Opening The Minds Eyes: Language Awareness for Malaysian Teachers of English

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Introduction

We are witnessing increasing concern on the part of parents, politicians and educators about the English language proficiency of English teachers. The New Straits Times, 26th. June 1990 issue quoted our Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad stressing the importance of proficiency in the English language as vital to Malaysia's development particularly so for those involved in the teaching, diplomatic and business professions.

On careful analysis, we cannot deny that the standard of English of Malaysian teachers has started to deteriorate. The English language teaching profession in Malaysia has now, more than ever been imbued with a large and increasing number of "no option", usually low proficient language learners, who have chosen to become language teachers as "something rather than nothing". Their "option" or higher proficient counterparts have chosen programmes other than teaching to major in disciplines like Medicine, Law, Engineering and Business Management. This group of teachers, now has the formidable task of teaching the English language which they themselves are insecure in or even uncomfortable with. It is therefore not surprising to know that learning English while using English, learning English while teaching English and learning English while using and teaching English are ongoing and overlapping activities for these teachers. Hence, taking the above situation the reality is that we have inherited the arduous task in teacher English language development of not only providing for the link between enhancement of user linguistic and communicative competence, but also providing for pedagogical competence and self-development competence, more specifically that of self-confidence and self-esteem building, for these teachers.

This paper acknowledges that the links mentioned above can be forged through Language Awareness (L.A., henceforth). According to Strevens (1987:29), L.A can be described as an approach that can "open the mind's eyes" - raise one's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life. The main aim of this paper is to put forward some ways in which L.A or "opening the mind's eyes" can be achieved in teacher English language development, specifically through the self, peer networking, INSET programs (in-service education for teachers) and through development of teaching materials. Language teachers, not only in Malaysia but in other countries with the same problems, can enhance their competency in learning, using and teaching the English language through developing knowledge of and about the English language.

Ways into opening The Mind's Eyes In Teacher English Language Development

The Self

For the link between enhancement of user competence, linguistic and communicative competence, teacher and pedagogical competence and self-development competence teachers must first let themselves, as Underhill (1991:4) has suggested, be "raisers of their own consciousness and students of their own self-education." More specifically, to develop their language competence as a whole through L.A and therefore to affect enhancement of the user competence and teacher and pedagogical competence dimensions, "Malaysian English language teachers must do this on their own free will and this development can only be carried out by the teachers concerned on behalf of themselves". (Bahiyah 1992: 15) English language teachers in Malaysia must first open their mind's eyes to the advantages of L.A in their own language development. If they are to affect their students' language achievement they must first challenge themselves: to ask questions about language and find strategies that can encourage them to come up with their own ideas about language - their own and not other people's ideas (textbook writers' especially). They must develop a common vocabulary to talk about language and to consciously use such vocabulary to talk about language with other teachers as well as with their students.

More importantly, they must strengthen their own capacity for insights into patterns and regularities of the language. They must (by actively activating their own metacognitive strategies) set up their own expectations as to what patterns or regularities to look for, given language data inside and outside of the classroom. While teachers expect their students to be able to automatically reflect on processes and practice in the learning process and to come up with the "how" of things, do teachers themselves practice what they preach?

With self-initiated reflection coupled with self- initiated awareness in L.A., through the three mutually supportive dimensions mentioned earlier, teachers can be given the chance to approach language problems, methods, process of learning and process of teaching with a critical eye. They will then be given the chance to make informed choices in teaching methodology, teaching techniques, materials, language points and classroom management. This type of development can only be "self-initiated, self-directed and self-evaluated. No one else can do it for us though other people can be indispensible in helping us to do it." (Underhill 1991: 14)

Peer Networking

L.A should be a uniting element in language teacher development simply because teachers have all acquired a language and therefore possess a common language. There are aspects of language that can be shared in a supportive environment by all who possess a common language. With L.A, where the mutually supportive user competence, linguistic and communicative competence, teacher and pedagogical competence and self-development competence dimensions are concerned, peer networking can bring people together. This can encourage each teacher to offer his/her personal contribution to the activities and discussions planned. Peer networking is then a bottom-up affair coming from each teacher. Peer networking therefore should be organised from within, with support from others and because of this can be organised in many different configurations, for instance at the in-school level or at the outside-of-the-school level.

In-school peer networking can be done on an informal basis with an individual conferring with a colleague. Such informal networking dynamics can comprise a minimum of two teachers who will discuss problems and devise action plans to solve problems or to gather suggestions which can then be implemented in the classroom. For a start, conferring sessions can be in the form of exchanging input which clarify questions such as "What is L.A."?, "Why L.A.?" and so on and then later move on to share ideas about incorporating L.A activities into the curriculum, syllabus and lessons.

In-school peer networking can also be done on a formal basis where activities for individual teachers are facilitated by the senior subject teacher, the head of department or the principal of the school. Activities and discussions are structured and can work from a structured agenda tailored to the needs of the subject matter, the department, or the school. Extending the peer networking in-school to the next level, peer networking in-school can be further linked to those peer networking dynamics in existance outside-of-the-school through special interest groups. As the name suggests, special interest groups are made up of a group of people, in this context teachers bound together by a special interest utilising a consultancy-based or problem-solving based approach.

This special interest group may be called the L.A group and will carry out activities related to the area. To link all four of the mutually supportive competences mentioned earlier, the group may focus on up-dating information on LA techniques in teaching and learning English. This may encompass such things as L.A in practice and L.A materials development. Whatever the level; in-school or outside-of-the-school, this kind of group can be guided by a facilitator or a central coordinating body/committee and can be set up at any one or all these levels: school, district, state, national and international. At the international level, this group can be affiliated to other international special interest groups. The L.A interest group as a whole, can be fed with input contributed from different "feeder" groups. For instance, "feeder" groups operating within the L.A group may be the group interested in part of the whole and can be called for example - "Language in Use and teaching group", "Structure of language and teaching group", "Morphology and teaching group" as can be seen by the diagram below:
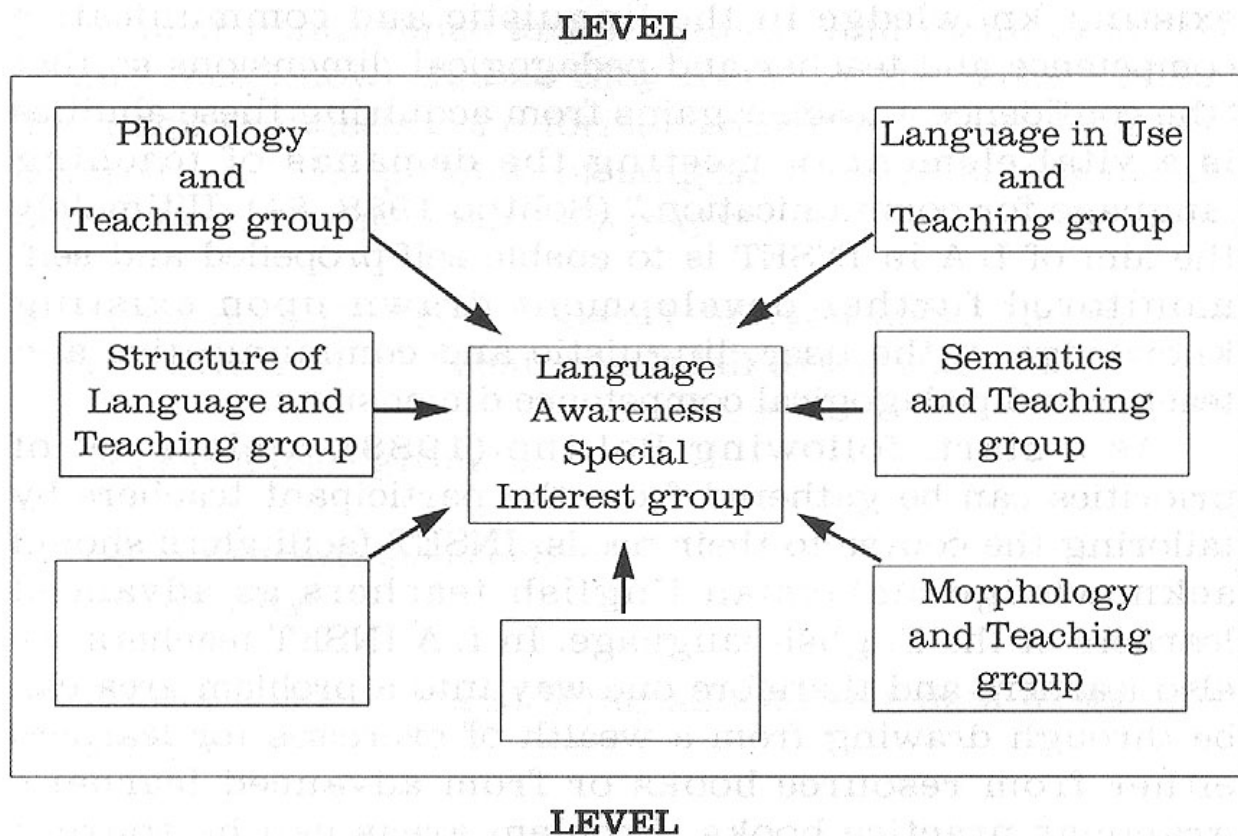
Inset-in-Service Education for Teachers

L.A in INSET should not aim at being a language course with remedial language high on its agenda though many participant teachers may refer to it as such at the beginning. It may be true that each group coming into the L.A. INSET course has different priorities in goals and different expectations about what is to be covered. However, the main goal of L.A in INSET must be: -

> "to present new viewpoints on language and language learning, not with the aim of forcing change but rather providing a spirit of enquiry to help teachers understand and make meaning of the changes that they are facing which are often imposed upon them"
>
> (Wright 1989: 6)

This can be done through providing activities that Bolitho (1988: 84) recommends, "should sharpen a teacher's critical faculties, enabling him/her to conduct thorough explorations of language points for teaching purposes, and to be more aware of flaws in course books and difficulties which learners may encounter". Such activities draw upon existing knowledge in the linguistic and communicative competence and teacher and pedagogical dimensions so that "the confidence a teacher gains from acquiring these abilities is a vital element in meeting the demands of teaching language for communication." (Bolitho 1988: 84). Ultimately the aim of L.A in INSET is to enable self-propelled and self-monitored further development drawn upon existing knowledge in the user, linguistic and communicative and teacher and pedagogical competence dimensions.

As a start, following Bolitho (1988), a clear set of priorities can be gathered from the participant teachers by tailoring the course to their needs. INSET facilitaters should acknowledge Malaysian English teachers as advanced learners of the English language. In L.A INSET teachers are also learners and therefore one way into a problem area can be through drawing from a wealth of exercises for learners either from resource books or from advanced learner's grammar practice books. Problem areas can be sourced depending on the level of the participants. For both materials, participant teachers can be lead to focus on the nature of the exercise, and the formal properties of the language. This can later culminate in a discussion of points of language use. This task draws upon participant teachers' prior user competence, linguistic and communicative competence and teacher and pedagogical competence knowledge.

Another way into a problem area can often be from what teachers deem as inadequate practice exercise found in learner's grammar practice books or teacher's resource books. These materials can make for excellent discussion because participating teachers can focus on the faults in a practice exercise. This will certainly raise awareness of the underlying problems of the material focused upon. This task also draws upon teachers' prior user competence, linguistic and communicative competence and teacher and pedagogical competence knowledge.

Appendix 1 is an example of an exercise I have adapted from a teacher's resource book published in 1987 entitled *Grammar in Action Again: Awareness Activities for Language Learning* by Christine Frank and Mario Rinvolucri which participant teachers may try out as a group activity. The three tasks and the accompanying questions draw upon teachers' prior user competence and linguistic and communicative competence knowledge as they focus on the nature of the language exercise(s), the formal properties of the language covered, and the point(s) of language use. The discussion questions following tasks 1-3 may be:

1. What does Exercise 2 task 1 tell you about the way we can give advice? What does it fail to tell you?
2. How is advice given in:

a. conversation/speech?
b. writing?

   Collect some data and bring all available data to the next session.

3. How is advice given:

a. in informal situations:

 i. between friends
 ii. between strangers (first meeting) or first time acquaintances? (e.g. at a party)

b. in formal situations:

 i. between a boss and his/her colleague?
 ii. between a teacher and his/her student?

   Collect some data and bring all available data to the next session.

4. What are the important aspects of the structures in Task 1 for communicative purposes other than giving advice?

5. What other things can you teach about giving advice. List them. Provide ways you would go about it (e.g. simulation, role play, etc.).

Texts from science and law, advertisements, lyrics and poems can be used for the next session where the focal point of the discussion can be - "What in the text has the potential to activate background knowledge?" Teacher participants can go a step further and comment on the language of advertisements, of law, and so on by commenting on language patterns and regularities in the texts given. They then can discuss what the common elements and how the organisation of these elements contribute to meaning of the text.

For more examples of L.A activities for INSET refer to Tony Wright's article (in James and Garrett, 1992:69-70 and 73-77) which advocates participant teachers to provide their own route through exercises sourced from learner's grammar practice books or teacher's resource books. This can generate further discussion of L.A as a methodological tool in language learning. It would also be appropriate at a later stage to induce teachers to create their own L.A materials and activities and to go through the INSET activities with such teacher-made and teacher-owned L.A materials. These teacher-made materials can then generate further discussion (c.f. Bolitho (1988), Wright (1989).

The Self Through Materials Development

The development of teaching materials, (either the writing of new materials or a reformulation, adaptation or supplement of existing teaching materials) together with the link made between L.A through the linguistic and communicative competence dimension as well as the user competence and teacher and pedagogical competence dimension can be further enhanced. This is because through materials development teachers' identification with what takes place in the classroom with reference to their language competence and teaching competence will be fore-fronted. Teachers in this case are able then to make informed choices of their own, relying on their own resources which identify with their students' learning needs and problems. (c.f. Bahiyah 1992a)

In the process of developing teaching materials, the impetus for the development of materials can be derived from many sources from within the classroom, for instance from students' language learning problems or language needs perceived by teachers or identified by the students themselves. Once the problem or need has been identified teachers must investigate the identified problem or the language need, using a wealth of support materials such as grammar books, dictionaries, models of syllabuses. This step is an important one because teachers' language competence can be further enhanced. Teachers will also enhance their user and pedagogical competence.

This step will support the second step in the process. The earlier knowledge can help teachers; in supplying the teaching materials they are developing the context, text and suitable ideas with which to work with and this is drawn upon prior knowledge from the linguistic, and communicative and teacher and pedagogical competence dimensions. Simultaneously, this goes on for the rest of the steps in the process. Teachers can then supply appropriate exercises, activities or instructions for the administration of the "raw teacher-made" materials. In the consequent step, teachers act on the medium, lay-out, and visuals for the materials and then administer the material to their students. The final step in this process deals with evaluation where teachers analyze or reflect upon the success of the "raw teacher-made materials" administered. This will help teachers decide whether the language problem has been solved or the language need has been met. It is in this phase of the process through feedback that the earlier dimensions are enhanced and that teachers are given the opportunity to approach language development (their language development as well as the language development of their students), ideas, and techniques with a critical eye.

In this kind of development through materials development, teachers have no choice but to rely upon and apply all three dimensions to the process. Eventually the teachers will not only enhance their language competence and teacher competence, they will simultaneously develop tangible end-products; teacher-made teaching materials that can be a source of pride and heightened self-esteem. If teachers can reap these benefits than it is likely that they will readily develop more teaching materials to satisfy their own classroom environment.

Conclusion

In this paper I have acknowledged L.A through analyzing language, as an approach that can enhance our Malaysian English language teachers' competence in using, analysing and teaching the English language. I am not saying that L.A will directly lead to greater competence in all three dimensions. If L.A does indeed lead to greater competence, the effect of it, as with other approaches, is unlikely to be direct and thus will only show up after some period of use. Whether L.A will lead to greater competence or not for the time being is secondary. What is primary is that the opening of the mind's eyes with L.A must take into close consideration the relationships between performance and attitude. Malaysian English language teachers may already have opened their mind's eyes to the who, what, where, how, when and why of L.A but unless they also develop a conscious desire to employ L.A into their own language development agendas, the obvious advantages contributed by this approach will not naturally follow. In this paper, the suggestions put forward as to how L.A can be achieved are not meant to be exhaustive and may not be entirely effective for all. The different ways to achieve L.A must be treated as helpful suggestions warranting further discussion. However, what I hope to achieve is to encourage Malaysian English language teachers to open their mind's eyes to L.A. They should value L.A as a rewarding end in itself, namely for its contribution to opening the mind's eyes - the raising of awareness of not only language patterns and regularities but also of the nature of language and its role in human life.

APPENDIX 1

PLEASE ADVISE

Task 1

1. The following are some ways you can give advice:
   Why don't you ....
   What if you + past
   How about .... + -ing
   If I were you, I'd ....
   Why not + infinitive
   I think it's a good idea that you + present

2. As a group discuss other ways you can give advice. Write down at least 3 more ways. (Use a clean sheet of paper and leave your answers on the table before you start the next task. Put your names on the top right-hand corner of the sheet).

Task 2

1. Take a card each from the envelope titled "My problem" (see appendix 2 for examples). Before reading your card silently to yourself agree who is going to tell his/her problem first, who second, third and so forth. Now read your card (remember silently to yourself). After everyone in your group has read his/her card silently, the person who has agreed to be the first tells his/her problem(s) to the group without referring to the card. It is wise to put into your own words what you have read. The rest of the group <u>must not question</u> but give advise using the structures in Task 1 no. 1 and no. 2 after the person has talked about his/her problem. <u>The person with the problem notes down each group member's advice</u>. After the rest of the group members have given their advice, the procedure is repeated for the second, third, fourth person and so on.

   (Please return your card to the envelope titled "My problem" before you proceed to the next task - Task 3.)

Task 3

1. Individually, write down on a piece of paper a problem you would like to share with your group members so that you can gather their advice. Take not more than 5 minutes to write your problem.
2. As a group agree who is going to share his/her problem first, who second, third and so forth. Follow the same procedure as in Task 2 no. 1.
   (Please leave the piece of paper with your problem written on it on the table).

Adapted from

Grammar in Action Again:
Awareness Activities for Language Learning.
Frank, C. and Rinvolucri, M. 1987

APPENDIX 2

My Problem - # 1

I guaranteed a loan given to my brother by his employer 10 years ago when he furthered his studies. His course took two years. When he returned, he did not rejoin his employer as agreed but resigned and took a job elsewhere.

Sometime in 1983 - January, I think - the employer gave me notice to re-pay the loan. I did not pay as I felt my brother should bear this responsibility and not me. There was no news from the employer.

Suddenly, in March this year, I received summons to pay the money. Please advise. Should my brother bear this responsibility?

My Problem - # 2

I am 24 years old, and a very happy-go-lucky girl. I have never encountered any problem when it comes to socialising. I got through college peacefully without any dashing guys chasing after me. Right now, I'm working in an accounting firm in K.L.

I'm attractive but very, very tall - a real giant at height 170 cm and weighing 95 kg. Recently, one of my best friends gave birth to a pair of cute twins. I have never thought about marriage seriously, but now I do. And believe me, I am panicking! Who in the world wants a wife who has the physical appearance of a giant? Please help!

Source
Female,
Jan -Dec 1991

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