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Language Awareness, Metapragmatics and the L2 Teacher

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**INTRODUCTION**

As language teaching becomes more professionalized, more importance is placed on ensuring the certification and preparation of TESOL practitioners entering the field (see Mullock, 2006). High schools, private conversation schools, universities as well as other teaching contexts increasingly seek language teachers who demonstrate the proper credentials. This shift in hiring standards now means that the expectation that second language teachers display of a sufficient standard of *Teacher Language Awareness* (TLA), or teacher knowledge about language, in order to ensure the successful fulfillment pedagogic duties has taken on more currency. Research into area of language awareness in general has become a principal subject of inquiry in recent times (Andrews, 1999, 2001; Wright & Bolitho, 1993, Hales, 1997). However, with respect to *pragmatic competence* (Taguchi, 2007; Garcia, 2004; Kasper, 2001; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Thomas, 1983), scant literature exists on its relation to TLA. Additionally, few models clearly display the binary and reciprocal influence that TLA and sociocultural context possess. I shall demonstrate these connections as I examine related literature, and therefore argue that in terms of not just teacher metalinguistic knowledge, but teacher *metapragmatic* knowledge, there need to be more detailed and holistic representations of what TLA is and how it relates to the context in which language teachers teach.



## 2.1 The skills of a good teacher

Before delving into detailed analyses and comparisons of TLA I would like to raise some valuable thoughts about the general notion of what a good teacher should be, and what skills a good teacher should possess. With reference to three specific conceptions, such as science/research conceptions, theory/philosophy conceptions as well as art/craft conceptions, Freeman and Richards (1993) propose the usefulness of "broadening our discussions to take in these embedded conceptions of teaching and stresses its relevance in contributing to the maturation of the field of second language teaching" (ibid., p. 194). For scientifically-based conceptions, he states the necessity for teachers to understand learning principles derived from a body of research and to develop criteria and tasks to be monitored. With respect to theory or value based conceptions, Freeman holds teachers responsible for understanding theory and principles on which practices are based, or values or beliefs, and suggests that teaching be monitored for conformity to these concepts. Thirdly, art/craft conceptions suggest that each teacher treat each teaching situation as unique and strategies to address characteristics and dynamics particular to the situation are tried and tested (ibid).

These three constructs give one a comprehensive sense of the qualities a teacher possesses in order to encourage and facilitate learning. However, it is the theory/philosophy conception that is drawn from "systematic and principled thinking" (ibid., p.201) This mode of thinking incorporates theoretical notions such as the necessary inclusion of communicatively-oriented classroom discourse, encouraging pragmatics to play a central role, and justifying how teachers approach instruction. So, to relate this to the thought that pragmatics is essential for TLA, teachers who exhibit this conception of teaching, no matter if they are oral, writing or reading teachers, can exploit the opportunity to "craft" it into a teaching style that will be intelligible and personalized to the learner (to borrow from the arts/craft paradigm.) Also, scientifically derived research and empirical investigations



can provide the teacher actual proof of what effective teachers have tested and done, and allow the teacher to draw from these examples to supplant his or her existing knowledge.

However, teachers would have to draw on these ideational components to address how they will handle language and how it relates to context. Freeman's (1989) descriptive model of teaching neatly demonstrates how the concept *awareness* serves to function as a "superordinate constituent" (p. 33) that integrates three other categories critical to teaching as a decision-making process: *knowledge*, which includes what the teacher is teaching, and who it is being taught to (the sociocultural context; *skills*, or what the teacher has to be able to do; and *attitude*, or the general feeling teachers have towards themselves as well as their target community. Awareness can be immediate or delayed, when it is triggered by someone or something (ibid., p. 34). An example Freeman provides is one where a foreign graduate schoolteacher of culture in Japan sits on a school desk in front of his pupils, much to their shock. Though the teacher may know otherwise, for example, the violation this rule could act as the purposeful manipulation of a social gaffe as a pedagogic objective. It is exactly in this fashion that awareness can therefore possess a prominent role in the aforementioned areas: knowledge, by understanding that such an act is taboo in the target culture; skills, by doing the gaffe to demonstrate cultural differences; and the possession of an attitude towards teaching that will enable one to successfully fulfill such goals.

## 2.2 The Language Awareness of the L2 Teacher

Awareness in Andrews' paradigm (2001) works quite specifically as it deals with TLA as a sub-component, bridging communicative language ability (CLA) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Andrews' explanation of CLA is similar to that of Bachman (1991) who he cites, in which he refers to CLA as knowledge or competence, and the ability to exhibit this competence



in appropriate situations. Thus there is a relation between CLA and the teacher's subject-matter knowledge. In TLA, Andrews (2001) postulates that any model of this paradigm would need to take into account that the teacher can demonstrate the proper CLA and subject matter knowledge and display the ability to reflect upon that knowledge and ability in order to ensure students receive useful input. Also, there should exist a metacognitive dimension of language awareness, which will supplant the teacher's subject matter knowledge with enhanced ability to plan and teach. Reflections about language are seen to be interacting, along with other aspects of CLA, and evolving (ibid). PCK is acknowledged as a special form of understanding that subsumes TLA, relating knowledge of the subject taught to knowledge of the learners, the context, the curriculum and the methodologies of teaching.

However, it is Andrews' thoughts on the impact of TLA on pedagogic practice seem not to lay out the role of pragmatics explicitly, especially from the view of those who see pragmatics as intrinsic to language development. Though Andrews (2001) acknowledges that for grammar lessons, teacher reflections on the lesson will demonstrate explicit knowledge of grammar rules and the teacher's communicative use of the grammar point (ibid). This could be potentially problematic especially if the teacher is a novice to teaching altogether. He also claims that "itemizing the range of grammar related tasks" (p.81) will help obtain a range of aspects of pedagogic practice upon which TLA has an effect. However, this will depend on the teaching context, or his or her PCK. If the focus is pragmatic competence, itemizing grammar related tasks probably should not be the sole activity. He also states that TLA affects the ability of teachers to identify grammar for learning and make it salient within the prepared input. But, not only does TLA influence the teacher's way of analyzing that area, it judges the extent to which the teacher can effectively convey the usefulness of that particular function to students within the communicative context being studied. Not only does the teacher have to identify key grammar points, he or she should relate them to



the sociocultural or situational context that the students are learning about in order to build awareness as far as appropriacy is concerned.

Within the classroom, not only, as Andrews suggests, should teachers make salient the key grammatical features that are input, but relate those features to a higher level social semiotic which will relate the grammar, or text, to the "social process" (Ventola, 1984) so that they can connect context to form, and understand how language is realized socially. Therefore, teachers must possess metapragmatic knowledge as well as grammatical awareness, especially if the target focus is oral production or comprehension.

This is especially important for TESOL. However, as he mentions that "the teacher of a language ... undoubtedly needs levels of implicit and explicit knowledge of grammar which will facilitate effective communication"(p. 78), he neglects the value of implicit and explicit metapragmatic knowledge that can also facilitate language learning. It is to metapragmatics where I shall continue my focus.

### **2.3 Metapragmatics and Language Awareness**

Clearly difficult to define is the concept of *metapragmatics* (Mey, 1993; Verschueren, 2000, 1999; Chen, 1996) or *metapragmatic awareness* (Verschueren, 2000; 1999; Nikula, 2002; Sarangi, 1998; Roberts, 1998; House, 1996; Mey, 1993) A fairly new concept with a variety of definitions, Metapragmatics in general means, according to Celia Roberts (1998), a meta level to take about or at least imply pragmatics. It indexes speaker perspective on events and the relation between those speaking and their interlocutors. Nikula (2002) prefers to focus on the purely reflexive nature of language use that it implies. For example, a mother's comment that her daughter was rude at the dinner table would reflect metapragmatic knowledge on the part of the mother that she is conveying to the daughter, stating that it is socially preferable to request for things politely in such a situation. Verschueren (2000) views metapragmatics as a reflective



interpretation of the speaking activity and Sarangi (1996) refers to it as a “rich resource for intercultural understanding” (p. 63), and that speakers understand what they are doing through consistent self monitoring. One component of Mey’s (1993) definition of metapragmatics, which applies to more closely to the topic of TLA here, is the “*pragmatic pendant to the metalinguistic level* (my emphasis)...which is often captured under the of label ‘reflexive language’(Mey, 1993, p. 176).

I would like to propose here that TLA consists of metapragmatic awareness of the target language, to allow for student language learning to become more multifaceted and multi-dimensional. Teacher Language Awareness should comprise of a metapragmatic component provided by the teacher - whether native or non-native - where students can benefit from learning conditions where certain words or expressions would be most appropriate. Also, metapragmatics will allow them to reflect on their own interactions (as well as receive instructor feedback) to determine if they are meeting their communicative contextual goals. This should be the case for any type of skills being taught whether listening, speaking, reading or writing. Here communicative functions and speech acts that are taught to students can be potentially affected by TLA. Similar to how Kasper identified “frames” that a competent listener should notice to demonstrate pragmatic comprehension (see Kasper 1984) I would like to propose that an L2 teacher with metapragmatic awareness be able to:

- 1) fashion student awareness of how to effectively strategize their approaches in conversation,
- 2) realize speech acts with the proper pragmalinguistic forms.
- 3) provide students with a larger sense of what’s “sayable” depending on the context.
- 4) give students access to choices, as Verschueren (1999) would put it, and allowing students to decide what choices would be best.



- 5) allow the opportunity for trial and error, especially in EFL, given the fact that few chances exist for many EFL students to interact outside the language school context.
- 6) develop in students the ability to self-monitor their pragmatic development. Students will ask “what should I say in this situation?” This question allows the teacher to take advantage of accessing students to variations in the language that may serve student needs or work against students’ needs, both types of information proving as useful for students to know, or allowing them to discover this autonomously.

## **2.4 Demonstrating Teacher Language Awareness in the Classroom**

Therefore, a well-rounded awareness of grammatical, pragmatic competence organizational competence is what encompasses TLA. To further view how this is displayed from the standpoint of the teacher, Wright and Bolitho (1993) propose a methodological framework that views TLA through three competencies which are continually developed and refined by the teacher. Drawing from Edge's explanation (cited in Wright & Bolitho) that a language teacher needs to be a language analyst, language or learner user, we gain access to a more comprehensive outlook on what is expected from TLA, with the interplay between these constructs. The learner user can be viewed as a teacher experiencing continuing discovery of his or her target language and how it works. The analyst is a teacher who discovers aspects of language and asks why language works in a particular way. Thirdly, the teacher imparts this knowledge onto students through teaching. The intersection of these competencies rely, as Wright & Bolitho contend, not only on "academic enquiry" but through common sense as well. TLA is a language methodology that Wright and Bolitho (ibid) see as a way to examine language and language use with strong implications for classroom practices. The destabilizing effect is seen as teachers "unlearn" concepts that they have known since they were learners, and the stabilizing effect is noticed through



classroom activities that reflect TLA and that effectively involve the learners.

With the increasing relevance of Communicative Language Teaching, and the growing emphasis on the development of pragmatic competence in the L2 classroom, I would like to suggest the need for TLA to reflect a sound metapragmatic understanding of pragmatic competence, rather than just focus on form, with the teacher playing a crucial role in facilitating such knowledge. LoCastro (2004) supports this by stressing that pragmatic ability is one of the most important components in successful communication.

## 2.5 Sociopragmatics, Pragmalinguistics and TLA

To further extrapolate on this, teacher awareness of *sociopragmatic* and *pragmalinguistic* issues of language (Kasper & Rose, 2001, Hurley; 1992; Thomas, 1983) is critical. Sociopragmatics are the social conventions governing interactions and registers, while pragmalinguistics has to do with particular structures or forms used for specific illocutions, where explicit knowledge of how pragmatic meaning is reflected through specific language formation and acts of speech, This will support grammatical knowledge and allow the language teacher the ability to possess a solid, holistic knowledge of how their L1 functions. For example, not only should the rule of the construction of the active versus passive voice be understood for the teacher, but the contexts in which we choose to use passive voice (i.e., when the agent is not important, when we choose to be tactful) must be assumed knowledge as well. As mentioned before, scant literature exists acknowledging second language teacher pragmatic awareness as a necessity in facilitating L2 learning. As Karatepe (2001) states, more literature in teacher education literature addresses the role of Language Awareness in general rather than pragmatics explicitly. Hopefully, with the discussions of the literature focusing on teacher knowledge and how it inextricably relates to metapragmatic knowledge, further research can begin to address this issue in





a more detailed fashion.

## **2.6 TLA and the EFL Target Community**

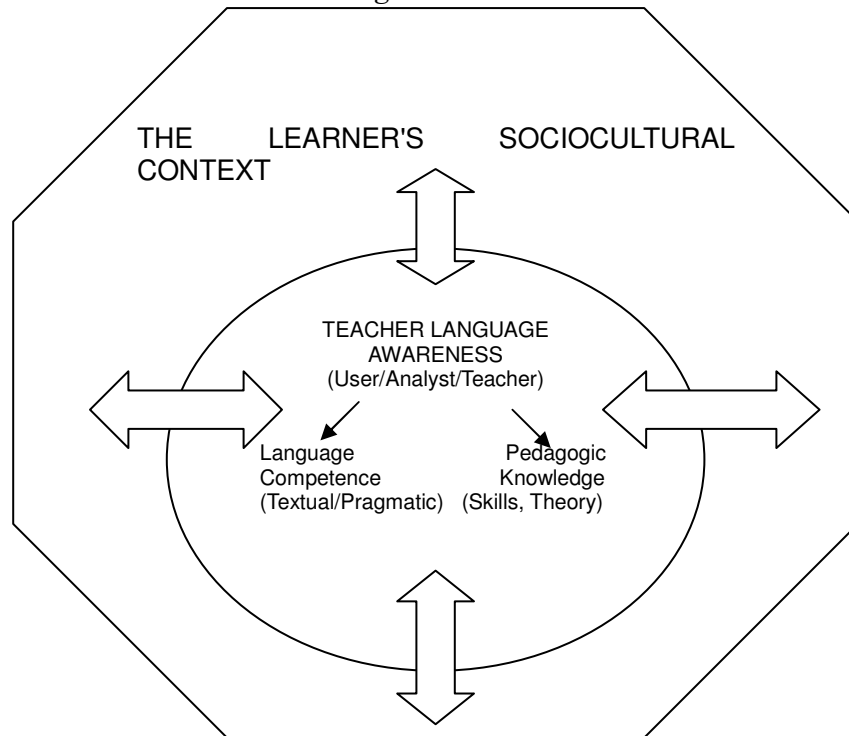
Clearly TLA is a developing process, and any framework set out to delineate how it functions should reflect this. Additionally, TLA's relationship with the socio-cultural environment within which it functions should not be ignored. Before I mentioned the incident where a teacher of a course on culture in Japan offended his students by sitting on his desk in front of them - a cultural gaffe. In my experience as a supervising teacher in Japan, I received word of a complaint a teacher who addressed female students in his class using the informal addressee referent "chan", for example "Hana-chan". Though this example does not relate to the teacher's TLA of the language taught, it suggests a higher-order sense of cultural awareness in which conventions may be violated if one is not careful. This sort of awareness can also be viewed in the way teachers use kinesics and proxemics, or non-verbal communication (NVC) in the classroom (see Hurley, 1992), as understood through the desk example. Proxemics vary across cultures; foreign teachers who touch students would be likely to cause offense in cultures where personal distance is valued. Prosody, to some degree has cultural similarities that transcend many nations but may also differ.

Thus, I would like to propose that TLA is somewhat governed by the sociocultural context we may find ourselves in. To exploit this for pedagogical gain, cross-cultural comparisons between the target learner community and the language being learned could be implemented. LoCastro (2004) discusses how job interview situations require second language learners to know how to use language to "sell themselves". However, in cultures where interviewees "from a different sociocultural background may shy away from such self-presentation"(p. 233) an English teacher might struggle in conveying this information to learners. This explains why teachers need to display awareness not only of the way language is manipulated in such contexts will



enable a teacher to impart knowledge, but awareness of where the learner's culture may act as a constraint in knowledge being imparted as well, as shown in the figure below.

Figure One



Here, I would like to discuss in further detail my model of a TLA descriptive methodology by commenting on the sociocultural dimension. As mentioned before, sensitivity to sociocultural phenomena in the target community when teaching a second language to a target community will allow transmission of that knowledge to take place. This allows cross-cultural knowledge to develop. As one becomes accustomed to how the native tongue is used in the sociocultural context (not necessary mastering it, per se, but becoming aware) then he or she will be able to pinpoint distinction between the mother tongue of the target community and his or her own tongue (phonetic distinctions, grammatical distinctions and pragmatic ones as well.) With this knowledge and awareness develops ideas about how to approach these issues in the classroom should they arise, regulating how intricacies of the target language are taught to the target community. Hence



the binary direction of the arrows, which are meant to reflect transfer of knowledge.

Secondly, note the way that TLA is represented within the diagram. TLA is expressed as teachers teach, analyze and use the target language. As Wright and Bolitho (1993) noted, it is a continual process of development that has subsumed within it pedagogical content knowledge, as well as language competence. Included within PCK is the knowledge and skills that a teacher is expected to possess; this knowledge is demonstrated by the type of teaching ideology (theory /philosophy) that a teacher develops over time, and a teaching approach (art/craft) that reflects this knowledge and the manner in which it is displayed. Within language competence one finds equal attention given to organizational and pragmatic competence, much in the same fashion as Bachmann (1991) outlines. In my view, the relationship between organizational, i.e, textual and grammatical knowledge, as well as pragmatic knowledge, in which one finds subsumed illocutionary and sociolinguistic knowledge provides the teacher with the holistic sense of TLA that is indeed needed in order to effectively present how the target language is used in context.

## 2.7 Implications

The implications of this model are quite simple. The most productive manner in which to reach the target community when teaching a foreign language is the following: Firstly, understand the language and how it is used in its proper contexts; secondly, know how the organization of text supports the meaning being conveyed; thirdly, teach it to the target community in a way that is intelligible for them; and fourth, know what constraints the learners may have in receiving the information transmitted, due to cultural language differences or learning styles.

Language as it is used in context is to be fully understood simply since it is these practical situations that students will be learning. Perhaps in



addition to such an understanding, which beginning teachers may have for simple situations (i.e. service situations or events where speech may or may not be used) TLA must encompass for complex situations where register may have to be adjusted due to power and social distance. It is in this juncture that organizational knowledge participates. By demonstrating a sound awareness organizational and pragmatic knowledge, and how they relate to context, the teacher will then be able to convey useful information to the student.

For instance, as far as my experience tells me, teachers have depended overwhelmingly on grammar as an area in which to correct learners, perhaps because it is such a salient feature. In my first year of teaching I recall myself doing the same. As I become more aware of the language I teach through self-analysis and study, as well as risk-taking, I have now found a niche for myself to notice other language features of my learning community that need to be addressed. The more I use and cultivate this type of noticing, the more I am able to give appropriate feedback to learners. In other words, metapragmatic discussions, as well as my own growing TLA, which now reflects a fuller view of language competence, allows me to provide explicit teaching in areas I would not have endeavored to address a few years ago. House (1996) demonstrates how, through, explicit metapragmatic instruction, the development of metapragmatic awareness developed student fluency. I have personally taken such approaches to use in my own teaching, and have found immediate results in, what I suppose, are student ability to acknowledge my extra tips. I have yet to notice the effects of these efforts, which would need to be a further focus of research.

But it is not enough just to exhibit awareness. Teachers must also know how to address particular information and ensure learner comprehension. Kasper (1997) said “no” to the question of whether pragmatic competence can be taught, but said that opportunities for pragmatic knowledge to be conveyed to the students have to be facilitated in the



classroom in order for pragmatic knowledge to be conveyed. Even the way in which this done must be handled with sensitivity; Thomas (1983) speaks of the danger of being prescriptivist when alerting language learners to pragmatic failure but the benefit of giving language learners a choice; it is left up to them to decide how to use the language, but only after awareness has been risen about the possibility of offence.

Therefore, knowledge how to raise awareness within the context of the learner, and, at the right opportunity, will display a sound level of TLA. Hurley (1992) speaks of how phatic communication, a term coined by Malinowski, is a social construct, a need for interlocutors to show regard for each other and maintain social harmony. This then seems to suggest that this form of communication is indispensable as a type of communication that the target community needs to know. However, phatic talk may be totally different in the learner's sociocultural context, which would then cause the potential for pragmatic failure. By using TLA to address these issues, we are enabling the learner to view through a cultural lens how the target language is used, and connected, to the higher order "social semiotic" (Ventola, 1984) that is representative of the target language's culture.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyze major strands of thought with respect to conceptions of teaching and TLA, and create an adjusted model interweaving the concepts studied in order to come up with a more holistic and realistic view of TLA. The descriptive model of TLA presented here shows that TLA is a constantly evolving and developing process, initiated and sustained by the teacher, as well as influenced by the learner and his or her sociocultural context. This model of TLA integrates the concept of pragmatic competence and reserves it a more prominent place in the discussion of TLA, connecting it to organizational competence and displaying how the teacher as a user, an analyst and a teacher is constantly, or should be



constantly evolving his or her state of TLA. The affective component of TLA is an area that warrants further attention, however. The teacher can either be motivated to raise his or her awareness or not, giving awareness a binary distinction. The suggested model takes into account a teacher who would supposedly be actively developing his or her knowledge and skills through awareness. More studies would need to take into account what demotivates a teacher and counteracts

awareness-raising and development. Clearly, the teacher with TLA who is an exemplar in the fostering of the agency of TLA is a teacher who will successfully promote language learning in whatever teaching context he or she may be situated.



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