

Critical Language Awareness, Accuracy of Speech, and Communication in EFL

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One of the most controversial issues in the field of ESOL in the conditions of this era of the communicative approach is the question of whether this approach is compatible with formal instruction in grammar as a specific aspect of language, and with focusing learner's attention on language forms. On one hand, there is the purely communicative approach that, as Fotos (1994:323) remarked, is based on giving the learner a rich variety and the greatest possible amount of comprehensible input while totally omitting the teacher-fronted grammar instruction. On the other hand, the cognitive theory of SLA is based on the belief that second language acquisition presupposes constructing a knowledge system where first, attention is paid to language aspects, and then appropriate skills become automatic (interpretation given by Lightbown & Spada, 1994). It requires methods where formal grammar instruction occupies some place in language teaching. It should be pointed out that the latter view is gradually gaining more and more partisans not only among conscious followers of cognitive approaches, but even among those who hold different views. For instance, Ellis (1990) points out that formal instruction can enhance or accelerate second language acquisition processes.

If such an approach is gaining prominence in teaching a second language, when students acquire it in one of the countries where it is spoken by the majority of the population, this approach is all the more needed in foreign language teaching/learning. The issue is that in a non-English-speaking setting, learners are mostly deprived of opportunities of receiving comprehensible input in the target language outside the EFL classroom. At the same time, classroom hours for language learning are, as a rule, limited. As a result, the situation of comprehensible input deficiency inevitably emerges—the situation where the communicative approach in its pure form does not work. The solution can be found only in the preservation of the dominantly communicative approach, as the only one suitable for communicative competence development, but combining it with the advantages of consciously mastering language structures to compensate for deficiencies in the volume of comprehensible input. The question arises, therefore, how to organize grammar instruction to make it efficient for developing learners' language accuracy in the target language without damaging fluency (i.e., communicative competence development), or even contributing to it. It is hardly possible to organize such

grammar instruction effectively in EFL without taking into account the students' mother tongue and its differences from the grammar of the language being learned.

Mother Tongue—Target Language Interaction in EFL and Critical Language Awareness

L1 influence is one of the most persistent factors in ESL/EFL teaching since, even if we have totally driven learners' L1 out of ESL/EFL classrooms, we cannot hope to drive it out of their minds as "whether we like it or not, the new language is learnt on the basis of a previous language" (Stern, 1992:282). L1 is such an integral and inseparable part of their personalities and thinking that everything in the new language is perceived from the point of view of, and compared to, the L1's structure and rules. The implications of this situation for foreign language learning found their development in the works of Russian linguists and psychologists explaining why adult and adolescent learners of a new language will always more or less consciously compare the new language structure to the structure of their mother tongue trying to "enforce and impose" the mother tongue structure on the language to be learned. For instance, a prominent Russian linguist Kolshansky (1985:11)¹ wrote (the translation from Russian is my own),

Since thinking (if we do not take into account a theoretically possible but practically less probably case) is developed on the basis of one, i.e., mother, tongue, it is natural that acquiring any other language will take place only in the conditions of interaction of L1 and L2—this interaction being of such a nature that one language is the leading, principal one while the other is subordinated (so, subordinated bilingualism can be observed).

The Russian psychologist Galperin and his followers (see Galperin, 1967; Kabanova & Galperin, 1972) developed the theory of "language consciousness" according to which every human language adequately reflects reality. But aspects of this reality are so numerous that the grammar system of any particular language reflects only some of them, ignoring others, or reflecting them not in all their entirety. Grammar systems of different languages may reflect different aspects, or one such system may reflect some of those aspects more or less fully than the grammar systems of some other languages.

¹ The last names of Russian authors used in the text are given in Latin alphabet. In References the names of those authors, the titles of their works, and all the information concerning a particular publication (publishing house or journal, etc.) are also given in Latin alphabet and in translation into English with indication that the original is in Russian.

For instance, the Russian verb tense-aspect system is different from the system of the English verb. The grammar form of a Russian verb cannot express what is the progressive aspect of an English verb—so, this aspect of reality is not reflected in the grammar system of the Russian language, though it certainly may be expressed by other, mainly lexical, means. In this way, the progressive aspect of the English verb becomes a major source of difficulties and errors for Russian-speaking learners of English.

Following the theory of Galperin, surmounting such obstacles is possible by developing a “target language consciousness” (i.e., a perception of the target language structure from a non-speaker point of view). It is achieved by conscious systemic comparison of L1 and L2 structures, distinguishing similarities and differences, i.e., by students’ consciousness-raising as to how they are reflected in their language system and in their speech. Galperin’s “target language consciousness” may otherwise be called “critical language awareness,” as it is a result of critical cross-linguistic comparison.

In the West, a similar set of issues has always been considered in literature, (i.e., L1 transfer and interference in learning L2). In the last two decades, the revival of interest in this field of research can be observed, so that a number of works on relevant issues has been published (see, for instance, Adjemian, 1983; Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Ellis, 1994; Faerch & Kasper, 1987; Kellerman, 1984; Odlin, 1989). This is due to the fact that, no matter what paradigm of L2 learning or acquisition is momentarily in vogue, the influence of L1 on this learning/acquisition cannot long be ignored, as it is clearly observed every day in teaching practice.

This kind of research spoken above has engendered the spreading belief that learners’ mother tongues should not be excluded but, on the contrary, should be made adequate use of for improving and accelerating target language acquisition. It concerns the use of students’ L1 for developing learners’ *interlingual awareness* (*critical language awareness*) with the aim of fostering the use of transfer strategies (see a practical example in the article by Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997).

The need of using L1 and L2 classroom is especially evident in an EFL setting since in this case, students always lack the sufficient volume of comprehensible input and both the teacher and the students often share the same L1. The first of these peculiarities should be compensated for, and the second adequately used. But to make the use of mother tongue in EFL teaching really appropriate, two questions should be answered. Since recourse to L1 for ensuring critical language awareness is primarily needed for raising learners’ accuracy in target language communication, it is necessary to find out:

1. whether critical language awareness really increases such accuracy in EFL, and what critical language awareness-raising techniques are effective for this purpose.

2. whether critical language awareness-raising work in the classroom interferes and has any adverse effect on target language fluency.

The two studies described below were carried out in the process of teaching English to tertiary technical students in one of Ukraine's universities, and were aimed at supplying answers to these two questions.

Study 1 (Methods, Results, Discussion): Critical Language Awareness and "Error Correction" as a Means of Increasing Accuracy in Speaking

The first study was devoted to developing an effective critical language awareness technique for increasing Ukrainian (Russian) students' accuracy in using the verb "to be" as a linking verb. The matter is that it is always a source of major difficulties and errors for Ukrainian (Russian)-speaking learners.

The aim of the preliminary stage of the study was to find the most typical errors students made when using "to be" as the linking verb while speaking English. This was achieved through the observation and tallying of students' speaking errors during the English classes for first year students of Dnepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport (English classes for the 1st year students at that University are held two times a week; 90 minutes for every class). During a two-year period, 50 students were observed in this way and the total number of registered "to be" errors was 658. The analysis of all the errors demonstrated only five typical ones.

1. The most frequent error (59% of all the errors registered) was omitting "to be" in affirmative, interrogative, and negative sentences in the present tense where using "to be" is obligatory in English. The cause is surely due to interference from L1, where the linking verb is most often not used in such cases.

2. The second most typical error (22%) was breaking the word order in negative and interrogative sentences with "to be," so that sentences like "*Where he is now?*" or "*They not were present yesterday*" could be frequently observed. Here again is a clear-cut case of L1 influence (such structures are used in Russian/Ukrainian).

3. The third (9%) was using "is" for all subjects in the present tense singular and plural indiscriminately (most often instead of "are," but not infrequently instead of "am"). It may also be L1 interference-based since Russian/Ukrainian has only one form of the linking verb for all the singular and plural persons in the present tense.

4. The fourth most frequent error (5%) could be ascribed only to intra-target language influence independent of L1 influence; the use of "was" instead of "were" in the past tense plural. The cause could be false analogy with other English verbs not changing their form in past plural as compared to past singular.

5. The final type (4%) was the “overuse” of “to be” when producing sentences like “I am stay at home every Sunday.” It is most probably a case of over generalization when learners, anxious not to omit “to be,” prefer to “overuse” it.

The observation and error categorization demonstrated that L1 differences were the principal cause of errors in using the English verb “to be” while speaking. This difference was fully responsible for 81% of errors (cases 1 and 2 above) and at least partially responsible for 9% more (case 3).

In the second phase of the study, students were asked to explore, on the basis of examples, the use of “to be” in English in comparison with the use of a corresponding linking verb in Russian (or Ukrainian)—with concentrated attention on areas of differences. After that, they were to do six specific “error correction” exercises (in written form). All the exercises were collections of sentences (10–12 in every exercise), each containing an error in using “to be” as a linking verb (for instances, sentences like “They not are friends”). The students’ task was to find the errors, correct them, and explain the corrections from the point of view of “the rules of English as opposed to the rules of Ukrainian (Russian).” All the other learning activities directed at developing “to be” in speaking were standard, including role-plays, where the content matter required use of “to be” as a linking verb.

Four groups of students of the first year of study at Dnepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport were chosen for participation in the study with 10 students in each group. Two of the groups were experimental (experimental group 1 and experimental group 2—EG1 and EG2), the others were control groups (CG1 and CG2). The students in all the groups were equalized as to their age (17–19 years old), sex (half males and half females in every group), and starting level of proficiency in English (lower intermediate level). As to the level of starting proficiency in using “to be” in speaking, a preliminary check (written and oral testing tasks) showed it to be rather poor in all the four groups with a great number of errors of the kind described above made by all students.

In the experimental groups during the first three two-hour classes from the beginning of the study the teaching/learning process was organized exactly as described above. In the control groups this organization was identical, except there were no deliberate comparisons with the students’ L1 and second, there were no “error correction” exercises. To preserve the volume of “to be” training intact, they were replaced by six traditional form-focusing exercises, such as filling in blanks with the required forms of “to be,” etc.

The fourth class period in both groups was devoted to taking the first (immediate) post-test, while the second (delayed) post-test was held a month later with no special “to be” training during that interval. In both tests, students first had to speak in pairs (dialogic speaking) in situations and on the topics described by the teacher and requiring fre-

nt using of “to be.” After that, every individual student had to prepare a short talk,) in a situation and on the topic described by the teacher and requiring frequent using ‘to be.’ Naturally, situations and topics for speaking in test 1 and test 2 were differ-. During testing, the teacher registered all the errors made by students when using be” in speaking.

The results of registering are shown in Table 1. All the registered errors in the table divided into two categories—typical errors for the five types given above and “the ers” (errors that are not typical).

Table 1

Number of errors in using “to be” made by students of experimental and control groups in their speaking during tests 1 and 2

	Group	EG1	EG2	CG1	CG2
Test 1	Number of typical errors	8	6	19	18
	Number of “the other” errors	0	1	1	0
	Mean number of errors per one student	0.8	0.7	2.0	1.8
	Group	EG1	EG2	CG1	CG2
Test 2	Number of typical errors	6	6	22	14
	Number of “the other” errors	0	0	0	1
	Mean number of errors per one student	0.6	0.6	2.2	1.5

It can be seen from the table that both in immediate and delayed testing the students of the experimental groups demonstrated two or even three times better results as to accuracy of using “to be” while speaking than the students of control groups.

A logical conclusion from the above is that the suggested critical language awareness-raising technique proved to be very effective in eliminating those errors that were due to L1 interference and in improving students’ accuracy when speaking English. At the same time, the very fact that this technique, based on interlingual comparison, does eliminate such errors lends support to the idea that the L1 is really their source of origin, and therefore, it supports the necessity of developing EFL learners’ critical language awareness. No damaging effect on speaking fluency development was observed.

Study 2 (Methods, Results, Discussion): Systemic Critical Language Awareness as a Means of Increasing Accuracy

The second study² had the same aim as Study 1—to find out what influence critical language awareness exerts on accuracy and fluency in EFL. The main difference from the first study was its systemic approach. The first study was carried out using a single phenomenon of English (the verb “to be” as a linking verb) in relative isolation from other phenomena. But the grammar of any language is a system of a number of subsystems, and Galperin’s theory of language consciousness asserts that target language consciousness-raising (critical language awareness-raising) is most effective when it is done systemically, i.e., when interlingual comparisons of grammar *systems* (or *subsystems*) are made, and not when we simply contrast separate grammatical phenomena.

For testing the effect of such systemic critical language awareness-raising, the passive voice of the English verb in all its systemic tense-aspect-voice manifestations was chosen—first, because it is a good example of a grammatical system (subsystem), and second, because the tense-aspect-voice system of the English verb (especially its passive voice) is the most difficult area of English grammar for Russian (Ukrainian)-speaking learners, and a source of numerous and serious errors that often make what students say in English almost incomprehensible and prevent them from comprehending what they read or hear. The difficulties arise from the great systemic differences of Russian (Ukrainian) and English verb systems.

The study was organized in four groups of the first year students at Dnepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport: two experimental (EG3 and EG4), and two control groups (CG3 and CG4). All the groups were equalized in the same way as in study 1, and study 2 itself was carried out over a period of three weeks (six classes).

During the first class, students in the experimental groups explored the passive voice of the English verb as a part of the whole tense-aspect-voice verb system in comparison and opposition to the Russian tense-aspect-voice verb system, accentuating the areas of differences and finding out how these differences are viewed from the point of view of English “language consciousness” in opposition to Russian “language consciousness.” In full accordance with the recommendations made by Kabanova & Galperin (1972), such an exploration was followed by a specific target language consciousness-raising activity. Students were given a number of various sentences in Russian with a request

² This study was carried out in cooperation with a teacher from the Foreign Language Department of Dnepropetrovsk State Technical University of Railway Transport (Nina Marochkina), the latter being responsible for teaching in experimental and control groups.

to say (and explain why from the point of view of English language consciousness) what tense, aspect, and voice of the verb-predicate should be used if those sentences were to be translated into English. All these activities took somewhat more than half of the first class. The other half and the following three classes were devoted to learning activities of communication-oriented nature (speaking, reading, listening).

In the control groups, the L1 grammatical system was not in any way involved. There was no systemic approach either, as during the first class, only the simple present, past, and future passive voice was discussed. In the second class, attention was focused on the progressive aspect with no attempt made to help students' see the entire underlying system and compare it to their L1 system, etc. All the other activities in the control groups, were the same as in the experimental groups.

In the fifth class period the students both in the experimental and control groups had to take a test for checking their accuracy in using English verb passive voice and, in general, their command of that grammatical structure. As the test was to check only the accuracy and nothing else, formal grammatical tasks were used. The first task was a multiple-choice one. There were blanks to be filled in with appropriate forms of the verb-predicate in seven sentences (one blank per sentence), each form to be chosen out of four alternatives. The second task was similar but more difficult. In six sentences the blanks were also to be filled in by appropriate forms of the verb-predicate. The students were given the verb-predicates in the infinitive and had to transform them into the grammatical forms required by the sense and structure of the entire sentences. In the third task four sentences in the active voice were to be transformed into the passive voice sentences. In the fourth task, in contrast, four sentences in the passive voice were to be transformed into the active voice sentences. The results of testing (four tasks) are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of doing four test tasks in experimental and control groups
(mean figures for every group)

Test task	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Total
Group	Correct responses (out of 7)	Correct responses (out of 6)	Correct responses (out of 4)	Correct responses (out of 4)	Correct responses (out of 21)
EG3	5.6 (80.0%)	4.9 (81.6%)	3.7 (93.5%)	3.6 (90.0%)	17.8 (84.7%)
EG4	6.2 (88.5%)	4.7 (78.3%)	3.3 (82.5%)	3.2 (80.0%)	17.4 (82.8%)
CG3	3.8 (54.2%)	2.6 (43.3%)	0.6 (15.0%)	0.4 (10.0%)	7.4 (35.2%)
CG4	3.3 (47.1%)	1.9 (31.6%)	0.3 (07.5%)	0.7 (17.5%)	6.2 (29.5%)

The differences in test results between the experimental and control groups, as can be seen from Table 2, were quite striking, and all the more so the more difficult the test task was.

Therefore, the second study again demonstrated the usefulness of developing students' critical target language awareness in EFL. It proved that the suggested systemic critical language awareness-raising technique had greatly improved students' target language accuracy. This improvement in accuracy was even more impressive (most probably, thanks to the use of systemic approach) than in Study 1.

But it was also necessary to find out whether the suggested technique could in any way impede the development of learners' fluency in English. For that purpose one more battery of tests was administered in the final sixth class to find out what level of skills in reading, listening, and speaking had been reached by the students of experimental and control groups.

The first test in the battery of three was aimed at reading skills. The students were given a short text (300 words) on the topic of international economic cooperation (it was the topic of communication in this study) and had to render in writing its content as fully as possible in their L1 (Russian). Comprehension was evaluated according to how many "units of information" from the text were rendered (there were 14 units of information in the text).

The next (listening) test was designed in a similar way. Students listened to a 300-word tape-recorded text on international economic cooperation with the greater part of verb-predicates in the text in the passive voice forms. The students had to render in Russian (in writing) the information they heard. The comprehension was evaluated by the number of units of information (out of nine) that the students had correctly rendered.

The final test was devoted to speaking skills. Every student had to give a talk (with no limitations as to time and volume of speaking) expressing her/his views, thoughts, and opinions on the subject of international economic cooperation. To increase objectivity, students talked in turns addressing independent assessors.

The results of all the three tests are given in Table 3 (group mean figures). The data in the table make the advantage in development of communicative skills of students from EG3 and EG4 sufficiently visible. The qualitative analysis of students' written work in reading and listening tests and interviews with the assessors demonstrated that: a) students from EG3 and EG4 were always substantially better than students from CG3 and CG4 in accuracy as they did not have any problems in understanding while reading or listening to sentences where the passive voice was used, and they also freely, and practically without errors, used the passive voice in their own speaking; b) students from EG3 and EG4 were better than students from CG3 and CG4 in fluency, volume, logical

cohesiveness of speaking, richness and variety of their talks, and comprehending the content of what they read and listened to.

Table 3

Results of testing students' communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking) in experimental and control groups (mean figures for every group)

Group	Reading test	Listening test	Speaking test	
	Units of information correctly comprehended and rendered (out of 14)	Units of information correctly comprehended and rendered (out of 9)	Mean Grade (with "5" as top grade) (assessor 1)	Mean Grade (with "5" as top grade) (assessor 2)
EG3	13.5 (96.4%)	8.5 (94.4%)	4.5	4.5
EG4	13.6 (97.1%)	8.8 (97.7%)	4.5	4.7
CG3	11.7 (83.5%)	6.6 (73.3%)	3.9	4.0
CG5	10.7 (76.4%)	6.6 (73.3%)	3.6	3.7

Conclusion

Two studies carried out to research the effect of critical language awareness-raising when teaching English as a foreign language to Ukrainian (Russian)-speaking university students learning English in Ukraine, permit us to draw two conclusions as follows:

1. Developing students' critical target language awareness has a great positive effect on increasing their grammatical accuracy in speaking, reading, and listening in English, and also in taking grammar tests.

2. This awareness, and techniques developing it, have no negative effect on students' communicative skill development. On the contrary, their effect may be considered as quite positive and beneficial for acquiring communicative skills, since increased accuracy improves fluency, as well as comprehension.

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