

## DEVELOPING TEACHER LANGUAGE AWARENESS VIA IN-SERVICE TRAINING: TRAINERS' BELIEFS

*Daniel Xerri*

### Introduction

TLA is deemed a significant component of practitioners' professional competence. Fifteen years ago van Lier (2001: 164) predicted that 'Two particular areas that should gain in strength are concerted and integrative approaches to language awareness across the curriculum, and a strong push for language awareness in teacher education.' In Malta a consolidated effort towards the achievement of the latter target started being undertaken only recently, the intention being that of eventually attaining the former through the mobilization of a more effective cadre of language teachers. At the start of the 2014-2015 scholastic year a group of teachers working within the primary and secondary sectors benefited from an in-service course aimed at developing their language awareness. All Year 3 and Forms 3-5 English teachers working in state schools in the country participated in this course. It was also attended by a number of teachers working in church schools. In total, 120 primary teachers and 112 secondary teachers attended the course. The course was geared towards enhancing teachers' knowledge about grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Teachers working in state schools in Malta are obliged to attend a minimum of twelve hours of in-service training every year. This training is either organised by Education Officers (henceforth EO) or by the school itself. The training may focus on subject-related issues or else on other educational priorities. In 2014 there were four EOs responsible for teachers of English at secondary level and one EO responsible for the teaching of English at primary level. One of their main duties consists of organizing (and sometimes delivering) annual in-service training for teachers. In this sense, EOs play the role of trainers as well. In the case of primary teachers, training related to the teaching of English cannot occur every year as they might be asked to attend courses organised by the EOs responsible for other subjects. A pre-course questionnaire confirmed that around a third of the 232 participants had received little or no training on TLA over the course of their career, the stress having usually been placed on methodology.

The course was the brainchild of the Minister for Education and it was co-ordinated by the primary and secondary English EOs. Knowing how much emphasis is placed on TLA in the private English Language Teaching (ELT) sector, the EFL Monitoring Board, the entity responsible for regulating this sector in Malta, was asked to help develop a course that would target this significant area in teachers' knowledge. The course was thus designed and delivered by twelve teacher trainers from the ELT sector specifically for the needs of mainstream teachers. This is an example of cross-pollination in teacher development (Xerri 2014).

The course consisted of six sessions spread over three days, three sessions for primary teachers and another three for secondary teachers. Each session lasted four hours. The twelve trainers worked in pairs in order to design a session that they then delivered individually to three separate groups. Half the trainers were responsible for the primary level and the other half for the secondary level. In this way each group of teachers benefited from the knowledge and experience of three different trainers. The course consisted of hands-on activities that for the most part used loop input. Woodward (2003) describes this as a 'type of experiential teacher training process that involves an alignment of the process and content of learning' (p. 301). Hence, for example, whilst engaged in a grammar activity the teachers were also actively learning about how to teach a particular aspect of grammar. In this way the course also sought to reinforce their methodology through TLA.

Over the past two decades research on the role and importance of beliefs has been conducted with respect to different aspects of TESOL. Michaela Borg (2001: 186) defines a belief as 'a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour'. Teachers' beliefs about language awareness have been the subject of substantial research (Borg 1998, 2005; Sanchez 2014), however, not enough attention has been paid to trainers' beliefs about

TLA. Given that in Malta and a number of other countries in-service training is still centralized and imposed on teachers in a top-down manner, research on the beliefs of those responsible for such training is crucial. In contexts such as Malta, where TLA has not been considered a training priority until now, research on trainers' beliefs in relation to TLA is fundamental. Based on the results of an interview-based study, this article explores EOs' and trainers' beliefs about the development of TLA via in-service training.

### Value of TLA

Currently, TLA is reckoned to be an essential part of the professional arsenal that teachers have at their disposal in their quest to engage in effective teaching. A teachers' ability to 'talk about the language itself, to analyse it, to understand how it works, and to make judgements about acceptability in doubtful cases' (Edge 1988: 10) is of considerable value. TLA is defined as 'the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively' (Thornbury 1997: x). The link that Thornbury (1997) makes between language awareness and effective teaching is crucial and confirms the idea that a sound understanding of the language, how it works and how students learn it and use it, enables teachers to exploit their pedagogical knowledge and skills more competently. In fact, Andrews (1999a: 144) maintains that:

In the case of the teacher, this explicit knowledge also feeds into her professional practices, potentially exerting a powerful influence upon her ability to teach effectively. It feeds into professional practices by being reflected upon, and arguably it is the quality of these reflections as least as much as the depth or extent of any teacher's explicit knowledge which can have the greatest impact on the teaching/learning process.

By augmenting the quality and depth of teachers' reflections, TLA 'plays a crucial role in structuring input so that it is potentially of maximum usefulness to learners' (Andrews 1999b: 175). Moreover, it 'is likely to have a significant effect upon the nature of the teacher's interaction with learner output and the extent to which any teacher is able to exploit such output positively' (Andrews 1999b: 176). In the pre-lesson stage, TLA affects the teacher's 'ability to specify the most appropriate learning objectives, and to select materials and tasks which are most likely to serve those objectives, ensuring that they are appropriate in terms of the learners' age and previous learning' (Andrews 2001: 81). During the lesson, 'TLA has a profound effect upon the

teacher's performance of a range of tasks', most of which require 'alertness and quick thinking, a knowledge-base which can be readily accessed, and a good level of communicative language ability' (Andrews 2001: 81). For these reasons, Wright (2002: 115) argues that 'A linguistically aware teacher not only understands how language works, but understands the student's struggle with language and is sensitive to errors and other interlanguage features.' TLA enables such a teacher to 'spot opportunities to generate discussion and exploration of language, for example, by noticing features of texts which suggest a particular language learning activity' (Wright 2002: 115). Similarly, Andrews (2003: 86) affirms that TLA 'encompasses an awareness of language from the learner's perspective, an awareness of the learner's developing interlanguage, and an awareness of the extent to which the language content of materials/lessons poses difficulties for students'. Due to this, 'TLA acts as a filter that inevitably influences the decisions and choices the teacher makes in mediating or shaping the language input that is made available to learners in the classroom' (Andrews 2007: 39). Gießler (2012: 131) explains that 'The filter metaphor for TLA stipulates that teachers base their decision for instigating language awareness-related activities in the classroom on the grounds of previous analyses of learners' language needs and the difficulty of the...items in question.' For this to happen, 'teachers responsible for students' language development should possess not only an implicit understanding of how language works but that they should also be able to explain this explicitly to the students they teach' (Sangster, Anderson, & O'Hara 2013: 311). TLA equips teachers with the competence to do this and a variety of related tasks. Mok (2013: 174), for example, found that TLA has 'an overall positive impact on a number of pedagogical tasks including lesson preparation, evaluation, and adaptation of teaching materials, giving grammar explanations, and assessing learners' performance'. Such benefits lead Svalberg and Askham (2014: 123) to conclude that 'Teachers with well-developed TLA have a wider range of options to draw on and TLA is thus an essential component in the teacher's "tool kit".' It seems clear that TLA facilitates language teachers' efforts to engage in effective teaching by providing them with the necessary knowledge base in relation to language and their learners' needs.

### TLA Training

Given its contribution to effective teaching, TLA needs to be one of the foci of teacher training at pre- and in-service levels. In fact, Andrews (1999a: 157) is convinced of ‘the importance of including a focus on explicit knowledge of grammar and grammatical terminology for *all* prospective L2 teachers, regardless of whether they are NSs or NNSs of that language, and regardless of their study background’. Nonetheless, ‘work aimed at developing teachers’ KAL [knowledge about language] should incorporate opportunities for them to develop and sustain a realistic awareness of that knowledge, and an understanding of how that awareness affects their work’ (Borg 2001: 28). For this reason amalgamating TLA training with pedagogy is crucial, so much so that a study of PGCE trainees found that it was ‘mainly through *teaching* and *preparing for teaching* rather than explicitly *learning about grammar* that trainees were gaining in confidence and competence, suggesting that applying knowledge in the classroom was a spur to and support for their own learning’ (Cajkler & Hislam 2002: 175). The need to weld TLA training and classroom practices is confirmed further by Andrews’s (2006) study on the evolution of three teachers’ TLA over the course of their career. The study found little evidence of change despite their years of language teaching experience and professional development, leading him to conclude that ‘It is clearly not the case that years of experience of teaching grammar necessarily lead to expertise’ (Andrews 2006: 15). Moreover, he also points out that ‘teacher learning in an area is dependent upon a teacher investing time and effort in that specific area and actively searching out related professional challenges’ (Andrews 2006: 16). For this to happen language teachers need to be convinced that TLA training should be a consistent feature of their CPD given its effect on teaching and learning. Andrews (2007: 16) argues that ‘it is important for the L2 teacher to possess a high level of explicit knowledge of grammar whether or not that teacher believes in the value of learners’ developing such knowledge’. Even though it might seem as if TLA ‘is of particular importance where teachers are employing “focus-on-formS” or “focus-on-form” approaches, it can also impact upon a teacher’s effectiveness even within the most extreme of meaning-focused approaches’ (Andrews 2007: 34). This idea is corroborated by Mok’s (2013) study on TLA’s role in pre-service teachers’ practicum sessions. She claims that ‘the language questions raised by their students and the large amount of personal queries that they had regarding the

English language...show the significant role that explicit knowledge about language plays in English language teacher education’ (Mok 2013: 172). Similarly, Sangster, Anderson and O’Hara (2013) found a gap between perceived and actual knowledge about language amongst primary and secondary trainee teachers. This leads them to conclude that ‘If developing school students’ literacy is a key policy, and if knowledge about language is perceived to be at the heart of literacy development, then teachers need to be ready to rise to the challenge’ (Sangster, Anderson, & O’Hara 2013: 313). Confirming the above views, Svalberg and Askham (2014: 134) argue that TLA training, ‘especially in terms of refinements to declarative knowledge and the encouragement of an analytical mindset, is an essential professional task which...can impact profoundly on the manner in which second language teachers enact a range of key pedagogical practices’. Developing TLA by means of pre- and in-service training seems fundamental if teachers are to be equipped with the necessary knowledge base for them to operate more effectively in the classroom. Such training not only provides them with the knowledge required to address learners’ needs in a competent manner but also helps to make them aware of any gaps in their knowledge as well as persuade them of why such gaps should be filled.

### Methodology

The findings reported in this article were generated as part of an interview-based study that investigated trainers’ beliefs while involved in an in-service course on TLA. Immediately after the course, semi-structured interviews were held with the five EOs co-ordinating it and with the twelve trainers responsible for its design and delivery. Each interview was held in a one-to-one manner, audio recorded and transcribed. These interviews focused on the interviewees’ views in relation to the significance of enhancing TLA via professional development. Tables 1 and 2 provide further information about the EOs and teacher trainers (henceforth TT) respectively.

Table 1. Education Officers.

Education Officer	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Years as Education Officer	Level
EO1	F	19.5	9	Primary
EO2	F	27	1.5	Secondary
EO3	F	22	1 month	Secondary
EO4	M	28	11	Secondary
EO5	F	35	10	Secondary

Table 2. Teacher Trainers.

Teacher Trainer	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Years as Teacher Trainer	Level
TT1	M	35	22	Secondary
TT2	F	10	6	Secondary
TT3	F	11	5	Secondary
TT4	F	11	5	Primary
TT5	F	11	8	Primary
TT6	F	25	18	Secondary
TT7	F	6	1	Secondary
TT8	F	14	7	Primary
TT9	F	24	13	Primary
TT10	F	30	16	Primary
TT11	M	18	12	Primary
TT12	M	22	15	Secondary

The tables above show that, with one exception, all the interviewees had plenty of teaching experience. Three of the five EOs had been in their post for an average of 10 years while the majority of the trainers had a minimum of five years' training experience. Hence, their knowledge of teachers' needs was quite in-depth.

### Significance of TLA Training

When the EOs were asked about the development of TLA via in-service training, they pointed out that this was significant for a number of reasons. They agreed that it should form part of teachers' professional development given its effect on language learning. One EO explained that 'a teacher has to have a solid language awareness in order to be able to address the difficulties that students come up with and which she analyses and knows they need help with' (EO2). Her colleague concurred by saying that 'unless your own language awareness is shipshape and up to standard you won't be able to pass the right language knowledge to your students' (EO5). Another EO provided an example of this: 'when it

comes to correcting a piece of written language, if teachers are not fully aware of the difference between a simple and a complex structure...then they wouldn't be able to provide students with the right kind of feedback' (EO4). If TLA is not sufficiently developed teachers 'might skim over certain aspects of the language because they are unaware of how exactly the language is working. They might not be aware of certain errors that the students might be making because their language awareness is lacking' (EO5). Not being able to develop students' own language awareness would be a way of shortchanging them given that 'to move beyond implicit awareness to an explicit and declarative understanding of what these rules are, and how they have been subverted, would help students to become more skilled and confident in their control and use of language' (Sangster, Anderson, & O'Hara 2013: 312). According to one EO, 'I don't think a teacher can function effectively without a good grasp of the way the language works... A clear understanding of how the language works is going to enable you to teach the language better' (EO2). Even though 'one might not necessarily use metalanguage with students, being aware of it is important, especially when it comes to planning and understanding certain concepts' (EO1). In this sense training on TLA serves the purpose of making teachers 'more conscious, more aware of the medium they're working with... I believe that it's important that as a teacher you're constantly aware of language' (EO3). Such training 'complements what is the usual focus of these INSET courses, that is, the enhancement of teachers' pedagogical skills' (EO4). For these reasons, the EOs indicated that such training should not be a one-off event but take place recurrently: 'as professionals, teachers should benefit from an ongoing development of their language awareness. You cannot just say, "I know it all and I can't be bothered." All teachers need to brush up on their linguistic knowledge as an ongoing process' (EO5). Teachers have 'got to be experts of the language so developing their language awareness should be an ongoing experience' (EO3). This is necessary because one 'can never say that a teacher, whatever his experience, is a finished product' (EO4). Placing more emphasis on TLA as part of CPD is 'also a matter of confidence... Unless you're really on top of your material you can't deliver well in class... I find that from my own experience of observing teachers, when you're not on top of your material it colours everything' (EO2). In concordance with the literature reviewed above, these EOs seemed to believe that developing TLA on a recurrent

basis is crucial because it fosters effective teaching and learning by equipping practitioners with the necessary linguistic expertise to address students' needs and difficulties in a confident manner.

The trainers hailing from the private ELT sector shared many of the beliefs expressed by the EOs in relation to the significance of training aimed at developing TLA. They all concurred that it has an impact on the language learning experience. In fact, one trainer explained that 'In order to help students learn the language better, teachers need to have a strong understanding of the language systems' (T12). TLA 'forms the very basis of teaching as we know it... Without language awareness you wouldn't be able to teach as effectively as if you had that kind of knowledge' (T11). It 'enables teachers to know a bit more about the learning that is happening and perhaps reflect a bit more on how to modify the tasks that they present learners with to facilitate language learning' (T4). For this reason, providing teachers with the opportunity to 'regularly focus on language awareness would allow them to see what the students' needs are and how they can help them in a more practical way' (T4). One particular trainer remarked that 'all teachers need constant training on different aspects of language awareness... Even if you're teaching beginners, in order to make them understand fully you need to show them what's going on and why in language' (T3). Similarly, a colleague of hers stated that 'language awareness is very important, especially if teachers are teaching the younger generation. If they don't have their basics they can hardly pass them on to the others' (T6). She went on to explain that 'in grammar there is usually a fine line between one usage and another and if you don't understand that yourself it's very difficult to pass it on to others' (T6). Another trainer maintained that 'In order to be able to teach the language, teachers need to know what the language make-up is. They may not necessarily use the metalanguage when they're teaching but they need to be aware of it to serve students better' (T9). For this reason, the trainers indicated that developing TLA also helps reinforce teachers' pedagogy, this having been one of the aims of the course they delivered: 'From the activities we did the teachers realized how important it is for them to have a well-developed language awareness in order to teach language effectively' (T8). A good understanding of the language complements teachers' insights into methodology: 'the two are equally beneficial to the teacher. Language awareness gives the teacher that extra bit of knowledge which is important for her to perform

better' (T9). This is essential because 'It's important to know what you're teaching besides knowing how to teach it in a fun way' (T2). One particular trainer explained that 'it becomes stimulating and motivating if you learn more things about your content and so it has lots of spinoffs in other areas, not least methodology' (T1). This is in line with Andrews's (2003: 86) idea that TLA 'involves an extra cognitive dimension of reflections upon both knowledge of subject matter and language proficiency, which provides a basis for the tasks of planning and teaching'. Just like the literature reviewed above, these trainers highlighted the significance of ongoing TLA training in helping to maximize the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. The linguistic knowledge developed thanks to such training bolsters pedagogy by enabling teachers to better cater for the needs of their students and address their difficulties more adequately.

Just like the EOs, the trainers also underscored the importance of TLA training in building teachers' confidence to teach language in a competent manner. One trainer affirmed that such training 'gives teachers confidence. Knowing the language well gives them the confidence to teach it and to experiment with methodology' (T1). A colleague of his claimed that 'It's important if you're going to be in this field of work and perform confidently' (T7). Similarly, another trainer remarked that she 'can really see a difference between a teacher who has studied the language in depth and a teacher who is merely good at methodology... It helps you when you're preparing lessons and you can tell why you're doing things. You can answer your own questions besides those of your learners' (T3). A well-developed TLA means that 'You can never be cornered if you're asked certain questions' (T11). In fact, most trainers mentioned that certain trainees lacked confidence because of poor TLA: 'the teachers knew their methodology but in terms of their knowledge about the language they weren't so confident... Whenever they had to focus on language itself you could see that they weren't comfortable' (T8). It seemed as if most of the trainers shared their colleague's observation that 'From what I could see during the activities they did on the course I noticed that language awareness was a weakness' (T8). One trainer remarked that 'the best thing that came out of the course was that it showed that teachers tend not to think about the language, maybe because they haven't actually studied the language in depth' (T4). In fact, another trainer recounted how a

trainee had told her that ‘in spite of teacher training she does not always feel prepared for dealing with certain questions students ask her about language’ (TT5). According to this trainer, ‘teachers lack the confidence to teach the language effectively because of gaps in their knowledge about the language’ (TT5). This led a colleague of hers to ask, ‘if you’re not confident, if you have doubts, how can you teach language well? You might not actually use the metalanguage in class...but having good language awareness allows you to deal with students’ difficulties better’ (TT10). In fact, Borg (1999, 2001, 2005) found that teachers who felt insecure about their knowledge about grammar placed less emphasis on grammar teaching and desisted from spontaneous grammar work whereas teachers who expressed confidence in this promoted class discussions about grammar rules. This leads Sanchez (2014: 221) to affirm that ‘there is no doubt that the way teachers perceive their understanding of the subject matter highly influences the pedagogical decisions they take in the classroom’. Due to their conviction that TLA is essential to effective teaching, the trainers seemed pleased that the course had led to the desired outcomes: ‘I feel the course has enhanced the teachers’ language awareness because...by the end they did tell me that one of the things they will take away with them is the confidence to use language awareness more effectively’ (TT9). These trainers indicated that training on TLA not only enhances teachers’ knowledge about language but also serves to reassure them that they can bank on such knowledge in their teaching.

### Conclusion

By revealing trainers’ beliefs about the development of TLA via in-service training, this article corroborates the idea propounded in a number of other studies that such training plays a significant role in equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge base and confidence for them to engage in effective language teaching practices. The focus on trainers’ beliefs is important insofar as they occupy a decision-making position in countries where teacher training is still a top-down process. Moreover, the experience that trainers gain by means of their regular contact with and observation of teachers makes them a valuable data source for researchers interested in exploring the development of TLA. By foregrounding trainers’ beliefs in relation to the value of ongoing training on TLA, this article underscores the need for further research on how TLA can be developed more sustainably through

CPD. In fact, Gießler (2012: 132) points out that ‘more fine-grained instruments for assessing the effectiveness of language awareness-related activities on teacher learning, especially with regard to TLA in its threefold dimension (language user, analyst, and teacher), should be developed in the future’. If teachers are expected to teach language effectively then a better understanding is required of how TLA training should be designed in order to fully serve their needs. As part of this investigation, examining the beliefs of trainers as much as those held by teachers is paramount.

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