potency blind us to most of the other attributes and characteristics an individual might possess. Labels of primary potency stop thought; they are examples of language “doing” our thinking for us... They refer only to one aspect of a human being, but not any others... The use of these labels reduces persons to one dimension; a stereotype. End of thinking. End of discussion.

There is also criticism of how a language constitutes a male-oriented view of the world. The word *man* is a typical example, having its definition as “a person, a human being” whereas *woman* does not. The role of women in society has advanced and words such as *policeman*, *fireman*, and *stewardess* have all been changed to *police officer*, *fire fighter*, and *flight attendant*. A sentence like, “*If anyone wants a copy, he can have one.*” has started being questioned as it implies that “*women were not allowed to have that copy.*”

5. Conclusion

Going outside and paying attention to the language use around us, English or Japanese, is one

way to raise our awareness towards language. Why do we say *bathroom*, *restroom*, or *powder room*, when in fact, we go to this room with no intention of taking a bath, resting, or powdering? Why do we say *keshou-sitsu* or *o-te-arai* instead of *ben-jo*, although the latter is more accurate? The names of the professional baseball teams in Japan are *Giants*, *Lions*, *Tigers*, *Dragons*, *Buffaloes*, *fighters*, and the most recent, *Eagles*, but why not *Dwarfs*, *Rats*, *Lice*, or *Worms*? *Fair Lady*, the name of Nissan sports cars that had been sold in Japan with considerable success several years ago, was introduced to the United States market under a new, more masculine name; the Z-series, *240Z*, *300Z*. Why had the name been changed? (Andrews, 1998) These are questions that give us a chance to think about language, perception, meaning, culture and all other concepts that are discussed in this paper.

Meanings of words vary according to our experience and therefore teaching what is set as a *definition* would probably be the best we can do. That is important, of course, as our first guide to grasp the word but in terms of acquiring flexibility, something more needs to be done. In addition, there are millions of cultures that language usage represents all over the world, including not only countries and races but also age, gender, location, income, and so on, so it is impossible to learn each one. A different approach to culture needs to be done. The solution suggested in this paper is *language awareness*.

It is also often said that not knowing another language is not knowing our own language. A Kenya environmental activist and the Nobel Prize winner of last year, Ms. Wangari Maathai has praised our Japanese word *Mottainai* and introduced this word at a United Nations conference in March this year. She says that *Mottainai* is a difficult word to translate in other foreign languages, although it is a word that most Japanese have probably learned from their parents or their teachers at a very early age. Many Japanese must have not been aware that this word is unique to our language until Ms. Maathai of Kenya visited Japan, touched our culture, and made her announcement. As Watzlawick *et al.* (1974) cite Whorf and say, "in a universe in which everything is blue, the concept of blueness cannot be developed for lack of contrasting colors." Nabekura (1997) says that, "only when we put our face in the water do we realize the importance of air." Unless we study another language, we do not have a chance to learn how unique, how potent, and how influential to the world our language is.

To implement a *language awareness* program at the classroom level, there is still a long way to go. The concept itself is not as popular in Japan as in other countries, for the reasons stated earlier in this paper, and therefore such programs are yet to be developed. If Japan is to enter into the *global* world, as Toyama (2003) claims in her governmental announcement, what could be done is not to overemphasize the surface of language but to go deeper to its roots. Apparently, *how* is the question that needs to be sought with more interdisciplinary research on linguistics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and other fields that seek the nature of humans and the world.

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