



A Review of “Linguistics at school: language awareness in primary and secondary education”

Eloy J.M. Romero-Muñoz

To cite this article: Eloy J.M. Romero-Muñoz (2011) A Review of “Linguistics at school: language awareness in primary and secondary education”, *Language Awareness*, 20:4, 382-384, DOI: [10.1080/09658416.2011.610128](https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2011.610128)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2011.610128>



Published online: 07 Dec 2011.



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the interrelatedness between language, culture, and representations of otherness through an interdisciplinary approach.

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Giuliana Ferri

*Department of Learning, Curriculum and Communication,
Institute of Education, University of London, UK*

gferri@ioe.ac.uk

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2011.603218>

Linguistics at school: language awareness in primary and secondary education, edited by Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, xii + 311 pp., £64.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-521-88701-4

The volume under review contributes to the growing scholarship on linguistics as it pertains to primary and secondary education. Included in its scope are detailed treatments of desired ‘top-down’ institutional changes (Part I) and ‘bottom-up’ classroom changes (Part II). More specifically, Part I details successes and failures at the institutional level to bring linguistics into the classroom, while Part II focuses more on similar attempts that originated in schools. Part III of the volume, which the editors consider as ‘perhaps the most important part’ (p. 229), reports on reflexive practice by primary and secondary education teachers who have experimented with linguistics in the classroom.

As is evident from the blurb and the general introduction, the book is aimed at teacher preparation curricula and in-service practitioners interested in lifelong training and career development, but it may equally appeal to a wide audience with an interest in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), language policy, and curriculum development.

There exists a robust body of evidence on the facilitative effects of metacognitive instructional practices – i.e. the use of linguistic terms and categories in the language classroom – in the area of SLA. Language Awareness (henceforth LA) research has indeed demonstrated that students who receive explicit instruction outperform those exposed only to implicit instruction, and that a higher level of LA correlates positively with language development (e.g. Abu Radwan, 2005; Leow, 1997; Robinson, 1995, 1997; Rosa & O’Neill, 1999). However, little is known about LA in first language settings. One reason may be that LA research has suffered from ‘misperceptions’ (p. 13) about its goals, methods, and potential for application (see Battistella, Chapter 1). For instance, the belief in the benefits of explicit knowledge in regular classrooms has very often been mistaken for an interest in grammar for grammar’s sake. It could hardly be otherwise, O’Neil argues, when linguistics has consistently been presented as an additional subject rather than as a tool to foster critical and analytical skills in students (p. 25). Sweetland (Chapter 11) sees the main concern for proponents of LA, and certainly one that is abundantly dealt within the present volume, as

the need to correlate research-based, desired changes with existing practices and teaching contexts.

Although the phrase ‘linguistics at school’ in the title of the book may seem to reinforce the idea of linguistics as a separate subject, the reviewed volume clearly offers ways in which we may promote inclusion of LA in regular classrooms. Jackendoff’s autobiographical foreword summarises the content of the book: proponents of LA need ‘to supplement rather than supplant students’ customary linguistic practices and underscore the added value of metalinguistic knowledge across the curriculum’ (p. xiv). Another overarching theme is the necessity to bridge the gap between linguists and educational practitioners by allowing the latter to contribute their field expertise and the former their theoretical insights (see especially Lord & Klein, Chapter 6).

Jackendoff’s recommendation that students from different dialect backgrounds should have standard varieties presented to them as another option in their linguistic inventory rather than a replacement for something they no longer need is echoed throughout the book. Considering the intended audience, however, the focus lies understandably more on how teachers might best deal with such students than on the students themselves. Wheeler’s report on how to address African American vernacular English in American schools is undoubtedly the most pertinent solution described in the book (Chapter 9). Her advice, which is transferable to other contexts and non-standard varieties of English, and perhaps also to the problem of register in SLA, is to depolarise the debate about this touchy subject by avoiding race and politics and approaching it with tools from dialectology and code-switching research (see also Mayer & New, Chapter 17). In a similar vein, Fields-Carey & Sweat (Chapter 22) and Clayton (Chapter 23) offer suggestions for a more student-centred approach to LA. The former discuss the linguistic prejudices faced by low-achieving students, while the latter uses slang as a starting point to approach language variation. Both contributions manage to underscore the systematicity of so-called non-standard varieties of English.

Many contributors also advocate the kind of teacher-driven, bottom-up implementation of linguistics which chimes with Denham and Lobeck’s claim that teachers already make ‘linguistically informed’ decisions (p. 231). Common to many contributors is the desire to capitalise on this ‘knowledge in practice’ (p. 153). This is very much in line with current findings in ELT (English language training) innovation research (Wedell, 2009); teacher support and careful analysis of teachers’ cognitions, i.e. what they think, know, believe, and do (Borg, 2003), are indeed key to ensuring the successful implementation of innovations.

However, the book also makes it clear that linguistics remains a ‘hard sell’ to teachers and policy-makers (O’Neil, p. 33). It is no wonder, then, that a substantial part of it should be devoted to understanding why changing everyday practices is easier said than done. First, as Honda, O’Neil, and Pippin demonstrate (Chapter 12), teacher training programmes often lack a linguistics focus, even for English majors. It thus seems that teachers are not so much reluctant as simply ill-equipped to include LA in their lesson plans. Second, teaching very often involves meeting standards set by language policy-makers. Peng and Ann (Chapter 10) observe that teachers are disinclined to implement innovations in the context of high-stakes testing because they will rely on their own entrenched beliefs when confronted with ‘ill-defined and deeply entangled situations’ (Nespor, 1987, p. 324). Fortunately, most contributors understand the need to go beyond theorising and offer practical solutions (see, for instance, Reaser, Chapter 7; Wheeler, Chapter 9; Honda, O’Neil, & Pippin, Chapter 12), some of which are clearly geared towards meeting educational standards (e.g. Lord & Klein, Chapter 6; Reaser, Chapter 7).

Despite the large number of contributions (23 papers as well as a foreword and a general introduction), Denham and Lobeck manage to ensure that the book functions as a whole rather than as a collection of loosely connected individual efforts. They do so by prefacing each of the three parts with an insightful summary. Extensive cross-referencing and a detailed index (pp. 303–311) further attest to the careful editing that went into putting this volume together. Perhaps one criticism that I have is the almost all-American focus of the book. Notable exceptions include Hudson (Chapter 3) and Clayton (Chapter 23) on England; Trousdale (Chapter 4) on Scotland; and Mulder (Chapter 5) and Thomas and Wawer (Chapter 19) on Australia. The absence of non-Anglophonic first language (L1) contexts is perhaps a more surprising flaw, considering both the importance of heritage languages in the United States (Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001) and the editors' justified attempts at promoting inclusiveness and diversity in the educational system.

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Eloy J.M. Romero-Muñoz
 English Unit, University of Namur, Belgium
 eromerom@fundp.ac.be

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2011.610128>