Prologue: The challenge of being 'language-aware'

Snapshot 1a: Clara

It's a warm afternoon in early October in a large modern co-educational secondary school in Hong Kong's New Territories. The air-conditioners are on in all the classrooms, making the ambient temperature pleasantly comfortable, but also creating a constant background whirring. A Secondary 5 class of forty Hong Kong Chinese 16-year-olds is listening with varying degrees of attention, as their English teacher, Clara, takes them through a set of exercises they were expected to have completed for homework.

Clara, like her students, is Hong Kong Chinese and shares their mother tongue, Cantonese. Clara is in her fourth year as a full-time secondary school teacher of English. She has a first degree from Canada (in Social Sciences rather than English) and is currently studying part-time for an initial qualification as a teacher of English.

Clara's students will be taking their first major public examination (the Hong Kong Certificate in Education Examination, or HKCEE) at the end of the academic year, and they are already accustomed to lessons in most subjects dominated by practice tests and past papers. Although most of the students do not have much intrinsic interest in English, they know that a good result in the public exam is important for their future study and job prospects.

In Clara's lesson this afternoon she is working through a series of exercises from a book of practice tests. The particular exercise that she is checking consists of single-sentence multiple-choice grammar items in which the students have to identify the correct way to complete the sentence from four given alternatives.

One of the first items in the exercise reads:

He did very little work for his exam. He_____ (pass).

The desired completion according to the Teacher's Book is ***can't have passed***. However, one of the students has selected another of the four possible options: ***could have passed***. He asks Clara whether his chosen answer might also be correct . . .

1

Teacher Language Awareness

This snapshot describes an episode that is likely to resonate with the experiences of most of us who have taught a second language. Not all of us will have worked with teenagers in the public sector (like Clara), but we have all been in situations where we find ourselves confronted with the unexpected – in Clara's case, a question from a student – and where we are forced to make a spontaneous and more-or-less instant decision about how to react.

Experience and an awareness of potential pitfalls may have taught us the benefits of caution, leading us to take the prudent step of deciding to defer a response so that we can buy ourselves some thinking time ('That's a very interesting question . . .!'). As part of this strategy, perhaps we refer the problem back to the individual student ('What do *you* think?'), and invite the other students to contribute to the problem-solving activity ('What do the rest of you think?'). Meanwhile, we attempt a smile of encouragement as we rack our brains to work out our own answer. If our antennae have warned us that the question is really tricky, we may well decide not to commit ourselves to an explanation there and then, undertaking instead to provide a more carefully considered reply shortly afterwards ('Let me think about that and get back to you in the next class').

Very often, however, we seem to end up improvising a response. We may do so for a variety of reasons, and often without being fully aware of them. For some of us, there may be times when we make a conscious, principled decision to exploit a learning opportunity and aim to provide the learners with knowledge at a moment when we sense that they may be especially receptive, i.e. (to use the contemporary jargon of second language acquisition) we think that our response to the learner's problem may trigger a restructuring of not only the interlanguage[1] of that learner but also potentially the interlanguage of others in the class.

For the majority of us, though, the reasons are likely to be less sophisticated and skilfully calculated, particularly when we are not so experienced and streetwise. We may improvise out of misplaced confidence, or naïveté – perhaps simply because our instinct when asked a question is to try to be helpful and provide a response. Or we may, of course, improvise for the opposite reason: out of fear and a lack of confidence. Perhaps we are worried that our students will judge us to be incompetent and deficient in basic knowledge if we do not provide them with an on-the-spot solution to their problem. We may be afraid that we will lose face as a result: that rather than perceiving our delaying strategy as the

---

[1] **Interlanguage** is defined by Thornbury (2006:109) as a term describing 'the grammatical system that a learner creates in the course of learning another language'. It is a constantly evolving system of rules. **Restructuring** refers to the process by which the learner's interlanguage appears to adapt in response to new information.

2

responsible action of a thinking professional teacher, the students will view such stalling tactics as signs of weakness and inadequacy.

Whatever blend of beliefs, emotions and anxieties influences our decision, once we have made a move to answer the question, it is very difficult to turn back. Even as it begins to dawn on us that the problem is perhaps not as straightforward as we had initially assumed, we usually carry on, possibly feeling that, having once started, there is no way out. In the worst case, it is only when it is far too late, as we observe (or try to ignore) the glazed incomprehension in the expressions of our students, that we realise how big a hole we may have dug for ourselves in our well-intentioned attempt to be of assistance.

In the case of Clara, and the lesson described in Snapshots 1a and 1b, we do not know what influenced her actions at this point. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to interview her after the class, so we can only speculate. In the event, for whatever reason, Clara opted to provide a virtually instant response to her student's question, as described in the second part of the snapshot:

Snapshot 1b: Clara

Clara's face betrays no emotion, and she pauses for barely a couple of seconds before providing the following response:

> So in this case actually it's better to use *He can't have passed* because you are just predicting something to happen, but you are not sure whether he can pass or not. You just predict it. Since he is not working hard, so he has the chance of failing in the exam, OK? If the test paper was returned to that student, you can say *He could have passed* or *He couldn't have passed*

As we look at Snapshot 1b, we may have different reactions, both to Clara's choice of strategy, and to the content of her response. However, the reason for focusing on this incident and on Clara's behaviour is not to invite analysis of her motivations or any evaluation of the quality of her explanation. Our interest is in the general rather than the specific, and in this case Clara's experience is being presented in order to draw our attention to the challenges facing any L2 teacher in a similar situation.

When Clara produced the explanation in Snapshot 1b, electing to improvise in front of a class of 40 students (not to mention the video camera that was recording the lesson on this occasion), her skills as a

3

Teacher Language Awareness

teacher were being challenged in a number of ways and at a variety of
levels. Some aspects of the challenge had little or no relation to the
content of the lesson. For instance, the situation was demanding on an
emotional and psychological level. Clara was new to the school, she had
been teaching this class for only a few weeks and it was the first time in
her career that she had taught a class preparing for a major public
examination. The incident was therefore a genuine test of her ability to
keep her nerve in front of a (potentially critical) student audience. The
situation also presented a challenge to Clara's overall teaching compe-
tence, and whether, for example, she would be able to engage the atten-
tion of a class of students and retain their interest in what she was
saying.

But the most significant aspects of the challenge for our present pur-
poses are those that are language-related. The most obvious of these was
the challenge to her knowledge of subject matter. The practice test item
and the student's question concerned modality, a notoriously complex
area for both students and teachers of L2 English. In addition, the ques-
tion did not relate to a relatively straightforward formal feature of verb
phrases involving modal auxiliaries: instead it focused on semantic inter-
pretations of modalised verb phrases referring to past time, interpret-
ations that were rendered that much more difficult and speculative
because of the inevitable lack of context accompanying a single-sentence
multiple-choice practice test item.

However, knowledge of subject matter represents just one aspect of the
multifaceted language-related challenge facing Clara, or any of us when
we find ourselves in similar situations in our teaching. A degree in
Linguistics and an in-depth knowledge of the relevant area of grammar
might (though not necessarily) equip us to cope with certain aspects of
the challenge related specifically to subject matter, but there would be
other language-related ways in which we might find ourselves chal-
lenged, going well beyond mere knowledge of subject matter, as the fol-
lowing observation from Michael Swan depicts so vividly.

> Good teaching involves a most mysterious feat – sitting, so to
> speak, on one's listener's shoulder, monitoring what one is saying
> with the listener's ears, and using this feedback to shape and
> adapt one's words from moment to moment so that the thread of
> communication never breaks. This is art, not science . . .
>
> (Swan, 1994:54–5)

Swan was actually writing about pedagogic language rules, and
proposing a set of criteria for such rules, criteria that might be applied
to the 'rules of thumb' that teachers produce on the spur of the moment,
like Clara, just as much as to the more carefully honed statements

4

appearing in textbooks. The quotation comes from the end of Swan's paper, when he provides a spirited defence of teachers' 'rules of thumb', arguing that the pedagogic focus of such rules may enable them to fit the need of a given classroom moment more successfully than other, more descriptively 'respectable' statements of that rule.

The significance of Swan's remarks in the context of the present discussion is that they highlight the paramount importance of the learner perspective in determining how we select and package the information and examples we make available to our students in the hopes of promoting learning. Snapshot 2 (see p. 6) illustrates this point. Like Clara in Snapshot 1, the teacher in this case (Pearl) is reacting to a student's contribution, and providing feedback, not only for the benefit of that student but also for the whole class. Unlike Snapshot 1, however, the area of language focus should not have posed any challenges to the teacher's knowledge of subject matter.

In this case, as we can see, the teacher adopts a different strategy from that employed by Clara in Snapshot 1. Pearl correctly identifies that there is a problem with the student's answer, but rather than providing a detailed explanation, drawing on her knowledge of the relevant subject matter, she tries to use a mixture of question and gesture in an apparent attempt to guide the student towards self-correction of the error. Given that these are young students with relatively limited English, this approach would seem to have much to commend it. However, it is a strategy that Pearl uses to little obvious effect. She may well have understood the confusion that was the likely basis of the student's error. But from the way she handles that error, there is little to indicate that she has made any real attempt to view the problem from the learner perspective. If she has, then somewhere in the 'real-time' process of analysing his problem and providing potentially useful feedback, there must have been a breakdown, because her correction conveys very little, either to the student making the error or to the rest of the class. The second student's correct response has nothing to do with Pearl's intervention: he is merely reading out what he has already written in his book.

There are, of course, a number of language-related questions to be considered when one attempts to evaluate a teacher's content-focused intervention from the learner perspective, whether that intervention is Pearl's, Clara's or any of our own. All of these considerations connect in some way to Swan's (1994) 'design criteria for pedagogic language rules'. Some of them relate exclusively to knowledge of subject matter, such as:

- Is the teacher's explanation an accurate representation of the 'truth'?

5

Teacher Language Awareness

Snapshot 2: Pearl

Pearl works in a large co-educational secondary school (for 11- to 18-year-olds) in a residential district of Hong Kong Island. She teaches both English and Home Economics, and all her English teaching is with the junior forms in the school.

It is a Wednesday morning, and Pearl is teaching a group of Secondary 1 students (11- to 12-year-olds). The class size is small by Hong Kong standards – there are just 20 children – because it consists of so-called 'remedial' students (i.e. those in the form whose test scores label them as being among the weakest in English).

Pearl is going through a blank-filling exercise, which the students worked on in pairs earlier in the lesson. The exercise focuses on the Present Simple and Present Progressive.

One of the items in the exercise reads:

My brother _____ (swim) very well. Perhaps he can give you swimming lessons.

When Pearl nominates one student to provide his answer, the boy says:

My brother is swimming very well. Perhaps he can give you swimming lessons.

Pearl's immediate reaction is to laugh (in a slightly nervous, but not unfriendly way). She starts miming breast-stroke movements, saying '*My brother is swimming very well?*' as she does so. She then says '*He is swimming all the time?*' and laughs again, looking towards the student who gave the incorrect reply. The boy stares at his textbook, saying nothing. Pearl turns to another student, from whom she immediately elicits the correct sentence completion. She then moves on to the next item in the exercise.

Other considerations, however, involve a complex blend of language-related competences, including the teacher's ability to communicate effectively. For instance:

- Does the teacher's explanation provide the learners with what they need at that particular moment? (In other words, does the teacher appear to have diagnosed the learners' problem correctly?)
- Does the teacher's explanation provide the learners with the right amount of information (neither too much nor too little) to serve their immediate learning needs?

6

- Is the explanation pitched at the right level, in that it uses only concepts and terminology with which the learners are already familiar?
- Is the explanation expressed in a clear, coherent and fully intelligible way?

In focusing attention on such questions, we are in fact identifying many of the key characteristics of Teacher Language Awareness, which is the focus of this book. The quotation from Swan is especially useful as we consider the nature of TLA because it encapsulates many aspects of the challenges involved in being a language-aware teacher and highlights some of the associated complexities and paradoxes which we shall explore in more detail in the following chapters.

Swan's final words, in which he talks about the art involved in good teaching, are also highly significant in relation to TLA, if language awareness is (as I would argue) one of the attributes one would expect the 'good teacher' to possess, since those words remind us that TLA as exemplified in the act of teaching is both art and science. TLA is in one sense science, in that it is dependent upon the teacher's possession of an appropriate base of knowledge and understanding about language (in particular, the target language) and how it works. At the same time, however, TLA, when it is demonstrated in good classroom practice, is much more than the direct application of science, i.e. the teacher's knowledge of linguistics. It involves a complex blend of learning- and learner-related understanding and sensitivity, such that the teacher is able to provide the precise amount of knowledge the learner needs at a given point and to convey that knowledge in a form that creates no barriers to comprehension. The language-aware teacher therefore needs to be both scientist and artist, and therein lies much of the challenge.

Earl Stevick, writing in 1980 about grammatical explanation, captures the essence of this blend of science and artistry, at the same time providing a strong argument in support of the need for the L2 teacher to be language-aware:

> The explaining of grammar. . . casts light on the unfamiliar pathways
> and the arbitrary obstacles through which [the student] must
> eventually be able to run back and forth with his eyes shut. It can
> thus save him a certain amount of time, energy, and barked shins.
> It is for this same reason, of course, that the teacher needs to know
> these same pathways and obstacles – not only to run back and forth
> in them for herself, but also to see them as they look to a newcomer.
> On top of this are the skills of knowing when to turn on the spotlight
> of explanation and when to turn it off, and knowing just how to aim
> it so that it will help the student instead of blinding him.
>
> (Stevick, 1980:251)

Teacher Language Awareness

At first sight, the message of a book on TLA might appear to be simply that it's a good idea for teachers of a language to know something about the subject (i.e. the language) they are teaching. If so, then the writer of such a book could with good reason be accused of what Basil Fawlty (in the TV comedy series *Fawlty Towers*) might describe as 'stating the bleeding obvious'.

I hope this book succeeds in doing rather more than that. There is in my view very little about language teaching and language learning that could justifiably be described as obvious, and it is the assumed truths about the processes we engage in as language teachers and about the qualities we require in order to be effective practitioners that are often most in need of interrogation and critical analysis. In the chapters that follow, an attempt is made to subject this particular assumed truth about language teaching and language teachers to questioning by exploring such issues as:

- What sort of knowledge about language do L2 teachers need?
- Why is knowledge of this kind important?
- How does such knowledge (or the lack of it) affect L2 teachers' handling of language-related issues in their teaching?

As far as possible, these issues are discussed and illustrated in relation to the lives and experiences of real teachers. As noted in the Introduction, the examples are drawn from one particular type of L2 teaching (the teaching of English as a Foreign Language) and a single macro-context, the Hong Kong secondary school, which has been the focus of my professional life since 1990. The problems and issues confronting the teachers in the book are, however, universal, and the experiences of these Hong Kong teachers (and the constraints they face) will, I am sure, be accessible and indeed familiar to L2 teachers around the world.

8

1 Language Awareness, 'Knowledge About Language' and TLA

1.1 Introduction

The aim of the present chapter is to provide a context for the book's focus on TLA: conceptually, by setting TLA within the broader framework of **Language Awareness** more generally, and historically, by situating the growing interest in TLA within the context of changing perspectives on grammar and L2 teaching. The chapter begins by briefly outlining the emergence of the Language Awareness 'movement', and examining what is understood by the terms 'Language Awareness' and '**Knowledge About Language**' (KAL) – the associated phrase which appears in much of the literature, particularly that concerned with the National Curriculum for English Language in the UK (see, e.g., Carter, 1990). The chapter then discusses the central concern of the Language Awareness 'movement' with **explicit knowledge** about language, and with the relationship between explicit and **implicit knowledge**. The debate about the interface between these two types of knowledge is linked to parallel discussions about **declarative/procedural knowledge** and learning/acquisition, as well as the related concept of **consciousness**. The relationship between Language Awareness, **'consciousness-raising'** and the language awareness of teachers is examined, and the chapter ends with a brief discussion of the increased attention to TLA within the context of recent trends in L2 education.

1.2 The Language Awareness 'movement'

Since the early 1980s, Language Awareness has become a major concern in language education. There has been much discussion of Language Awareness both in relation to the language development of students and, to a lesser extent, in connection with the study and analysis of language by teachers of language (see, e.g., Hawkins, 1984; Donmall, 1985; Sinclair, 1985; James and Garrett, 1991a; Fairclough, 1992; Carter, 1994; McCarthy and Carter, 1994; van Lier, 1995; 1996). The so-called Language Awareness 'movement', which has embraced both mother-tongue and second-/foreign-language teaching, has sought

9

to find ways of improving the language awareness of students and of their teachers.

Initially the Language Awareness movement's focus was specifically on the language awareness of learners. An underlying belief behind the movement is that students who are able to analyse and describe language accurately are likely to be more effective users of the language. A direct relationship is assumed between explicit knowledge of formal aspects of language and performance in using the language. In the case of teachers, it is assumed that an understanding of the language they teach and the ability to analyse it will contribute directly to teaching effectiveness. This is the view expressed, for example, by Edge (1988:9): 'My position on this may seem over-conservative in some circles . . . but I want to argue that knowledge about language and language learning still has a central role to play in English language teacher training for speakers of other languages.' The language awareness development activities in Bolitho and Tomlinson (1980; 1995), Wright (1994) and Thornbury (1997) reflect such an assumption. Although these assumptions about learners and teachers may appear compelling, there was initially little or no empirical evidence produced to support them, at least as far as native English speakers are concerned. However, recent research (see, e.g., Andrews, 1999b; McNeill, 1999) suggests that TLA does have the potential to exert a powerful influence upon teaching effectiveness, at least as far as L2 teachers are concerned. Evidence from related studies is presented in subsequent chapters, particularly Chapters 5, 6 and 8.

1.3 Language Awareness and 'Knowledge About Language' (KAL)

The term 'Language Awareness' was put on the international agenda of language education as recently as 1992, with the formation of the Association for Language Awareness and the setting up of the journal *Language Awareness*. The association and the journal were the outcomes of a growing interest in language awareness, originating in the 1970s and burgeoning in the 1980s, especially in Britain (where Language Awareness is frequently referred to as 'Knowledge About Language', or KAL). Mitchell, Hooper and Brumfit (1994:2) describe KAL as a new title for an old concern: 'that pupils learning languages in formal settings should acquire some explicit understandings and knowledge of the nature of language, alongside the development of practical language skills'.

Much of the impetus for the British interest in Language Awareness / KAL stemmed from a widespread reaction to the poor language performance of children at school. According to James and Garrett (1991b:3),