

Consciousness-Raising in Freshman English

David McLachlan Jeffrey, Asia University

INTRODUCTION

Consciousness-raising is a psycholinguistic concept related to the widely debated question of how second languages are learned and is specifically concerned with the cognitive question of how students' minds work.

This paper examines consciousness-raising and considers the ways in which I use it in my Freshman English classes at the Center for English Language Education at Asia University, Tokyo, Japan.

DEFINITIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Rutherford (1987, 151) makes the following observation about second language learning:

It is incontestable that one cannot learn a language without direct contact with that language. No one could ever learn English, for example, given a vocabulary list and set of rules for syntax, morphology, phonology, etc., no matter how accurate and comprehensive.

Hence, what is required, according to Rutherford (*ibid.*), is the availability of a "subset" of the formal range of the target language for students, and:

...from this subset of grammatical properties the student is able to "project" to grammatical phenomena that may not themselves have been present in the data to which he was exposed.

Similarly, Skehan (1998, 64) sees consciousness-raising as 'tasks that draw attention to a particular form, but give no explicit information' and Ellis (1992, 138) defines it as 'a type of form-focused instruction designed to make learners aware of a specific feature'.

Willis (1996, 64) says consciousness-raising occurs when:

...students are encouraged to notice particular features of the language, to draw conclusions from what they notice and to organize their view of language in the light of the conclusions they have drawn.

The essence of consciousness-raising can be found in the interplay between learning and acquisition. Whilst language learning refers to the conscious internalization of rules and formulas, language acquisition tends to be unconscious and spontaneous (Krashen: 1987, 1988). Acquisition is similar to the way children learn their mother tongue (however, consciousness-raising refers more specifically to second language students). Krashen believed that no transfer could happen between the learned and the acquired because of their different inputs, but Ellis (1982: 76) drawing on Stevick (1980) points out that:

It may be that communicative opportunity is necessary as the *switch* that starts the flow of learnt to acquired knowledge.

Consciousness-raising assists in both learning and acquisition in that it relies on some explicit teaching, but uses explicit teaching merely as a foundation to help students understand and use language features by subtly drawing their attention to them.

In this way, consciousness-raising makes teaching effective, but by no means should the explicit side of teaching dominate. Doing so would hinder the automatization of acquisition, as Cavour (2002: 27) explains:

While it is true that teaching explicitly certain strategies could strengthen learners' weak areas, it may also hinder the automatization of language acquisition and, in turn, slow down communication, the ultimate purpose of foreign language classes.

This leads to a related consciousness-raising issue, which is the distinction between realistic and real English (Pearse 1983). In Japan, where the explicit approach is mostly used, many students become stuck in the learning phase, applying English as a realistic language, which prohibits consciousness-raising taking effect. For consciousness-raising to work teachers need to close the gap between realistic English (saying something to use English), and real English (using English to say something) by using language learning (formal study) as a springboard for acquisition (spontaneity).

In this way teachers can draw students' attention to prominent characteristics of the target language and let this learning process facilitate acquisition. It is the cognitive capacity of the students that is most important in this respect, rather than mere memorization and regurgitation as in realistic English. Consciousness-raising requires second language acquisition to not be simply the accumulation of one isolated grammatical entity upon another, but rather the acquisition of new language skills upon pre-existing knowledge, through attention to form rather than merely on memorizing details.

Consciousness-raising requires salient features of the target language to be isolated

and focused upon so that students do not have to know everything about the grammar of a target language in order to speak it. This is important to counter the effects of fossilization, defined by Ellis (1992, 139) as:

...the process responsible for the cessation of learning some way short of target-language competence.

These salient features then become guidelines allowing students to draw their own conclusions. As such, because it is the student who discovers it (rather than being drilled in by endless repetition), the student's retention capacity becomes stronger, as awareness is more acute.

Consciousness-raising is also an invisible process, in that it need not be realized immediately in conversational output, but is, at the same time, also a process making fairly significant changes in the mind of the student. The student begins to remember and understand grammar forms, and through this awareness they become inculcated as part of the overall study process.

FRESHMAN ENGLISH AND CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Freshman English at Asia University is based on the communicative approach, which in turn is based on real English, as opposed to realistic English. It is in Freshman English that most students have a chance to use real English for the first time in their lives.

The communicative approach encourages students to converse as much as possible in English, and to enjoy this without worrying about making mistakes, and stressing that the most important aspect of conversation is the ability to convey meaning and not grammatical perfection. In the communicative approach, grammar is a means to an end, and not an end in itself, with the objective of acquiring realistic English. This important feature of Freshman English allows for consciousness-raising activities to take place. In this way Freshman English could be said to be compatible with consciousness-raising.

Another reason for Freshman English being compatible with consciousness-raising is its semi-intensive nature whereby students have forty-five minutes of classes five times a week. For consciousness-raising to work, students need to remember things from day to day. In many other English programs and courses in Japan, students have only one class per week, which is inadequate for successful consciousness-raising to have effect. In Freshman English the frequency of classes, and time allowed to assign homework and do listening and conversational activities draws the students' attention to form and allows for a 'perceptual salience' that is described by Skehan (1998, 48) as:

...how prominent a form is in input ... the more a form stands out in the input

stream, the more likely it is to be noticed.

In addition to this, the way in which I structure and sequence the activities in my Freshman English classes are important ways of optimizing the existing needs of frequency and perceptual salience, which serves to maximize consciousness-raising (as will be demonstrated shortly).

The base text for my classes is *Firsthand Success: Beginners' Course 2* (2001). Its underlying philosophy is consistent with the communicative objectives of Freshman English, which in turn lends itself to the facilitation of consciousness-raising. As the introduction in the *Firsthand Success* textbook (ibid. 4) says:

Firsthand Success helps beginning students learn to communicate in English with confidence...people learn English by using English...with support, learners really can communicate in English, even from the beginning.

Consciousness-raising is also enhanced when additional material is used with the base text, as Skehan (1988, 49) says:

If attentional resources are variable, forms which call attention to themselves and are perceptually salient will have a greater chance of impinging on consciousness.

I therefore also use videos, photocopies of lessons from other books and lessons downloaded from the Internet. When using supplementary material it is important to maintain the same theme, to reinforce the role of perpetual saliency, and in this way make it contribute to consciousness-raising.

APPLYING CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING IN FRESHMAN ENGLISH

My approach to teaching in Freshman English aims to maximize communicative opportunity and is in an attempt to teach the skills necessary to acquire the language with each step performing a consciousness-raising function. This is similar to the PPP approach (**p**reparation, then **p**ractice, then **p**erformance) in the sequencing of activities. Finchpark (2002: 4) describes the PPP approach as:

...teaching the micro skills first (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure), before asking the learners to use the language (communication). The focus is on the various components of the language first. Students then have to fit these together in comprehending or producing language.

In my classes homework is the preparation, listening activities are the practice, while the conversation activities are the performance.

Despite the popularity of the PPP approach, Ranalli (2001) draws attention to criticism of it as being an unnatural learning approach that ignores the natural order of acquisition and its undue stress on productive practice. Ranalli's criticism may hold for very motivated and proactive students. However, my students are extremely passive and need to be helped in a step-by-step way of raising their consciousness to the forms to be used in conversation. I find its use appropriate as a means of bridging the gap between accuracy and fluency among the extremely passive students that I teach.

It is a way of structuring the learning process so that the student can most effectively grasp matters, and also concerns how activities are sequenced so that students can observe salient forms and build on them. Learning is not an isolated process because languages are extensive and comprehensive. Learning is rather a process of adding new information to existing understanding, so that students can relate to what they already know.

HOMEWORK AS THE FOUNDATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Homework is the consciousness-raising foundation upon which all other activities in my classes hinge because it draws attention to new vocabulary and language forms that will be relied on in the listening and conversation activities that follow. The homework assignments keep the students focussed, extrinsically motivated, and prepared for each day's lesson. As Skehan (1998, 48) mentions, 'the more frequent a form, the more likely it is to be noticed and then become integrated into the language system'. Homework serves this purpose in my classes.

A little homework is regularly assigned as pre-task activities usually from the Grammar Check tasks or from the Writing Units of the Firsthand Success textbook, then checked the following day. It usually does not take more than fifteen minutes for the students to complete at home. Homework is usually a grammar-focus exercise coupled with a written exercise (usually by matching, or filling in missing words, such as information-gap tasks). It also sometimes concerns the learning of new words from the vocabulary sections of the textbook, and a short test is given at the start of the next classes to check if students can remember the words, or students can use them in sentences to enhance their awareness of them.

Homework is always chosen that will draw the students' attention to new forms of grammar, new vocabulary and typical expressions that will be used in conversation exercises with their classmates the next day (in personal contexts). It is important to note that the grammar homework focuses on the communicative context to enhance the raising of consciousness through attention to form that can be easily related to practical conversational

use.

Homework is where the retention and cognitive organization of prominent language detail begin. These then become more embedded in the minds of the students with listening and conversation practice. This in turn lays the foundations upon which further knowledge is added in the future.

I find that students who do not do the homework are not able to cope adequately with the listening and speaking activities the next day in the classroom. Homework ensures that the students undergo their learning activities with the necessary seriousness, which in turn allows for consciousness-raising to take hold.

LISTENING AND CONVERSATION AS THE MANIFESTATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

Consciousness-raising is strived for through ensuring that, as far as possible, there is a link between grammatical form (done at home) and conversation (in the classroom). It is accepted that the students will never gain conversational proficiency by merely studying the rules of sentence construction, but by using what they have gained through focusing on grammatical forms in practical conversation where it is most needed, they are engaged in a process consciousness-raising that will yield results at some future time. Thus homework checking in the classroom only takes about five minutes, listening activities another ten minutes, and the remaining thirty minutes are fluency-based conversational activities. The efforts students make to be comprehensible in their conversation activities (and Speaking Tests) are believed to facilitate acquisition where they apply what they have consciously learnt before.

Listening activities aim at reinforcing the link between what has already been drawn to their attention through focus on grammatical form for homework, and is also a good bridge between the homework and the conversational activities that follow. Listening activities are the interface between grammar and lexis where students listen for gist (through extracting main ideas or information) as well as for detail. Video activities are sometimes added to the CD activities to help bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world.

Listening activities serve as a refresher and a warm-up, and assist in getting the students to use the grammatical forms to some extent in their conversations. However, the listening exercises are covered quickly to afford students to make the most opportunity of the conversation activities, and benefit from them. If the listening activities take too long, the students begin to forget the forms that they learned for homework, and hence cannot apply them adequately in the conversation activities. This is important for a fuller impact of consciousness-raising.

Unrehearsed and largely unfettered conversational activities constitute the bulk of classroom time, and I act mainly as facilitator by preparing the students for conversational

activities and then letting them get on with it. The themes remain the same as they were for homework. For example, if the homework was on the topic of fashion, then so would both the listening and the conversation activities be on fashion. This is done in a step-by-step way to maximize consciousness-raising.

The students are also circulated among each other in small groups so that they get maximum contact with each other during the conversation activities. I will, for example, give them a topic to talk about, not all of a sudden, but rather the process will be staggered. It will begin with the students perhaps writing down a couple of thoughts to aid the thinking process, and then talking about it. At first, they are rather passive, but after talking on the same topic with more partners the conversations become more and more active, and they seem to enjoy it more.

Students are encouraged to personalize what they are learning, through expressing their own ideas and opinions as much as possible. Students are encouraged to use the grammatical regularities that they covered in homework. In this way, I try to promote co-operative learning (and discourage competition) as a form of consciousness-raising, where students are encouraged to share their knowledge. Also, while the students are practicing conversation topics in the classroom, they are constantly rotated into different groups, so that they get as much experience as possible in speaking to different people.

In conversational activities, students are encouraged to place most emphasis on fluency (as opposed to accuracy), and conversational content and strategy, as well as physical gestures and eye contact play important roles. Students are taught how to open and close conversations, introduce and develop topics, and understand and use common useful expressions as well as idiomatic phrases. They are reminded often that they do not have to understand every word they encounter, just as it is in the real life situation, and they are encouraged to guess its meaning from the context of the situation. It is felt that this also aids consciousness-raising.

SPEAKING TESTS AS THE CULMINATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

The consciousness-raising process that starts with homework, manifests itself in the listening and conversation activities, and culminates with the speaking tests.

In the Speaking Tests the students are expected to show that they can recall and use forms of speech related to the topics covered in the past few weeks, and couple them with their own insights in communication.

On the day of the speaking quiz, three students are randomly chosen, enter the testing room and sit facing each other at a table. They choose one quiz question from a set of quiz questions that are written on cards and placed face down on the table. The students talk about this question in English with each other for three minutes. I then give each of the three students a grade. After the three minutes are up, a new group of students is called to

the room, and the process continues until all the students have been tested.

I administer various quizzes and tests, but the ones that count most in terms of their final grades are the speaking tests. At least four speaking tests are held per semester. These tests are important consciousness-raisers as they give a definite purpose for homework and classroom activities, and thereby ensure that students undergo their consciousness-raising activities with the necessary seriousness.

A larger portion of the grade is allocated to the 'content of conversation' and to the 'communication strategies', than to 'grammar and vocabulary', and 'pronunciation'. 'Content of conversation' relates to the ability to converse on a topic with some detail or reasons for opinions. 'Communication strategies' relate to starting conversations, responding to questions, asking for more information, and closing a conversation, and also includes gestures and eye contact.

Fluency is thereby given greater importance than accuracy. In this way, I encourage the students to make meaningful conversation a skill, while their attention to grammatical form is in the process of unfolding at a slower pace and at a largely unconscious level.

Knowing that they will be tested a week or two later on the same subject matter, and knowing that their homework will not only be checked the next day, but will also enable them to converse more in the classroom the next day and thereby enable them to acquire more participation points, the students pay a lot more serious attention to the forms of grammatical structures as preparation than we believe they otherwise would. This, I feel, assists in consciousness-raising playing as large as possible a role in my classes.

CONCLUSION

I view the daily consistency of Freshman English as a good opportunity to apply consciousness-raising in as many ways as possible. It is important to draw the students' attention to as many forms of the language as possible, and give the students as much opportunity to practice these forms with other students so that consciousness-raising is enhanced.

The frequency of classes, the variety and nature of the texts, daily homework on grammar forms, listening and conversation exercises in the classrooms, practicing the grammar forms in personal ways, and the build up to the speaking tests all contribute to consciousness-raising. This is especially so if homework is the preparation, listening activities are the practice and conversation is the performance. I believe that this way of sequencing activities facilitates consciousness-raising by allowing awareness of language forms to manifest naturally in the acquisition process. These complement each other in order to allow consciousness-raising to unfold. I feel that teachers should be constantly aware of consciousness-raising, and its benefits.

The next consciousness-raising experience for the students is the real world, where life is the teacher. Hopefully, one year of consciousness-raising in Freshman English may be enough to encourage them to speak English outside the classroom, where life itself becomes a consciousness-raising experience of gaining higher levels of English proficiency.

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