Vol.4 Issue 1 Autumn 1998

LANGUAGE AWARENESS: PRACTICES AND PROGRESS?

Philip Kerr

Introduction

October 1996 saw the introduction of a revamped syllabus for the RSA/UCLES Certificate in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (CTEFLA), henceforth known as the Cambridge / RSA Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA). This pre-service training scheme is important not only because of its size (7,500 candidates in 1995-1996) but also because of its influence throughout the ELT world. An increasing number of universities in the UK, US and Australia are offering these courses, and major recruiters such as the British Council and International House look for teachers with these qualifications. In the field of publishing, many ELT authors (e.g. Soars & Soars, Naunton, Acklam) have been CTEFLA trainers and it is standard practice for ELT editors to be CTEFLA qualified. Given the number of influential opinion-shapers closely connected to the scheme, its significance is even greater than the candidate numbers would suggest. Changes to the syllabus, therefore, are likely to be of importance to the profession as a whole.

Background to the changes

The changes to CTEFLA were wide-ranging with changes to course format, external validation and evaluation procedures, as well as to the syllabus. This paper is only concerned with one area of the syllabus that was substantially revised: language awareness. The CTEFLA (pre-1996) syllabus specifications contained two references to language:

> Practical awareness of:
> Language - Linguistic form, function and meaning including, eg a knowledge of grammar and its terminology, appreciation of structure and function; an understanding of *the principles of selection and grading* and an introduction to how subject matter and context affects language, and the importance of phonology.

Practical ability in:

Presentation and Practice of New Language - The ability to *select language items appropriate to students' needs and level, to divide the items into learnable units*, to present the language clearly and efficiently to students, to devise and operate appropriate activities for *the controlled and free practice of the language presented* and to check learning and understanding at all stages of the process.

(my italics)

Table 1

Implicit in the above is a synthetic ELT syllabus underpinnning the training syllabus. The assumption is that the learning process in the classroom is best organised by dividing the language up into discrete, sequenced units that can be presented to students, and acquired through a sequence of practice activities. In a study of language awareness practices in CTEFLA courses (Kerr, 1993a, 1993b, 1994), it was found that practice closely matched the syllabus in terms of the promotion of the PPP (presentation - practice-production) methodology and that the language focused on was almost exclusively verb-phrase grammar. Such an approach has come under sustained attack in recent years (e.g. Grundy, 1989; Kerr, 1993a; Lewis, 1993; Willis & Willis, 1996) and alternative approaches to language awareness work on training courses have been suggested in publications (e.g. Hales, 1997; Kerr, 1996; Thornbury, 1997; Wright & Bolitho, 1993) and at conferences intended for teacher trainers (e.g. 1993 CTEFLA Conference, 1997 IALS Symposium). The possibility of a revision to the syllabus was generally welcomed.

The new syllabus

The publication of the new syllabus followed a consultation and trialling process that was unparalleled in scope in British ELT. Language awareness is now covered in one of the six syllabus topics and the content is listed as follows:

1.1 Basic concepts and terminology used in ELT for describing form and meaning in language and language use.

1.2 Basic concepts and terminology used for describing language skills and sub-skills.

1.3 Language description and syllabus design for the teaching of English to adults.

1.4 The practical significance of similarities and differences between languages.

1.5 Reference materials for language awareness.

Table 2

Each of these content areas is elaborated further in brief statements of course objectives, but neither here nor in the evaluation framework is there any reference to the grading and sequencing of language items or to the presentation and practice of new language. Although the new syllabus does not preclude the kind of discrete item transmission teaching that was so clearly embedded in the CTEFLA syllabus, the new CELTA syllabus is striking in its *omission* of references to such models of language and teaching. There is, then, the potential for a radical departure from established practices, the possibility of gearing the training process towards a more fashionable (Skehan, 1998: 94) analytic ELT syllabus, more in tune with current language acquisition theory.

Changes in training practices related to language awareness

In order to establish whether the syllabus change had affected training practices on CELTA courses, I collected data from 40 courses in over 30 centres in the first part of 1997. This represented a large sample and included both full and part-time courses, public and private sector, language schools and universities, UK and overseas, experienced and inexperienced trainers. Three sets of data from each course were analysed: course timetables, course application tasks (in which candidates' 'language awareness' is evaluated) and 'pre-course learning tasks' (most of which contain a large section entitled 'Language Awareness' or 'Language Analysis'). The next section of this paper focuses on the course timetables, but conclusions drawn from analysis of the other two sources is consistent with the general picture which emerges below.

Course timetables

Course timetables serve three important purposes: i) as an indication to trainees of the content and evolution of their course, ii) as an indication to the external assessor of how the course is organised, iii) as an aide-mémoire for the team of trainers. Although timetables alone cannot provide a full or accurate picture of the content or methodology of a particular seminar (or series of seminars), they can provide firm clues. The language used by trainers in the writing of these course timetables was subjected to an analysis of lexical adjacency. In the title of any given seminar, I was interested to discover which words were likely / unlikely to co-occur with key terms such as 'language awareness', 'grammar', 'vocabulary' or 'pronunciation'.

The data indicates that it is still standard practice, as it was six years ago (Kerr, 1993a), to include an average of 6 seminars per course entitled 'Language Awareness', 'Language Analysis' or simply 'LA'. Within the scheme as a whole, it would seem that these terms are used indiscriminately. Some course timetables do not provide any further information about what takes place in the 'LA' seminars, but the majority use a colon after the main heading and further details are given. A typical timetable's coverage of 'LA' is given in Table 3.

LA Present Tense	LA Futurity
LA Present Perfect	LA Passives
LA Modality	LA Conditionals

Table 3

An analysis of all the language areas that follow 'Language Awareness / Language Analysis / LA :' in seminar titles is given in table 4.

Verb-phrase grammar		**Non verb-phrase grammar**	
The future	18 (49%)	Determiners / quantifiers	4 (11%)
The present	17 (46%)	Countability	2 (6%)
Perfectives	17 (46%)	Idioms	2
Modal verbs	16 (43%)	Adjectival word order	1 (3%)
Conditionals	13 (35%)	'The noun group'	1
The past	10 (27%)	Relative clauses	1
Phrasal verbs	6 (16%)	Conjunctions	1
Passives	5 (14%)		
Functions	1 (3%)		
Subjunctives	1		
Progressives			

N.B. Sample size: 37

Table 4

Besides the language areas listed above, a small number of other content areas were also found in 'LA' seminars. These are listed in Table 5.

Expression	Frequency
Pronunciation / Phonology	7*
Anticipating problems	3
Vocabulary	2
Coursebooks	2
Test-Teach-Test	2
Presenting language	1
Concept checking	1
Student level	1
Consonant sounds	1
	* These 7 instances come from just 3 timetables.

Table 5

With a small number of exceptions (e.g. four courses that had no reference to language awareness in their timetable), the picture that emerges is fairly uniform. Language awareness work on these courses, at least in as much as it is addressed directly in seminars is primarily concerned with verb phrase grammar for the purposes of presenting this language to students. Whilst there is some agreement as to which verb structures it is appropriate study on the course, it remains the case that no verb structure is covered on over 50% of courses. This then begs the question of how and why particular language areas are selected. Recent developments in the analysis of computer corpora, of collocation, of spoken grammar and of discourse have had very little impact in the way that CELTA trainers have conceived of and packaged language awareness for their trainees. Awareness of lexis and phonology is considered separate from language awareness. To summarise, the data suggests that, with only a few innovatory courses as exceptions, very little has changed since Kerr (1993a), at which time the situation was little different from that described in Shaw (1979).

Conclusion

Whilst the new CELTA syllabus is still in its infancy, it is too early to say whether changes to training practices can be expected. However, for those critics of practices on the old CTEFLA scheme who would hope to see a pre-service teacher training course more in line with current models of language description and acquisition there is perhaps little reason to be optimistic. Markee (1997: 4) makes two observations that are relevant in this context. Firstly, curriculum development and teacher development are indivisible, rather than separate, issues. The trainers who deliver these courses work in a business of low profit margins where time is rarely made available for teacher development and there is a heavy administrative load on their time. The training of trainers usually follows an apprenticeship model which is more likely to perpetuate current practices than to encourage innovations. Other changes to the evaluation system of the course (both internal and external) mean that there is less scope for innovation than previously, and fewer opportunities for the diffusion of innovation. Secondly, Markee points out that educational change always occurs within a context where cultural, economic, political and other factors may either promote or inhibit innovation. Skehan (1998: 94) lists three reasons why current practices are so durable: secure teacher roles, a conservative teacher training profession and surface accountability. Within the systemic ecology of the CELTA scheme, the forces of inertia outweigh those of change. In this context, it would be surprising if this particular change to an educational system did not join the 75% of all educational innovations that fail to survive (Adams & Chen, cited in Markee, 1997: 6).

References

Grundy, P. 1989. 'Gone to teachers every one - a critique of accepted pre-service teacher training', *The Teacher Trainer* 3 / 2: 4 - 10

Hales, T. 1997. 'Exploring data-driven language awareness' *ELT Journal* 51/3: 217 - 223

Kerr, P. 1993a. 'Language training on pre-service courses for native speakers', *Modern English Teacher* 2 / 4 : 40-3

Kerr, P. 1993b. 'What makes an EFL teacher,' in *CTEFLA 1993 Conference Report*, Cambridge: UCLES, pp.14-16

Kerr, P. 1994. 'Language awareness in native-speaker teacher training courses', *IATEFL TT SIG Newsletter* No. 11: 2 - 5

Kerr, P.1996. 'Grammar for Trainee Teachers' in Willis & Willis (1996): 93-98

Lewis, M. 1993. *The Lexical Approach.* Hove:LTP

Markee, N. 1997. *Managing Curricular Innovation.* Cambridge: CUP

Shaw, P.A. 1979. 'Handling a language component in a teacher training course' in *Teacher Training*, Holden, S. (Ed.), MEP.

Skehan, P. 1998. *A Cognitive Approach to Language Lelarning. Oxford: OUP*

Willis, J. & D. (eds) 1996. *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching.* Oxford: Heinemann

Wright, T. & Bolitho, R. 1993. 'Language awareness: a missing link in language teacher education?' *ELT Journal* 47/4:292-304