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Introduction

1 What is the book about?

This book is concerned with Teacher Language Awareness, or TLA, defined by Thornbury (1997:x) as ‘the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively’. The focus of the book is the language awareness of L2 teachers (i.e. teachers of a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL)), and the examples are drawn from the teaching of L2 English. However, the issues raised are equally applicable to teachers of any language that is not the mother tongue of their students. In many cases, they are likely to be of relevance to teachers of the mother tongue, too.

The book concentrates on teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the language systems, in the belief that these systems are at the heart of the language acquisition process and must therefore form the core of any teacher’s language awareness. As the quotation above from Thornbury makes clear, TLA applies to all the language systems and assumes their interdependence, given that they are, as Carter (in Bolitho et al., 2003:253) points out, ‘closely interwoven in the construction of meanings and of texts, both spoken and written’. The specific focus of the present book is on TLA as it relates to grammar. However, the discussion and the examples in the following chapters acknowledge and reflect the interrelationship between the language systems, and in particular between grammar, lexis and discourse.

The basic argument presented in the book is that the possession of an adequate level of TLA is an essential attribute of any competent L2 teacher. The assumption underlying that argument is that there is a relationship between the language awareness of the L2 teacher and the effectiveness of that teacher as indicated by the language learning achieved by his/her students. Put simply, the book assumes that TLA has a positive impact on student learning: TLA is seen as a potentially crucial variable in the language teaching / language learning enterprise, in the sense that the language-aware L2 teacher is more likely to be effective in promoting student learning than the teacher who is less language-aware.

The book discusses the findings of a number of studies conducted in a variety of locations and in a range of areas relevant to TLA. However,

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the snapshots of the teaching of L2 English presented and discussed in the book are all drawn from one particular context: the Hong Kong secondary school. Although the official English Language curriculum in Hong Kong has been based on communicative principles since the early 1980s, the vast majority of schools and teachers have adopted a very ‘weak’ version of communicative/task-based language teaching, in which the explicit teaching of grammar continues to play a significant role. The Hong Kong teachers whose performance is examined in the book are all non-native speakers (NNS) of English.

2 Who is this book for?

Although Teacher Language Awareness has received scant attention in terms of published research, it is an area of increasing concern to those involved in language teacher education, as well as those responsible for quality assurance in language teaching. Because of this, the book should be of interest to a wide range of people with an involvement or interest in language education issues: practising teachers, students on in-service teacher education programmes, language teacher educators, academics and other professionals engaged in language education.

3 What is the purpose of the book?

The book sets out to address the following fundamental questions about teachers’ knowledge of the systems of language, i.e. their TLA: what form does this knowledge take, and what is its potential impact on teacher effectiveness? The aim in the following chapters is to examine these and related questions by exploring the nature of teachers’ knowledge of the language systems (with particular reference to grammar), and the relationship between teachers’ knowledge and their handling of language-related issues in their teaching.

The purpose of the book is to encourage teachers and others involved in language education, including teacher educators, to think more deeply about the importance of TLA, the nature of TLA and the impact of TLA upon teaching (and, potentially, upon learning). The book is intended to contribute to a greater understanding of TLA, making teachers more aware of the potential significance of their language-related interventions, and enabling teacher educators to adopt a more principled approach to the planning of those parts of their programmes associated with TLA. At the same time, I hope that the book will provoke debate and raise questions that will help to establish the beginnings of a research agenda for TLA.

4 What is the book NOT about?

This book does not set out to develop teachers' awareness of language via any direct treatment. There are no language-analysis tasks designed to stimulate teachers' reflections on the workings of different parts of the language systems. A number of books containing tasks of this type are already available, such as Bolitho and Tomlinson's *Discover English* (1980; 1995), Wright's *Investigating English* (1994) and Thornbury's *About Language* (1997). The interested reader need look no further than these three texts to find a wealth of activities intended to foster the development of TLA.

The book does not promote particular approaches to the teaching of grammar. Frequent reference is made to data from studies of teachers' language awareness as it relates to grammar. However, in the analysis of these data, there is a deliberate attempt to avoid evaluation of the methodology employed by individual teachers: instead, the discussion focuses exclusively on language-related issues.

There is also no attempt to suggest that a teacher's explicit knowledge of grammar should be based exclusively upon any single model of language. My own views of language and of grammar are the product of a number of influences, including the grammars of Leech and Svartvik (1975), Quirk et al. (1985), Biber et al. (1999) and Carter and McCarthy (2006), as well as systemic functional linguistics (see, e.g., Halliday, 1985), which emphasises the role of the language systems as a resource for making meaning, the close interrelationship of grammar and lexis (the 'lexico-grammar') and the importance of discourse grammar. Inevitably, where judgemental comment is made on an individual teacher's awareness in relation to, for example, a specific feature of grammar, such comment passes through the filter of my own perspective on language. However, as far as possible, such remarks are based upon what might reasonably be expected of that teacher within the prevailing norms of the context within which he or she works. They are *not* set within a single theoretical framework of grammar.

The aim is therefore not to specify the precise form or extent of the knowledge that teachers of language should have about grammar. In my view, the knowledge of the language-aware teacher should not be based upon any single theoretical model, but rather upon informed, principled eclecticism. Such knowledge is not static: it is constantly changing, developing, renewing itself. The developments in any teacher's language awareness over the course of a career are likely to occur idiosyncratically, as a result of a combination of factors, including exposure to theoretical developments and reflections on practical experience. The adequacy and appropriateness of an individual teacher's language

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awareness at any stage of his or her career need to be considered in relation to the demands posed by the context in which that teacher is working at that time.

5 How is the book organised?

The book consists of a Prologue, followed by nine chapters and an Epilogue. The Prologue introduces some of the major questions addressed in the main body of the book, with snapshots from the Hong Kong secondary school classroom. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the history of interest in Teacher Language Awareness, in the context of the increased attention since the late 1970s to ‘Language Awareness’ generally, and to the role of explicit language knowledge in language learning in particular. Chapter 2 presents a detailed analysis of the language awareness of the L2 teacher, exploring the complex nature of TLA, its significance in L2 teaching and learning, how it affects teacher behaviour and its potential impact on pedagogical practice. Chapter 3 examines some of the issues and debates concerning the value of explicit knowledge about the language systems, particularly grammar, for L2 learning and teaching, together with the implications for TLA of current understandings of these issues.

Chapters 4 and 5 revisit issues originally discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 focuses on L2 teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, feelings and understandings about the content of learning (i.e. the subject-matter cognitions which form the core of any teacher’s language awareness). Chapter 5 explores various aspects of TLA in pedagogical practice, in particular (a) how the L2 teacher’s language awareness both influences and is influenced by that teacher’s engagement with the content of learning, and (b) the relationship between TLA and teaching materials. Both chapters draw extensively on data from Hong Kong secondary school teachers and classrooms.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider the TLA of teachers of L2 English at different stages of their careers and from different backgrounds. Chapter 6 examines the TLA of novice, highly proficient and expert teachers, while Chapter 7 attempts a dispassionate analysis of the TLA of native-speaker (NS) and non-native-speaker (NNS) teachers.

Chapter 8 focuses on the relationship between TLA and student learning. While acknowledging the difficulty of identifying any direct causative connection between TLA and students’ learning outcomes, the chapter discusses relevant research in relation to three themes: teachers’ subject-matter knowledge; teacher engagement with the content of learning; and teachers’ awareness of learner difficulties.

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Introduction

Chapter 9 also looks at TLA and learning, but in this case focusing on teachers' own learning. The chapter examines issues relating to the development of the L2 teacher's language awareness, and principles that might be applied to the planning of TLA-related courses and activities.

The Epilogue returns to the central argument of the book – that possession of an adequate level of TLA is an essential attribute of any competent L2 teacher – and sets it within the context of the broader debate about teacher professionalism in general and L2 teacher professionalism in particular.