

# LANGUAGE AWARENESS: ACHIEVING LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE THROUGH EXPLICIT GRAMMAR

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**Abstract:** *Language awareness blends content about language, language skills, attitudinal education, and metacognitive opportunities, which allow the learning participants to reflect on the process of language acquisition, language learning, and language use. Considering its importance in teaching and learning context, it is crucially essential to introduce this multi-faceted domain in academic setting to ensure the success of teaching and learning process to its maximum potential. One of the tools that can be employed to raise language awareness is through grammar, which is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. Having knowledge about how languages work (L1 and L2) helps us detect ambiguity, foster precision, and even exploit the richness of expressions available in languages. Therefore, through clear and easy way to understand' grammar, both linguistic competence in the form of a set internalized rules and linguistic performance which is demonstrated in utterances or sentences can be achieved. This paper highlights some research concerning grammar as language awareness raiser and attempts to promote language awareness movement in general.*

**Keywords:** *Language Awareness, Grammar, Linguistic Competence, and Linguistic Performance.*

**Abstrak:** *Kesadaran berbahasa memadukan konten tentang bahasa, kemampuan bahasa, pendidikan sikap, dan peluang metakognitif, yang memungkinkan peserta belajar untuk merefleksikan proses pemerolehan bahasa, pembelajaran bahasa, dan penggunaan bahasa. Mengingat pentingnya dalam konteks mengajar dan belajar, adalah sangat penting untuk memperkenalkan domain aspek multi ini dalam pengaturan akademik untuk memastikan keberhasilan proses belajar mengajar secara maksimal. Salah satu alat yang dapat digunakan untuk meningkatkan kesadaran bahasa adalah melalui tata bahasa, yang merupakan landasan struktural kemampuan kita untuk mengekspresikan diri. Memiliki pengetahuan tentang bagaimana sebuah bahasa (L1 dan L2) membantu kita mendeteksi ambiguitas, presisi asuh, dan bahkan mengeksploitasi kekayaan ekspresi yang tersedia dalam bahasa. Oleh karena itu, melalui cara yang jelas dan mudah dimengerti 'tata bahasa, baik kompetensi linguistik dalam bentuk seperangkat aturan diinternalisasi dan kinerja linguistik yang ditunjukkan dalam ucapan atau kalimat dapat dicapai. Tulisan ini menyoroti beberapa penelitian mengenai tata bahasa sebagai bahasa penggalang kesadaran dan upaya untuk mempromosikan gerakan kesadaran bahasa pada umumnya.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Kesadaran Berbahasa, Grammar, Kemampuan Linguistic, dan Kinerja Linguistik*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language Awareness is an approach that basically deals with language teaching, language learning, and language in use. Since it deals with language teaching and learning, it is classified under the scientific study of teaching known as "Pedagogy". This fundamental issue should draw the attention and the intention of every professional teacher because having both knowledge and skills in pedagogy is one of the

strong indicators that a teacher is qualified of playing his/her role as a teacher. The other crucial issue is language in use. How we use a language as a member in a given society is of the interest of a socio-linguist. Socio-linguistics is a new science, which studies the connection of a language and the society who employ it. In addition, psycho-linguistics is the scientific study which involves the way a language is acquired, learned, comprehended, and produced. A psycho-linguist investigates the mental

process taking place in the human's brain in relation to language use. Pedagogy and linguistics are two major fields of high values that should be exposed, explored, and experimented by any teacher because these two fields will highly contribute to the success of the teaching-learning process. Both fields are under the "Umbrella" term called language awareness. This language awareness can be raised through explicit grammar.

The first problem that we were faced with before making use of more explicit techniques was students' lack of awareness of the grammar point at hand. For example, while teaching the verbs that take an infinitive and those that take a gerund, we experienced such a problem; the learners were unaware of the structure and the meaning or concept of the structure throughout the handling of the topic. In the book, there was a context provided which included gerunds and infinitives. However meaningful and helpful the context may be, the students were obviously unable to notice the grammar feature and therefore its meaning maybe because there is no distinction of gerund and infinitive in their L1. As a result of this unawareness, throughout the lesson the students asked irrelevant questions about the topic, such as "Which one should I use with the verb 'do', infinitive or gerund?" This means that they overgeneralized the grammar form to all verbs and missed the point of the structure altogether. We were frustrated to explain the basics about the point all over again and again, and seemingly in vain. Later, we did

some research to help us out for our next lessons. We have seen that Batstone and Ellis (2009) provide a good account of what the reason for that lack of awareness is and offer some solutions. In the article, certain principles are offered for an effective grammar teaching, one of which is the awareness principle. The principle is based on the following observation that we cited at the beginning of this article: "people learn about the things they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (Schmidt, 2001). The article differentiates between different senses of awareness, two of which we find worth mentioning. Firstly, learners should pay conscious attention to certain grammatical forms that arise in the input.

In order to be able to use a language properly and effectively, we need to have four language skills which can be categorized as receptive skills and productive skills. Receptive skills are listening ability and reading ability, whereas productive skills are speaking ability and writing ability. When we read prints (eg: a magazine, morning paper, book, flier, etc), we actually see a word, or a string of words, or symbols, or signs. Similarly, when we listen to an utterance or a conversation, we in fact, hear speech sounds and intonations. Both prints and utterances serve as inputs. These inputs will be processed in order to construct meaning. There are two processes occurring at this stage, top-down and bottom-up processes. Prints and utterances are stimuli or sensations which are

caught by our senses. In the case of reading prints, by our sense of sight and by our sense of hearing, in the case of listening to utterances. These sensations are delivered to our brain through the neural system. The brain processes the sensations by employing the two processes mentioned-above (top-down and bottom-up processes). The whole process is referred to as perception. Thus perception, is trying to find or retrieve the collection of connotations or associations from the memory span in our brain to construct meanings.

If the input mechanism as described above runs well, which means that the inputs are comprehensible (Krashen, 1982), then it is likely that productive skills (speaking ability and writing ability) can be expected. Therefore, receptive skills are prior to productive skills, simply because there would not be any outputs without any inputs. Reading and listening will provide infinite exemplifications of how a language is used. Writing and speaking, on the other hand, will reflect the way how we use a language, which can be categorized as ‘grammatically correct or grammatically incorrect’, based on social convention or personal perception. That is why it is important to have explicit knowledge of grammar to avoid misunderstanding or ambiguities, so that the purpose of using a language as a means of communication fulfills its goal. In the view of language awareness, the set of rules in reading or listening should be explicitly taught and learned so that it can manifest in the form of

writing and reading. Explicit grammar can be used as a tool to promote linguistic competence as well as linguistic performance.

## 2. DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Language Awareness

It was Eric W. Hawkins who pioneered the concept of language awareness and was considered as the ‘Father of language awareness’. In the seventies, language awareness started out as a movement which was British in origin and now it has been widespread throughout the globe. The idea behind this movement is to abridge two languages as products of two different cultures (L1 and L2). Hawkins believed that students should have an understanding of their own language before tackling a second one. This would mean knowledge of the structure of their language and also an understanding of the role language plays in culture and society. Hawkins (1999) stated that language awareness was applied primarily by the modern linguists as a new ‘bridging’ element in the UK schools to solve several failures that were being faced by schools in United Kingdom, such as illiteracy in English, failure to learn foreign languages, and divisive prejudices. Hawkins (1974, as cited in Hawkins, 1999: 124) then proposed a new subject “**language**”, to be taught as a ‘bridging

subject', linking English and the foreign languages in the curriculum. Meanwhile, Language awareness blends content about language, language skill, attitudinal education and metacognitive opportunities, which allow the student to reflect on the process of language acquisition, learning and language use. All four of these aspects of language awareness need to be integrated into the existing subject areas. A focus on language awareness is a key aspect of creating student-centered classrooms, and assists the teacher to present material accordingly to student readiness (Bilash and Tulasiewicz, 1995, p.49)

In 'Ten questions about language awareness', Bolitho et al (2003: 251-252) mention that language awareness, which is a pedagogic approach aiming to assist learners to obtain insight on how languages work, is a mental attribute that develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, which contributes in enabling language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages works. Hawkins (1984, cited in Bolitho et al, 2003) points out that language awareness involves challenging learners to ask questions about language, encouraging learners to collect their own data from the world outside academic setting, and helping learners to develop a growing insight into the way language works in order to convey meaning. The key element of language awareness approach is that learners discover language for themselves. Furthermore, Tomlinson (1994, as cited in Bolitho et al, 2003)

sees language awareness as something 'dynamic and intuitive', which is gradually developed internally by the learners, whereas Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995, cited in Bolitho et al, 2003) view language awareness as helping to develop a healthy spirit of inquiry and set the classroom as a place where 'the only views of language that matter are the ones that both teachers and learners have established in their heads. Having viewed several perspectives on language awareness, we can draw a conclusion that language awareness should be implemented in academic setting because it fosters bilingualism which can raise other form of intelligences, such as metacognitive and metalinguistic capacities. It also fosters independent learning because it motivates the learners to discover how languages work and is used to either construct or deliver meanings.

In regard to Indonesian context, language awareness has been promoted through International standard school, where bilingualism is applied (Bahasa Indonesia and English). In fact, the use of Bahasa Indonesia as a national and official language and English as a foreign language, have been regulated in the ACT of the Republic of Indonesia No 24, 2009, from chapter 25 through chapter 45. This ACT serves as a foundation to raise language awareness where L1 and L2 are employed interchangeably in school setting. However, it should also be noted that we just might have problems similar of those faced by the students in the United Kingdom which triggered the

language awareness movement in the first place; illiteracy in native tongue (Bahasa Indonesia) and the failure to learn foreign language (English). Consider that Bahasa Indonesia is acquired, not learned, and it seems that we take for granted that we are capable of using it properly. On the other hand, English as a foreign language is learned, not acquired. Yet, too many times we feel that we are not capable enough as to convey our thought to a native speaker or construct meanings when a native speaker of English speaks. Thus language awareness is needed as to facilitate the gap between L1 acquisition and L2 learning, so that L1 is not only acquired but also learned, and L2 is not only learned but also acquired. The other underlying notion is that by having expected level of knowledge of how both languages work, we strongly assume that learners better understand the content/material.

## 2.2 Explicit Grammar

Earlier in this paper, I highlight that language awareness involves language teaching and learning and language in use which naturally deals with the four language skills; receptive skills which are listening and reading abilities and productive skills which covers speaking and writing abilities. These four skills reflecting one's capacity to use language depends heavily on grammar as the sets of rules which govern the way a language work. Hawkins (1999: 127) states that many learners'

reading failure is related to unfamiliarity with the syntax of the language that they are asked to read. In other words, the learners have no sufficient knowledge of grammar, structure, or order of the elements in a language statement. They do not know the rules of a language, particularly how the various parts of sentences go together. Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves and to comprehend others. It helps us foster precision, detect ambiguity, and even exploit the richness of expression available in a given language. Thus explicit grammar, or grammar which is clear and easy to understand, should be taught, learned, and acquired. Only by having explicit grammar will we be able to use language properly, correctly and confidently. For example, if we are to learn the simple past tense, we should be able to retell (past events). If we are to learn comparative adjectives, we should be able to compare one thing to another. Or, if we are to learn conditional sentences, we should be able to hypothesize. That is what is meant by explicit grammar in this context.

There was an interesting research conducted by Stevick (1989, cited in Gerngross, Puchta, & Thornbury, 2006) that indicated highly successful language learners draw on three resources when speaking or writing (productive skills). These resources include 1). Explicit rules /explicit grammar, 2). Remembered sentences and sentence fragments, and 3). Feelings derived from 'experiences about how a change at one point in a sentence will require a change

somewhere else. That is instincts about regularities or patterns. All these sorts of resources are connected to one another, and so they help to retain one another in the learners' memory. In addition, regularities/patterns and remembered sentences/fragments operate faster than rules. Similarly, we can assume that highly successful language learners also employ these three resources when listening or reading (receptive skills).

### **2.3 Linguistic Competence and Linguistic Performance**

In both linguistics and language teaching, definitions of competence have shown a continual development from that first proposed by Chomsky. Underlying current interpretations of the term three general hypotheses can be perceived. The first is the widespread acceptance that language is essentially a cognitive phenomenon and that the use of the linguistic code of a language (performance) is steered by tacit rule-based knowledge stored in the minds of speakers (competence). This view includes both a Chomskyan modular (language-specific) view of competence and those theories that can be grouped under the heading of 'Cognitive Linguistics' which see language and cognition in general as an integrated whole sharing similar systems of perception and categorization.

The second is the recognition that the subject of linguistic description is not only the

mental processes that steer language but the speech community and culture in which a particular variety of language is used. The third is the view that language analysis must include not only the systems and rules which steer the generation of utterances, but the interactional processes by which human discourse arises and is maintained; that is to say language use.

In the 1960s and 70s Chomsky's description of the terms competence and performance triggered an intensive debate among linguists, later to be picked up by applied linguists. Theoretical bones of contention lay within two separate but interconnected areas:

- 1) the nature of linguistic competence
- 2) the relationship between competence and performance and their respective roles in linguistic analysis and description.

What is the difference between linguistic competence and linguistic performance? An American linguist, Noam Chomsky, proposed these terms in 1950s. A similar dichotomy was formulated earlier by a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure in 1915, *la langue* and *parole*. The concept regarding the distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance is actually quite simple. Linguistic competence is what one knows about a language, the knowledge he/she (subconsciously) possesses about how to speak a language; whereas linguistic performance is how he/she actually uses the language, the real world linguistic output. In other words, Linguistic competence has to do with a set of internalized

rules or the system of grammar, while linguistic performance deals with the usage of the system. Thus we can conclude that performance may accurately reflect competence.

Consider the following sentences:

- 1) I have a zorph. She ( ... ) two ( ... )
- 2) He is ( dorph ) those ( zorph )

If your answer to the first sentence is “She **has** two **zorphs**”, then you are linguistically competent in terms of the subject-verb agreement in the simple present tense regarding the third person singular subject and the inflectional –s in plural noun. If your answer to the second sentence is “He is **dorphing** those **zorphs**”, again you are competent linguistically in the present continuous tense and inflectional –s plural noun. You demonstrate your competence in your use of the language in form of utterances (oral) and sentences (written).

Another influential theory that laid the foundation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistics is five hypotheses by Krashen (1982). One of these hypotheses, the acquisition-learning distinction hypothesis states that there are two ways developing competence in a second language. The first way is language acquisition which is a subconscious process. The language acquirers are not consciously aware that they are acquiring the language, but they are aware the fact that they are using the language for the purpose of communication. Language acquisition is just like ‘picking up’ a language. It is implicit learning, informal learning, or natural learning. Language acquisition is responsible for

‘fluency’. The second way to develop competence in a second language is through language learning. The term language learning refer to the conscious knowledge of how a second language work, or knowing about the language’s rules, being able to talk about them and being aware about them. Language learning is responsible for ‘accuracy’. The question is, “Can we say that linguistic competence is the same thing with language acquisition and linguistic performance is similar to language learning?” This remains a debate amongst linguists.

## 2.4 The Application of Explicit Grammar

Explicit teaching is an instructional strategy used by teachers to meet the needs of their students and engage them in unambiguous, clearly articulated teaching.

Teachers plan for explicit teaching to make clear connections to curriculum content, through a concise focus on the gradual and progressive steps that lead to a student’s development and independent application of knowledge, understanding and skills associated with Australian Curriculum: English content.

## 2.5 Aspects of Explicit Teaching

The aspects of explicit teaching represented in these vignettes include:

- 1) focusing instruction on identified curriculum content
- 2) connecting to prior knowledge and skills when beginning a learning sequence
- 3) establishing and maintaining clear learning goals and expectations for each lesson
- 4) teaching and expecting students to use metalanguage in ways that support learning
- 5) deconstructing and sequencing teaching to focus on the steps that lead to new knowledge, deeper understandings and/or more sophisticated skill
- 6) describing and modelling concepts and processes clearly, using ‘think aloud’ and examining models and inferior examples
- 7) varying instruction in response to immediate and reflective feedback
- 8) asking questions to continually monitor understanding and progress and inform immediate feedback
- 9) providing scaffolded learning experiences for students to practice, synthesize and consolidate learning
- 10) developing the capability of students to self-regulate and learn independently.

Teachers who focus on language forms presentation, explain the grammar rules and practice through drilling hold a traditional view of language teaching. They equate language to grammar mastery and accurate usage and create bored, disaffected students who can produce correct forms on exercises and tests, but consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context. In other words, students

under this form of instruction know a lot about the language but they are unable to use the language itself appropriately in contextualized situations – these students consistently make errors when they try to use the language in context. One of the most famous methods which advocate this kind of instruction is the audiolingual method.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Language awareness should be and is necessarily raised and implemented in school setting. Both L1 and L2 play crucial role as to fight against mother tongue’s illiteracy and failure in learning foreign language (English). Besides language awareness can promote metacognitive skill, which is the ability to understand, control, manipulate the learners’ own cognitive process, and use particular strategies for both learning and problem solving. Furthermore, language awareness fosters independent learning by way of discovery and inquiry.

Explicit grammar is the key to unlock unfamiliarity with how a language works and how a language should be used. Grammar should be applied explicitly, as opposed to implicit implementation, so that both linguistic competence and performance can be expected.

In Indonesian context, both L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) and L2 (English as a foreign



language) are regulated in ACT no 24, 2009. In fact, this ACT can be and should be used as stand point to raise language awareness.

Further research on language awareness in Indonesian context in relation to content and language integrated learning (CLIL) should be cultivated and promoted as a means of problem solving to the many problems being faced by the world of education in Indonesia.

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