

Teacher language awareness

Daniel Xerri and Odette Vassallo expose the need for explicit training.

Defined as ‘the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively’ (Thornbury 1997: x), Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) is considered something that all ELT practitioners should have at their disposal. A sound understanding of the English language, how it works and how students learn it and use it, enables teachers to exploit their pedagogical knowledge, skills, and strategies more effectively. According to Mok (2013: 174), 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’. For these reasons, developing teachers’ TLA is of the utmost significance.

Background

A group of 232 teachers of English in Malta attended a 12-hour in-service TLA training course. The trainees came from both the primary and secondary school sectors while the training sessions were run by 12 ELT trainers from the private language teaching sector. This cross-pollination in teacher development (Xerri 2014), was not only beneficial for the teachers but also served to develop the trainers’ beliefs (Xerri in press). The course focused on enhancing participants’ knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation and consisted of hands-on activities, using loop input (Woodward 2003) designed to provide teachers with a deeper understanding of language systems for effective teaching.

To explore the participants’ beliefs and attitudes in relation to TLA and training focusing on its development, a mixed methods study was conducted. Data was collected using a pre-course questionnaire, a course evaluation form, and a post-course questionnaire completed by 158 trainees. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 12 teacher trainers.

Level of TLA development

The majority of teachers rated their TLA as highly developed despite 37 per cent admitting receiving little or no TLA training. The trainers, on the other hand, indicated that the teachers’ language awareness was not as well developed as the latter believed. One trainer pointed out that ‘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’. This seems to suggest that there is a disjuncture between teachers’ conceptions of their TLA and its actual level.

Significance of TLA training

Both the teachers and trainers considered TLA important for effective teaching. In the words of one of the trainers,

‘it 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’.

The absolute majority of teachers considered the training course was relevant to their teaching (93 per cent) and applicable to their classroom practices (93 per cent). Moreover, they indicated that the training had led to an increase in their level of TLA (95 per cent). One teacher affirmed, ‘It has refreshed my previous knowledge of the language systems. Due to this course I will surely be more aware of the language I use during instruction as well as when designing worksheets’. According to a trainer, ‘TLA training gives teachers confidence. Knowing the language well gives them the confidence to teach it and to experiment with methodology’. It seems clear that enhanced language awareness facilitates the task of identifying and adequately addressing the main learning problems that students might have with the language.

The course seems to have made most of the participants aware of the need for more TLA training. In fact, one teacher mentioned that her ‘favourite session was the one on pronunciation as it made all concerned more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as well as misconceptions’. This suggests that in addition to their metalinguistic knowledge, training also needs to develop teachers’ beliefs and attitudes in relation to TLA.

Professional development plays a pivotal role in maximizing teachers’ ability to capitalise on their knowledge of language systems for a more effective pedagogy. In-service training should focus on enhancing teachers’ metalinguistic knowledge as well as on developing related beliefs and attitudes.



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References from the authors on request