

# Critical language awareness in foreign language learning

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## **Resumen**

*Este trabajo ofrece una descripción panorámica de las formas en que la Conciencia Crítica de la Lengua puede contribuir en la enseñanza y aprendizaje del Inglés como lengua global, lo cual incluye un conjunto de medios digitales y modalidades de comunicación visuales y verbales. La panorámica ofrecida comienza con el concepto de Conciencia de la Lengua, se detiene en mayor profundidad en el de Conciencia Crítica de la Lengua y establece un paralelo con el impacto de Paulo Freire y su concepción basada en las nociones de justicia social, identidad, poder e inequidad. Finalmente, se presenta el desarrollo histórico en contexto de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en Chile y se detalla el sentido más amplio en que el discurso está siendo definido, aquel de "discurso multimedia".*

**Palabras claves:** - Conciencia crítica de la lengua - Conciencia de la lengua - Transferabilidad - Competencia comunicativa intercultural

## **Abstract**

*This paper provides a panoramic description of the ways in which the so-called Critical Language Awareness (CLA), can contribute to the teaching and learning of English as a global language, which increasingly involves a wide range of visual, verbal, and digitally-delivered media and modes of communication. The overview presented begins with the concept of Language Awareness, and goes into more depth with respect to that of Critical Language Awareness, establishing a parallel with Paulo Freire's conception based on the notions of social justice, identity, power and inequality. Finally, the history of the teaching of foreign languages in Chile is presented, and a broader sense of the concept of discourse is outlined, that of multimedia discourse.*

**Key Words:** - critical language awareness - language awareness - transferability- intercultural communicative competence

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## 1. Introduction

Studies conducted over the past eight to ten years within the field of applied linguistics provide a wealth of new approaches to language learning and teaching. This paper advocates for approaches that take into account the perspectives afforded by Critical Language Awareness, or CLA<sup>1</sup>. CLA will help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers realize current objectives involving intercultural communicative competence and, in so doing, move foreign language instruction in Chile towards a broader and more inclusive understanding of English as a global language. In the context of Chile's ongoing history of foreign language instruction, CLA offers a way of moving past the Eurocentric tendency registered within foreign language curricula from within its very origins in the formation of the state. This paper examines theoretical and practical challenges facing those involved in the teaching and learning of English as a global language that increasingly involves a wide range of visual, verbal, and digitally-delivered media and modes of communication. CLA presents an approach that will adapt to these changes, an approach which furthermore is consonant with recent modifications and transformations in university-level studies in English cultural and language Studies.

## 2. Language awareness

CLA can be understood as springing from an earlier movement called 'language awareness' which developed in England in response to government reports bearing out a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with English and foreign language education in public schools, (The Kingman and Cox reports, DES 1988, DES 1989).

Language awareness, initially defined by Fairclough (1992) as "conscious attention to properties of language and language use as an element of language education," is substantially impacted by the experience and perception of the individual. Thus Donmall (1985) describes language awareness as involving "a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life". Language awareness, according to Donmall, operates on three distinctive levels:

- a) The cognitive level, referring to awareness of language patterns
- b) The affective level, ie, with regard to forming attitudes
- c) The social level, which references the improvement of learners' effectiveness as communicators

Among the studies demonstrating that language awareness, as a form of consciousness-raising, facilitates language development, Leow, writing in 1997, concludes that:

- a) meta-awareness apparently correlates with an increased usage of hypothesis testing and morphological rule formation (conceptually driven processing)
- b) learners demonstrating a higher level of awareness performed significantly better than those with a lower level of awareness on both the recognition and written production of the targeted forms, (Leow 1977:560, in Gabrys 2002).

Arndt, Harvey and Nuttall (2000) regard a focus on language awareness as bringing numerous benefits, such as:

- a) speakers are more appreciative of the complexity and sophistication of communication through language
- b) LA methodology offers a productive and rewarding route for exploring the richness and complexity of language
- c) Speakers are encouraged to consider what is involved in attempts to transfer L1 skills to another language and thus to draw inferential relationships between languages, which is one of the first steps in developing intercultural communication skills.
- d) LA helps, perhaps on the most practical level, so that those who are involved in ELT derive a broadened, deepened understanding of how English works.

To these four benefits of 1) appreciation, 2) greater understanding of complexity, 3) encouraging speakers to consider transferability, and 4) a broader and deeper understanding of English, I would add a number of considerations given the immediate context of most learners within the EFL situation, as learners who have already acquired their mother language. LA offers an approach and context that these learners find advantageous as they develop a broader and deeper awareness of their own ongoing use of and relation to language itself, whether that language be English or Spanish. The point is worth pursuing still further, to suggest that LA is ultimately built on a foundation of understanding how we function as human beings, and a conception of human experience as a universal experience that is expressed by language, whatever that language might be, and whatever our relation to that language might be.

With respect to LA's stress on individual perception and experience, I would here mention an aspect of my own academic and intellectual formation as illuminating or at least illustrating the processes by which language awareness becomes critical language awareness. At one point in my academic career I had thought that the study of language functioning would eventually lead to the construction of a sort of grammar of life, much as Levi-Strauss sought a grammar of myths that would explain and summarize all myths, or as Chomsky postulated language universals that would establish the underlying parameters of all languages. Even as I persisted and persist in the possibly utopian or woefully universalistic ideal of discovering a single and all-embracing grammar, my experience of reading Maturana, Hymes, Bernstein, Freire, Barthes and Foucault and experiencing the language in situ within the context of Chile and the United States, I have come to regard the complexity of human experience as ultimately irreducible to any one grammar. Rather, I have come to regard language's nature as multiple and probably ineffable. Given the infinite, dynamic, eccentric, and probably irreducible nature of experience, I doubt that any language can be reduced to any one set of rules. Even so, the shared social and institutional experience and context of working with students and colleagues from other universities finds me more than ever committed to the underlying project of LA, adding this important caveat. As an attempt to involve the learner in raising consciousness about the processes of language learning, LA will by practical necessity consider language as social practice, since language does not exist outside its sociocultural milieu, above all when we are operating within a set of institutional and pedagogical considerations. That consideration of language as critical practice, involving self-consciousness, and as socially enacted, engaged with others, is what Critical Language Awareness could well provide.

### 3. Critical language awareness

At this point, we need to clarify that the proposal to consider CLA as a foundational concept for language teaching programs is an issue at the level of approach. Here, I am following the traditional distinction (coined by Anthony) distinguishing between approach, method and technique. CLA as an approach offers an orientation to language learning and teaching that can or cannot become embodied as method or transformed, subsequently, into technique. This orientation towards CLA as approach can be situated at the same level as that of humanistic psychology, to some extent incorporating and informing methods such as Community Language Learning and the Silent Way.

What critical language awareness adds to the approaches propounded by its predecessors is its alliance or coalition with advocates of Critical Pedagogy. From this alliance or coalition three major principles emerge: first, that teaching is emancipatory; second, that teaching is oriented towards the recognition of difference; and third, an engagement with teaching as an oppositional practice in which all participants are continuously thinking towards the prospects for empowerment, particularly of sectors that have been disempowered or excluded in the past. Marking CLA's engagement with emancipatory recognition of difference within teaching as an oppositional practice is an orientation towards the social that CLA shares with a multitude of related critical approaches, all of which are similarly involved with emancipatory educational practices. Among these related critical approaches that are of particular importance for CLA are critical discourse analysis, as propounded, for instance, by Teun Van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, critical literacy as in the work of Henry Giroux and Ira Shor, critical applied linguistics, as in the work of Alastair Pennycook, Braj Kachru and S. Canagarajah. I would note in passing that all of these approaches and thinkers find support in the philosophical commitments of the Frankfurt school and primary inspiration in the range of freirean approaches to education.

To give a sense of how CLA stands in relation to other approaches from the Frankfurt School and from Freiré and his followers, I would quote Clark and Ivanic, whose work on *The politics of writing* provides a sense of the aims and scope of CLA, which, they say, looks to "empower learners by providing them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experiences and practices, the language practices of others in the institutions of which they are a part and in the wider society within which they live" (Clark and Ivanic, 1997, p.217).

As Clark and Ivanic have suggested, the empowerment of learners constitutes the main purpose of CLA. This concept will not be foreign to Chilean eyes or ears given our familiarity with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who has been one of the leading figures in bringing into educational discussions the notions of social justice, identity, power and inequality. His now classic text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, opposes two types of education: banking education and problem posing education. Perhaps his greatest single contribution involves the argument for advocating for change in current practices, changes that would usher in shifts in both perspective and action, moving from an imposing monologic view to a dialogic and collaborative praxis.

To the overall aim or direction provided by freirian education, the field of applied linguistics presents seeds of criticality in work of linguists such as Pennycook, who has identified three main features that define critical work in language teaching. These

features begin with the domain, or area of interest, moving on to the insistence on constant questioning of common assumptions, and keeping always in mind the importance of transformative pedagogy. Thus Pennycook would have us ask, repeatedly, the following questions:

- a) with regard to the domain or area of interest: To what extent do particular domains define a critical approach, a self-reflexive stance on critical theory?
- b) with regard to underlying assumptions: To what extent does the work constantly question common assumptions, including its own?
- c) with regard to transformative pedagogy: How does the particular approach to education hope to change things?

All of the matters of approach and method that I have sketched out, deriving from freirian pedagogy and from applied linguistics are, I would argue, essential to critically engaging any language teacher training program. Chief among the contextual concerns to be taken into consideration are the institutional mechanisms and settings which will encourage collaborative work among representatives from multiple programs, thus enabling the participants to bring to their individual institutional settings a nuanced engagement with issues of gender, power, social justice, race, to mention just a few primary considerations. The ways and principles in which the curriculum relates to critical theory also need to be explored, along with developing an appreciation for how those who are teaching and conducting research within the program are aiming to change current practices. As a matter of fact, these concerns have been explored and discussed to some extent by the creation of RECAP (Red de Capacitación y Perfeccionamiento para Profesores de Inglés), a consortium of higher education institutions aiming to promote high standards of quality in English teaching training. What is needed for CLA to take root is a change in the beliefs and attitudes to language learning from a decontextualized, explicit grammar oriented approach to an inclusion of the political and social dimension in which the language is used. As Clark and Ivanic point out, language cannot be separated from the social contexts which shape it:

...language forms cannot be considered independently of how they are used to communicate in context. Further, individual acts of communication in context cannot be considered independently of the social forces which have set up the convention of appropriacy for that context.

Within the Chilean EFL context, implementing an approach that takes into account the power of social forces within what Clark and Ivanic describe as the convention of appropriacy could involve, as one possibility, having students develop skills in sociolinguistic and ethnographic research. We can do this, for example, by having students engage in projects to analyze and evaluate the use of language (s), registers, accents and dialects around them. Among the sort of questions that could well guide such projects would be: Is Chile a monolingual country? Are other languages spoken? What is their status? What variety of English am I learning? Concerning the English language, students may explore the implications of its global spread having as a reference the model provided by Kachru 1985 representing three concentric circles that establish relationships between the center and the periphery. The inner circle, or center, represents the technologically advanced communities of the West which are the traditional bases of English: the US, UK, Ireland, Canadá, Australia and New Zealand. The outer circle includes ex British colonies where English plays a role as a second language in multilingual settings and include Singapore, India, Malawi, Nigeria, Barbados, Malaysia and other territories. The expanding circle includes nations where

English has acquired the status of international language and is taught as a foreign language, as is the case of Chile, China, Japan, Greece, Indonesia, Mexico and others.

#### 4. Historical context

To further illustrate how the sociolinguistic concerns of CLA will be of particular value for foreign language teaching in Chile in the present as well as in the foreseeable future, I will make some brief observations about historical contexts of our profession's current situation (see Vera 1942 for a partial history of English language teaching in Chile). A kind of genealogical map that identifies kinship offers important awareness for the background to our present location. Regarding the question of what niche our program seems to occupy in the current context of institutionalized foreign language learning and teaching, I would urge taking a long view, a Janus-faced approach that looks retrospectively into the origins of foreign language teaching, and prospectively, towards future adaptation and change. Looking to the distant past, to the origins of foreign language teaching in Chile, we can find the following statement:

*"Habiendo hecho el particular examen sobre si aun en la más perfecta lengua de los Indios se pueden explicar bien, y con propiedad los misterios de nuestra Santa Fe Católica, se ha reconocido que no es posible sin cometer grandes disonancias, e imperfecciones", Ley de Indias dictada en Valladolid el 17/7/1550 (Libro VI, tit I, ley xviii, p. 193, citado en Neira 1997)*

This quotation from 1550 synthesizes the then-prevailing language policies in this New World, where the colonizing power summarily dismissed the native languages, no matter how perfectly expressed (*aun en la más perfecta lengua de los Indios*), finding those languages to be wholly inappropriate for the emancipatory aim of the time, located exclusively within the realm of the theology. Consonant with the summary dismissal of the native languages is the reproduction of the European scholastic patterns for language teaching, in which Latin and Greek are presented as exemplary linguistic models because of their use within theology and, more broadly, their association with ecclesiastic power.

As we move closer towards the national period a somewhat broader-based model appears in one of the first references to foreign languages, dating from 1811, when Don Manuel Salas mentions the importance of foreign languages in the education of the population. His ideas are subsequently registered in the foundations of the Instituto Nacional, in a curriculum that includes the study of Spanish, French as well as English grammar.

For the most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, English, German and French have been taught to greater or lesser degrees throughout most of Chile's public schools. Within the national panorama, regional differences yield some interesting phenomena. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the North of Chile, for example, English became more dominant for political and economic considerations related to the exploitation of the mineral mines, which lay primarily in the hands of British capitals. Within Central Chile's proximity to the seat of government and diplomacy, French was the language of foreign language instruction, while German was predominantly taught in the South, where Pérez Rosales had brought a large group of German colonizers.

Moving closer to the present day, it is worth pointing to the continuing impact of educational reforms dating from the 1960's, as these spurred changes in the status of

foreign language teaching, changes relevant to immediate past and current institutional contexts for foreign language teaching in Chile.

Notable in the 1960s is the notion of foreign language education as optional or dispensable. Beginning in the 1960s, the new university entrance examination, Prueba de Aptitud Académica, included no measures of foreign language proficiency. While a new law was passed in 1981 regulating university studies, university status was granted to only 12 programs, with none of those programs involving teacher training. Even the successful inclusion and retention within the secondary educational system of larger portions of the population had an adverse impact on foreign language education, as the school day was divided into two halves that excluded the curriculum in foreign languages, following the rationale that the school day no longer included enough time for the study of foreign languages. In a related move, foreign languages became elective subjects in the school curriculum.

In contrast to this set of adverse conditions for foreign language instruction, the current picture shows remarkable improvement. English is back into the school curriculum with the school reform and is now taught from 5° Básico up to 4° Medio. Most encouraging of all, the Ministry of Education has launched the Chile Bilingue program and private universities have joined the traditional universities in training teachers of English.

These circumstances are critically important, as they reflect a changing world order, and Chile's engagement with that change. This brings me to my final point, which regards the critical awareness of discourse in the foreseeable future.

## **5. Critical awareness of discourse**

As Fairclough 2004 reminds us, the latest developments in CLA take into account the world's changing configurations. Even as the shape of new global social order becomes more evident, so does the need for a critical awareness of language "*as part of people's resources for living in new ways, in new circumstances*". Among those new circumstances is a broader sense of what constitutes discourse, given that the linguistic code is part of a broad array of multiple semiotic codes, including, for example, visual images. Several authors have already approached this emerging type of discourse, called by some "multimedia discourse" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2000; for implications for TEFL see Farías, 2003). The production, consumption, and comprehension of media in all of its aspects will surely play an increasingly important role in the language learning curriculum. Within this framework of ongoing change, I would argue that a sense of where we have been and a common sense of where we might be headed, with regard to foreign language instruction, will be crucial as we expand our concept of what is meant by literacy to include a variety of practices. This will include numerous visual and digital modes. From the inclusion of film and other visual media into our curricula, from the use of instant messaging among our students to our working with them to develop the ability to work in geographically distributed teams, from our recognizing the importance of research that is attentive to the ability to extract digitally-encoded information, to the ability to share that information between networks or across programs or disciplines, applied linguistics and the approaches generated by critical language awareness have a great deal to offer. I believe that these approaches will provide us, as English language teachers, with adaptable tools enabling us to engage emancipatory change within a very wide range of possible futures.

## Notas

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