



Raising Language Awareness of EFL Learners in Student-Centered Classroom

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Abstract. EFL learners in the same context might have different outcomes in their English behaviors. The reasons might be quite complex but one important reason is that different learners have different levels of Language Awareness (LA), and higher level of language awareness contributes to more learning. The current study takes the theoretical framework of self-determination theory and designs engagement activities to raise LA of EFL learners. The study reveals that in student-centered classroom, with enhanced activities that require more engagement, students assume more responsibility in their learning and construct more understanding of language, hence their language awareness could be raised.

Keywords: Engagement activities · Language awareness · Autonomy · Scaffolding

1 Introduction

In the theories of second language acquisition (SLA), input, interaction, and output constitute the major engagement activities. However, in traditional classrooms of English language learning in China, language knowledge is more emphasized rather than language engagement activity, the consequence of which is that English is learned in the way of learning other subjects, in other words, students are not much engaged in language behaviors. Lack of engagement results in less attention to language features. The term “attention”, or “noticing”, “awareness”, “consciousness”, used interchangeably in some language research, is of great significance in language engagement. EFL learners in the same context might have different outcomes in language behavior; one of the reasons might be that they have different language awareness (LA), and designing engagement activities to raise EFL learners’ awareness remains a tough task in English teaching. The present study takes the theoretical research framework of “constructivism”, trying to design engagement activities related to input, interaction, and output to increase LA raising of EFL learners in student-centered classroom. In these activities, students are encouraged to construct their understanding of language, rather than being passive knowledge receivers. The study reveals that with these enhanced engagement activities, learners have more language activities in and out of class, and therefore could raise their language awareness.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) [19] takes the approach of human motivation and psychological needs as its major arena. It assumes that human beings have the tendency to be active or passive. A social context that could support and encourage autonomy could reduce the vulnerability of being passive. By promoting individuals' satisfaction in meeting their development needs, intrinsic motivation and self-regulation are also promoted [19].

When applied SDT in language learning, it is important to notice that, without any engagement in classroom, students would not get any satisfaction. In designing enhanced engagement activities, teachers should be aware of each student's competence and personal interest, making sure that each student could meet their demands in developing their language competence.

2.2 Language Awareness (LA)

The concept of LA did not catch much attention in the field of SLA until the Association for Language was set up and the journal, *Language Awareness* was issued in the early 1990s. However, the origin of the concept was quite different from what it is investigated in recent years. The concept of LA was first raised to respond the use of L1 in English learning in British schools teaching immigrant students in 1960s when English was not L1 of many students at that time [9], therefore, the need for English language sensitivity and awareness was emphasized in 1985.

It was noteworthy to mention the book *Awareness of Language*, written by Hawkins in 1984, which boosted the British Language Awareness Movement. Since then, the research of LA burgeoned. Long [15] raised the term of "focus on form", Smith [24] raised the concept of "input enhancement", and Schmidt [22] emphasized the significance of "noticing". Despite the small variations in these terms, the significant role of LA in foreign language learning was repeatedly emphasized in different ways.

ALA gives an early definition of Language Awareness: "Language awareness is a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in the human life" [27], which underlies that awareness can be conscious or unconscious. In the similar vein, Carter [2] gives a similar definition: "Language awareness refers to the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language", which promoted the equal importance of LA in form and meaning in the field of SLA.

The significance of LA raising in the field of SLA is evident by many researchers. In his Hypothesis of Noticing, Schmidt [20] emphasized that without awareness, implicit learning could not be realized. Schmidt [22] believes that when learners pay enough attention to the language they have received and could finally be aware of its use, then they could increase their language awareness. In his research of L2 learning, Schmidt [22] analysed the way Wes, a Japanese learner in English, made mistakes in grammar and found that Wes paid little attention to form and he kept repeating the similar grammatical errors in oral English. Thus, Schmidt made conclusion that when not enough attention is

paid to the language structure, the same mistakes would occur in language use. Bearing the same view, Leow [13] evidenced from his research that L2 students of higher sense of awareness in the target language could have better performance than those who have lower levels of awareness. In other words, different level of awareness generates variable effects in foreign language behavior according to how much their awareness focuses on the target language feature.

Given the salient significance of LA, many studies focus on its implications in language learning and teaching. The approaches of Dictogloss and reformulation are commonly used in raising awareness, believing that working with a whole text provides opportunity for the learners to raise their awareness in both grammatical and vocabulary level within a form-focused or meaning-focused syllabus [33]. What is more, language awareness generates more language engagement or knowledge construction [27].

In promoting the specific approach of raising conscious awareness of linguistic features, Borg [1] lists five main features of an LA methodology:

- The study of language awareness should be continuous, taking language as a vital and changing phenomenon, instead of unchanged facts of language knowledge.
- LA occurs when learners keep talking and self-reflecting in their language production.
- Learners should be involved in self-discovery of their language behaviors.
- LA is not just about learning language as a branch of knowledge, while it should be taken to develop their language learning skills and cultivating their learning autonomy.
- Cultivating LA involves the learners in the field of learning and emotion.

According to Borg's argument, LA is first considered as the construction of language. It is also a cognitive process, which is supported by Swain's [31] concept of "languaging" or "language producing", which mediates the cognitive activity. Borg emphasizes learner interaction and engagement in LA. The later studies [26, 32] have corresponded with these beliefs on learner-learner interaction and its effects, believing that awareness, autonomy, authenticity, and learner engagement are all demanding elements in language learning [34].

3 Designing Engagement Activities for Raising LA of EFL Learners in Learner-Centered Classroom

3.1 Context

The present study takes place in an independent college in Guangzhou, China. The study participants are 86 Juniors (73 females and 13 males) of English majors who have finished learning the basic grammatical rules in their middle school years and whose examination marks in The National Matriculation English Test (or Gaokao in China) were close. All the students are adult learners and are quite conscious of the goals of this course in their learning.

The participants take the course of Advanced English (or Intensive Reading) in the third year, which aims to cultivate the English majors in their ability to read, listen, speak, write, and translate. It is a compulsory course of 4 credits, semester-based, from which

students are supposed to learn the text under the teacher' instruction. The traditional way of teaching the course is instructed learning: the teacher explains the whole text while students sit passively in the classroom and take notes as much as possible. In this sense, students are more like knowledge receiver while the teacher provides language knowledge in the classroom. Being passive learners, students are not quite aware of the language features since they are not active participants.

To increase students' LA, a series of activities are designed. The guidelines are to increase students' engagement in language behaviors, increase their understanding of language material, and promote their autonomy in English learning.

3.2 Activity 1: Increasing Different Kinds of Input

Gass and Selinker [7] point out three types of input in a language classroom, the teacher, the reading material, and other learners. Teacher's input in class is quite limited; therefore, the reading material could be abundant.

The first engagement activity is to assign pre-class reading, which should go beyond the text. Pre-class tasks increase input in the way that learners must read different kind of online material, including relevant cultural background information, language expressions, and linguistic features. It prepares the students better for the in-class discussions of the language features and cultural information, which helps generate the students' language awareness to notice the language features in phonological, syntax, and semantic level. With the accessibility of internet, students can have more online reading. Students are encouraged to search different kinds of information, so they could be well-prepared for their sharing report in class. With these online reading activities, students' role changes from "learners of English to users of English" [25].

3.3 Activity 2: Increasing Input Processing

Input process increases comprehension, which is the first step towards acquisition [36]. The process involves making a connection between form and meaning and the acquirer of a foreign language must understand the form and meaning at the same time. In the pre-class activities, students are required to process material text and relevant background information, including language feature analysis and making summarization of reading material.

As Wen [39] has noticed, it is challenging to choose textbooks that are 100% matched with the students, for the intention of textbook writing is to ensure students "to learn how to process new materials and find out what they need for language production". For better comprehension of the long articles in the textbook, students are encouraged to be familiar with the history, the development, and the primary connotation of liberal arts education. While doing these relevant readings, students must comprehend the input on their own, which would be beneficial in that "increasingly complex tasks may prompt learners to look for more and more help in the input, attending to facilitative forms made salient by teacher intervention using [...] focus on form techniques" [18].

3.4 Activity 3: Interaction Encouraged to Raise the Students' LA of Using English for Communication

SDT is concerned about development in individual, however, if the environment plays an antagonistic part, it is not likely to promote individual development [19]. To build a positive environment that could facilitate the development of individual language competency, interaction activities are designed and encouraged in classroom.

3.5 Teacher-Student Interactions

As Wen [39] has noticed: “the pedagogical methods used in mainstream education in Mainland China are characterized as being text-centered and input-based”. This type of “English instruction takes the text as an end rather than a means, and input-processing is the major learning task”, which “can at most enhance students’ comprehension skills” [39]. In the long run, this would mislead the students to take English language as knowledge instead of a language for communication. To change this habitual way of instructed learning, more opportunities are provided for in-class discussion instead of explaining the language features in the text. Take a sentence analysis in Lesson 1 Who are you and what are you doing here? for a case, the following is a compound sentence which, to many students, is quite complicated.

The idea that a university education really should have no substantial content, should not be about what John Keats was disposed to call Soul-making, is one that you might think professors and university presidents would be discreet about. Not so [4].

The traditional practice of explaining the above sentence is that the teacher explains the sentence structure and language points one by one with students sitting there and taking the notes when necessary. To enhance students’ engagement in classroom, modified questions are presented for students’ discussion, including questions like “what did John Keats think about university education? What do professors and university presidents think about university education? What does the public think about university education?” Working in teams, students could discuss with their partners about what they have found in pre-class assignment and figure out the answers to these questions; then the final step is to draw their attention to the complex syntax structure of the sentence.

3.6 Student-Student Interactions

Peer interaction activities are designed for conscious engagement in class. The interactionist perspective of “language learning through interaction” views “interaction as the context and process through which language can be learned” [16]. In the same vein, many empirical studies have demonstrated that students can talk more and negotiate meaning in group work than in the teacher-fronted classroom [3] and peer interaction could facilitate comprehension [17]. Encouraged by this point of view, group tasks are assigned to finish pre-class task and in-class discussions. Taking Lesson 2 Two kinds for example, the students are required to search the immigrant tides of American Chinese

and figure out the reasons and purposes of the immigrating. As a team, the students are expected to make a report and illustrate what they have found. The rest of the class, as listeners, would ask questions if they have different opinions. This part of oral report involves prior input and prior interaction before class, which could “yield better L2 production” [6].

The other group discussions activities include finding out the implied meaning of the sentence, the correct use of a specific vocabulary, and a summary of the text. There might be mistakes in the conversation, which is quite common for EFL learners in China. Still, it is helpful in that it could enhance students’ engagement in class, their utterances are the testing of the text and reading material comprehension. When EFL learners seldom have the chance of practicing their oral English outside classroom, their conversational interaction is of great importance. Learners could only notice and acquire the language rules by application of these rules [37]. In having conversations like this, the students are pushed to examine their language and make careful decisions in employing words and sentence structures.

Another way of student-student interaction is feedback to the classroom reports. When students finish their reading, they are required to make slides and report to the class. After that, the audience students are free to raise questions. In raising and answering questions, students are more engaged and take more autonomy in classroom learning.

3.7 Activity 4: Output Task Required to Raise the Students’ LA of Their Language Competence

Generally, the daily use of the English language in China is mainly in productive activities (i.e., speaking, writing, interpreting, and translating), while receptive activities (i.e., listening and reading) serve as median [38]. SDT believes that individuals are influenced to perform by different factors, and their satisfaction from the performance could generate personal interest and intrinsic motivation [19]. Therefore, the outcome activities are designed for students to gain satisfaction from their language performance.

Therefore, productive output tasks are designed to encourage students to express themselves in oral or written form in the class of Advanced English. The objectives in this part are not only for practice but also for the students to be aware of their language competence and take more responsibility for their learning. Output practice serves for noticing and hypothesis-testing function [30]; when learners produce language, they may notice the gap between their own language produce and the target language.

Output tasks include oral and written work. Oral work ranges from paraphrasing the sentences, oral report of the background information to summarizing the main idea of paragraphs. Paraphrasing is difficult for many students partly because they don’t know the paraphrasing skills. Some students could replace one or two words in the sentence without changing the sentence structure. In this case, they would be encouraged to employ different ways, for example, changing the voice of the sentence, using similar phrases, or adding simpler words to explain difficult words, etc. An oral report is illustrating what they have found from the internet with their slides. To make themselves understood, to get recognition from the teacher and classmates, most of the students would make the rehearsal before class, which, in return, promotes more engagement in the task.

Written work is mainly about text reconstruction. Krashen [12] believes that writing comes from reading or comprehension of reading material and writing can “clarify and stimulate our thinking”. When a subsection is finished, the students would be given some key words to reconstruct the text. Pair work is encouraged in this part, i.e., pair discussion of how to make correct use of the key words. After they finish the writing, they would have pair proofreading to find out the language errors that escape from themselves. Proofreading aims to raise students’ language awareness in both form and meaning. Sentences like “The story is tells a mother and her daughter.” or “The mother wants to changed the daughter according to her expects.” would often come up but when it needs to be pointed out because most of the students cannot identify the errors autonomously. Rewriting after peer review is required and teacher review is provided. Students could compare their first drafts, peer suggestions, and teacher’s advice and proofread their writings.

4 Reflection on Present Study

As is shown in Leow [13] and Schmidt [22], learners learn the things they pay close attention to and those with higher levels of awareness of the target features perform better than those with lower levels of awareness. That is also observed in the present study. For the students who perform better in their “languaging”, they are, to a larger degree, aware of the language features and would pay more effort in supplying themselves with more input, have more interactions with their teammates, and are active in engaging the class. For the many whose language outcomes do not meet their satisfaction, their lack of LA is quite complicated: motivations, language proficiency, and self-reflection abilities might all account.

Besides the personal factors, the general and apparent problems in raising the language awareness of Chinese adult students include:

- In a large class of over 30 or 40 students, each student’s allocation of time is quite limited, which may cause the insufficiency of their language outcome performance.
- Many students are reluctant to talk in the classroom or switch code into Mandarin when they could not figure out an appropriate way to express themselves in English, which may lead to not enough awareness of language structure in English.
- The students pay more attention to meaning than form, which leads to their poor writing in English, which, in the long run, is not beneficial to their academic writing.

5 Conclusion

This study takes the theoretical perspective of SDT and makes research in LA raising. SDT assumes that individual promotes intrinsic motivation with more engagement in learning. In student-centered classroom, learners are encouraged to have more engagement in language behaviors. Enhanced activities related to input, interaction, and output are taken as an integrated process to increase learners’ engagement in English language learning. Observations from students’ in-class performance show that students who have

more engagement are more conscious about their language outcome and could raise their language awareness.

The present study provides some insights for English teaching practitioners and researchers in designing engagement activities to raise language awareness of EFL learners in the context of China. Yet, given that it is a classroom-based study, its limitation is also obvious: How much scaffolding should be given to students when they report their pre-class assignment remains a question and is worthy of future research.

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