

# Language awareness issues and teachers' beliefs about language learning in a Greek EFL context

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**Abstract:** The present study aimed at investigating the role of language awareness from the teachers' perspective as well as its relationship with other aspects of EFL teacher knowledge. The study was designed and conducted with the aim of providing an account of the issues related to EFL teachers' language awareness and their beliefs about how students learn a foreign language. Questionnaires were distributed to a total of 150 EFL teachers employed in public primary and secondary schools in Northern Greece. The findings indicated that the participants were conscious to a certain degree of the need for raising language awareness in the EFL classroom and developing students' language learning strategies.

**Key words:** language awareness, foreign language, EFL teachers, beliefs, learning strategies

## 1. Introduction

The impact of English as an International Language (EIL) and the growing demand for EFL courses have highlighted the need for a higher level of language sensitivity among EFL teachers and have established Language Awareness (LA) as an essential component in teacher education. The fact should be stressed that EFL teachers' awareness of themselves and of their learners' needs concerning the language learning process are regarded vital for the effective outcome of any EFL course.

The 'knowledge' of language teachers (Freeman 2002) has been defined as 'teacher beliefs' (Richards 1998), 'attitudes' (Woods 1996), 'conceptions of teaching' (Freeman & Richards 1993), and 'conceptions of practice' (Freeman 1996). A sub-field of teacher knowledge (Andrews 2003) which examines what teachers know about language systems, is termed 'teacher metalinguistic awareness' (Andrews 1999), or 'language awareness' (Hawkins 1999; Wright & Bolitho 1993; James 1999). The need for language sensitivity among teachers has given rise to the Language Awareness 'movement' (Brumfit 1997), which places emphasis on the knowledge about language for teachers and teacher cognition. One way to think about language awareness is that everyone is a learner, since even teachers have to continue to explore language systems-a lifelong process (Bourke 2008).

Language awareness has been defined in a number of different ways. It has been described as "the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively" (Thornbury 1997: x). Moreover, from its cognitive perspective, language awareness is referred to as conscious language learning on a meta-cognitive level within a learner-centred approach, (Prtic Soons 2008). In particular, language awareness encompasses morphological awareness, phonological awareness, awareness of the structural patterns and pragmatic awareness.

Furthermore, teacher language awareness incorporates 'strategic competence', 'language competence', and 'knowledge of subject matter' (Andrews 2001). According to Wright (2002) teachers' language awareness encompasses an awareness of the

learner's developing interlanguage, and an awareness of the extent to which the language content of materials or lessons poses difficulties for students. Also, teachers' language awareness is metacognitive in nature (Andrews 2003: 87), since it involves reflection upon knowledge of teaching methodology and language proficiency. Besides, Wright (2002) states that "a linguistically aware teacher not only understands how language works, but understands the student's struggle with language and is sensitive to errors and other interlanguage features" (Wright 2002: 115).

On the same line, there is a consensus that in order to understand language teaching better, we need to know more about teachers' knowledge (James 2001; Freeman 2001; Borg 2003) as well as to investigate teachers' perceived beliefs concerning language learning and teaching (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich & Stanovich 2004). Teachers' beliefs are closely related to their values, views of learners, attitudes toward learning, and conceptions of teachers' roles in teaching practices. Therefore, the information about teachers' beliefs is extremely important in terms of improving both professional development and teaching effectiveness (Nespor 1987). Schommer (1990) proposed some dimensions of teacher beliefs, such as: a) teachers' beliefs about the learner's role in learning can be regarded as 'source of knowledge', b) teachers' beliefs of how the process of learning occurs are classified as 'structure and speed of knowledge acquisition' and c) the teachers' beliefs regarding ability to learn can be classified as 'control of knowledge' dimension.

Teachers' beliefs and knowledge are also considered to cause misinterpretations related to language learning, language awareness, and language learning strategies. The findings of previous studies (Li 1998; Lewis & McCook 2002) showed that not only different educational values and practices but also misconceptions of teaching and learning among teachers are the main reasons for difficulties in implementing communicative language teaching. Moreover, studies (Karavas-Doukas 1996; Rollman 1994; Sato & Kleinsasser 1999; Thompson 1996), which researched teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards communicative language teaching found a lot of misconceptions among them.

## **2. The study**

### *2.1. Purpose and objectives*

Little research has been conducted into how conscious EFL teachers are of the specific needs of the students who learn English as a foreign language in the Greek educational system. The present study was designed and conducted with the aim to provide an account of the issues related to the EFL teachers' perceptions of language awareness, and their beliefs about how students learn a FL. It is important to understand teacher attitudes towards language awareness, language learning, and students' learning skills and strategies in order to increase our understanding of teacher behaviour.

In particular, the study aimed at:

- identifying and recording the way EFL teachers conceive language awareness (including morphological awareness, phonological awareness, and awareness of the structural patterns);
- reflecting on the EFL teachers' attitudes to teaching processes;
- providing an account of issues related to students' development of the productive skills;
- providing an account of issues related to students' development of the receptive skills;
- recording the EFL teachers' views in relation to the language learning strategies employed by EFL students.

## 2.2 Method

The participants were 150 English language teachers (133 female and 17 male), appointed in state primary and secondary schools in Northern Greece. At the time of the study, 83 (55.3%) of them were employed in primary education and 67 (44.7%) in secondary education.

Their teaching experience varied; 32% of the teachers had worked for one to five years, 24.7% from 6 to 10 years and 43.3% for more than 11 years. Only a limited percentage of the participants (16%) held a master degree.

The *questionnaire*, which was used as the basic instrument for conducting this research, was administered in Greek and the participants received some explanations regarding metalinguistic terms. It comprised four basic sections: a) language learning aspects (including 10 questions), b) beliefs on language learning strategies (including 18 questions), c) beliefs on language awareness (including 6 questions regarding 'phonological awareness', 6 questions related to 'morphological awareness' and 6 questions regarding awareness of the 'structural patterns') and d) views on language skill development (including 20 questions).

The research instrument included 'Likert-type' questions: teachers were asked to choose from "much, fairly and little" for questions that fall into the basic area of learning strategies and to language skill development (reading, writing, listening and speaking). They were also asked to a) choose from "agree-disagree-don't know" for questions that fall into the basic area of language awareness components (phonological, morphological, syntax), b) rank 5 out of 20 items related to language skills as highly needed (point 1 was for high priority ranking).

Data derived from the questionnaire were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items of the questionnaires were obtained. Moreover, the techniques of Chi-square-test (X<sup>2</sup>) (Ind. Cramer's V), t-test, ANOVA were performed.

## 3. Questionnaire results

### 3.1 Teachers' beliefs on language awareness

Raising students' language awareness is worth dealing with and is a starting point for reinforcement from the first day students start learning a foreign language. However, according to the data, the EFL teachers showed certain misapprehensions and misconceptions in relation to student language awareness.

Concerning *phonological awareness*, the majority of the teachers showed significant interest in the 'detection of the same phonemes in different words' ('agree' 76.7%). Moreover, both 'rhyme awareness' and 'change/add a sound in a word to make a new one' merited an important level of priority for a significant percentage of the teachers (70.7%) who regarded them as basic components in language learning, of which students should be aware. Similarly, 'initial phoneme detection', 'blending phonemes to compose words' along with 'awareness of syllable completion' accumulated a significant percentage of agreement (54.7%, 48%, 46%). No significant differences were identified between the primary and secondary education teachers in relation to the components of phonological awareness.

Regarding *morphological awareness*, the majority of the teachers believed that students should be able to 'discriminate word form' (75.3%). However, an important percentage of the total number of the participants declared uncertainty about whether students' need to develop the skills of detecting either 'inflectional' (42.7%) or 'derivational' (30%) morphemes. Also, an equally significant number of teachers declared uncertainty about whether the students should develop the following

morphological skills: a) discrimination of inflectional from derivational morphemes ('don't know' 46%, disagree 28%) and b) correct use of inflectional and derivational morphemes ('don't know' 40.7%, disagree 18.7%). No significant differences were identified between the primary and secondary education teachers in relation to the components of morphological awareness.

In relation to students' awareness of grammatical and structural patterns, the vast majority of the participants declared the highest degree of agreement on 'combining sentences in order to have meaningful discourse at the paragraph level' (96.7%), and 'combining words into sentences in a correct order' (96%). Moreover, 'combining a main sentence with a subordinate sentence or phrase in order to have a complete meaning' (84.7%) accumulated a high degree of teachers' agreement. 'Detecting a main sentence' (72%), 'detecting a subordinate sentence/phrase' (70.7%), and 'discriminating a main sentence from a subordinate sentence/phrase' (71.3%) followed. A significant part of the teachers gave mediocre percentages regarding their agreement on issues related to a) 'identifying verb phrases' (58.7%), b) 'identifying noun phrases' (57.3%), and small percentages to 'learning the grammatical rules by heart' (22.7%). No significant differences were identified between the primary and secondary education teachers in relation to the awareness of structural patterns.

### 3.2 Teachers' views on language learning and teaching aspects

The participants were asked to choose their most preferred learning and teaching methods out of a list. Results showed that the majority of the teachers favoured 'taking into account students' learning styles' (92%), 'identification of students' needs' (89.3%), and 'focus on a process-oriented approach for student learning' (80%). 'Learning through group work' was also highly favoured by the teachers (78%) followed by 'adapting teaching to students' background knowledge and experience' (57.3%). However, they disfavoured the views that their students can learn through 'immediate error correction' (16.7%) and through 'memorization of list of words translated in L1' (11.3%). 'Memorizing dialogues' and 'translating word by word' a reading text gained the lowest percentages (6% and 3.3% respectively). Last 14.7% of the teachers indicated the need for grammar to be taught as an autonomous subject. No correlations were found with respect to the preferences of primary and secondary EFL teachers.

### 3.3 Teachers' Beliefs on language learning strategies

#### 3.3.1 Cognitive strategies

Regarding the *Cognitive* strategies, 'guessing the meaning of a word or phrase in context' received the highest percentage (77.3%) as the most important learning strategy. Although the vast majority of the teachers welcomed the idea of students developing the specific strategy, there is a statistically significant difference ( $X^2= 5.989$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.06$ ) (Gramer's  $V= 0.200$ ) between primary school teachers who ranked it higher (84%) than the secondary school teachers (68%).

In addition, the participants viewed 'comparing elements of the new language with elements of L1' as meriting an important level of priority, by ranking it as 'very much' important (40%) and important 'enough' (49.3%). However, there was statistically significant difference between primary and secondary school teachers ( $X^2= 9.200$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0,010$ ) (Gramer's  $V= 0,248$ ). The secondary school teachers ranked it higher as an essential strategy (52%) compared to their colleagues in primary education (30%).

A considerable number of the respondents showed interest in 'determining the meaning of a word or expression by breaking them down into parts', by scoring it either

as 'very important' (32%) or 'important enough' (50%). Moreover, 'repeating a word or phrase over and over in order to learn it' was selected by 24% of the total number of the participants as a 'very important strategy' and by 49.3% of the teachers as a strategy 'important enough' for students to develop. It was the primary school teachers (29%) who regarded it as a more important learning strategy compared to secondary school teachers (17.9% 'very much'). ( $X^2=9.460$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.009$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.251$ ).

It is also worth mentioning that 'note taking' was considered of medium importance for the majority of the teachers, since only 17.3% of the teachers selected the 'very much' rank and 45.3% of the teachers the 'enough' rank. However, some statistically significant difference was revealed ( $X^2=6.209$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.044$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.243$ ); primary school teachers ranked 'note taking' as a more efficient strategy for learners (67.5%) compared to secondary education teachers (57.8%).

Moreover, despite the fact that 'looking up words in a dictionary' gained lower percentages as a 'very important' (14%) or 'important enough' (36.7%) strategy, the secondary school teachers ranked it as a more significant strategy (43.3%) than the primary school teachers who ranked it as of little importance (60%), ( $X^2=7.517$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.23$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.224$ ).

In addition, although 'imitating a language model' was not marked as a very important strategy, since only 11.3% of the teachers chose the option 'very X important' and 37.3% of the participants 'important enough'. It was primary school teachers who showed a greater preference for this strategy (60.3%) than secondary school teachers (34.4%) did. ( $X^2=10.535$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.005$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.265$ ). However, 'translating a target language expression or word into the L1' was selected as the least important strategy by 83 teachers (55.3%).

On the other hand, 'using a circumlocution or synonyms whenever students cannot remember a word or phrase' was ranked higher by the teachers, as a compensation strategy, gaining 'very important' (47.3%) and 'important enough' (48%) percentages respectively. However, no statistically significant difference between primary and secondary school teachers were found.

### 3.3.2 Memory strategies

Concerning *memory* strategies, 'activating background knowledge' was considered by the majority of the teachers as a 'very important' strategy (77.3%). In addition, 18.7% of the teachers believed that students should draw on prior knowledge and previous experience to facilitate them in acquiring new knowledge.

A significant proportion of the sample viewed 'relating information to usual concepts in memory' (using imagery) as meriting either a 'very important' (38%) or an 'important enough' (51.3%) level of priority for students. It is worth mentioning that the primary school teachers showed greater preference (54.2%) for linking verbal with visual aspects as a learning strategy for students compared to the secondary school teachers, who ranked it as an important way for students to learn (17.9%) ( $X^2=24.564$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.405$ ).

Furthermore, they showed preference for 'using rhymes' as a way to enable learners to store verbal material and then retrieve it when needed (very much 22.7%, enough 48%). Significant differences were found between primary school teachers, who regarded it as a more suitable learning strategy (34.9%) than the secondary school teachers (7.5%) did ( $X^2=22.194$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.385$ ). Moreover, a statistically significant correlation was indicated between the teaching experience and the degree of importance of 'using rhymes' ( $r=0.196$ ,  $p=0.017$ ). A large part of the experienced teachers considered it as a more prominent strategy.

### 3.3.3 Metacognitive and social strategies

Regarding the *social/ affective* strategies, the majority of the teachers stated that students could profit from asking the teacher or the peers for clarification about what they cannot understand (very much 56%, enough 38%). In addition, 'self-correction' gained a high percentage from teachers, who believe that this strategy could help their students at a high (40.7%) and a medium degree (47.3%) respectively. However, half of the total number of the participants (50%) showed a rather negative attitude towards 'asking the teacher to correct students' while performing a task. There were significant differences between the primary school teachers who regarded it as a more important strategy (16.4%) than the secondary school teachers (2.4%) ( $X^2= 14.473$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) (Gramer's  $V= 0.311$ ). It is noteworthy that a great number of the participants (87.3%) showed a major preference for the development of student strategy of taking the risk to write or speak in the target language despite the chance of making mistakes.

### 3.4 Teachers' views on language skills

#### 3.4.1 Reading skills

With respect to *reading skills*, the teachers almost unanimously (98.7%) declared the students' need for practice in developing the 'reading comprehension' sub-skill. Furthermore, they stated a high practice need in 'skimming a text' to determine main ideas (97.3%) and in 'scanning a text' in order to identify specific information or confirm predictions.

On the other hand, the ability to read a text as quickly as possible and the ability to read a text with good pronunciation received lower degree of teacher interest. More specifically, 'rapid reading' and 'prosodic reading' was stated as necessary to develop by 54.7% and 51.3% of the teachers respectively. In addition, reading accuracy ( $r. = .536$ ) and speed reading ( $r. = .559$ ) were also considered to be closely related to reading comprehension.

It should be highlighted that the primary school teachers showed a larger degree of agreement on helping students develop 'prosodic reading' (62.7%) than the secondary school teachers (37%), ( $X^2= 9.998$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.006$ ) (Gramer's  $V= 0.258$ ).

#### 3.4.2. Writing skills

In relation to the practice provided to students concerning 'writing formal or informal letters' for accomplishing various purposes, the majority of the teachers (78.7%) agreed on the merits of students developing this sub-skill. However, a certain part of primary school teachers (13.3%) declared that they were not certain about the significance of developing the students' writing skills in the specific genres, in comparison to secondary school teachers (1.5%), ( $X^2=9.142$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.010$ ) (Gramer's  $V= 0.247$ ).

The great majority of the participants (95.3%) were fully in agreement with the students' need to develop the sub-skill of 'constructing a meaningful sentence or a paragraph' and to provide the students with practice in 'selecting appropriate vocabulary' (90.7%) while composing a piece of writing. In addition, a significant number of the participants highlighted the need for the students to receive practice into 'making a summary' (79.3%). On the other hand, 'writing short answers' was the least favoured sub-skill chosen only by 17.6% of the teachers.

#### 3.4.3 Oral communication development

Regarding *listening skills*, the teachers stated a high practice need for students both in 'skimming a listening text' to determine main idea (97.3%) and in 'scanning a listening

text' in order to find specific information or confirm predictions (96%). Moreover, the teachers scored significant percentages on 'follow-up discussion about the content and meaning of a listening text' (78%) and expressed the need for students to be trained in the specific skill.

'Understanding native speakers' was viewed as meriting a less important level of priority, since a smaller percentage of the participants consented to this statement (69.3%); meanwhile an outstanding percentage of the sample either disagreed (18.7%) or felt uncertain (12 %).

Even a smaller percentage of the participants (62%) agreed on training students to be able to 'understand a listening text in order to complete/perform a task' and 30% of them disagreed on providing students with practice in order to develop the specific sub-skill. However, there were significant differences ( $X^2=6.185$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.042$ ) (Gramer's  $V=0.220$ ) between primary school teachers who showed a greater degree of agreement (70%) compared to secondary education teachers (53.2%).

Concerning *speaking skills*, the vast majority of the teachers had preference for developing students' ability of 'interacting and exchanging ideas' (98%) as well as 'participating actively in role playing' (92.7%) and they indicated the students' need in getting practice into these skills. Although the vast majority of the teachers (90.7%) stated that students should develop 'fluency in speaking', an important percentage (59.3%) of them agreed that students should also develop 'accuracy in speaking'.

Nevertheless, there were significant differences between primary and secondary school teachers ( $X^2= 5.346$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.06$ ); the secondary school teachers seemed to agree to a higher degree (64.2%) with developing students 'accuracy in speaking' compared to the participants from primary education (55.4%). In addition, statistically significant correlation was indicated between teaching experience and degree of agreement on developing this sub-skill ( $r. =0.183$ ,  $p=0.030$ ). A large part of the participants with teaching experience of more than ten years seemed to place a greater emphasis on 'speaking accurately'. On the other hand, the participants showed little preference to the drilling skill of 'asking and answering' (82.7%).

### 3.5 Prioritizing language skills

Although the teachers perceived the development of 'all language skills' as 'very important', reading and listening were considered the most important and highly needed skills. The results showed that the means of 5 out of 20 items were in high range (2.34 is the highest mean) (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean scores of the five most important teaching strategies advocated by the teachers

Prioritizing skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>Language skills</i>		
1. Speaking fluently	2.34	1.472
2. Skimming a text	2.52	1.421
3. Listening and comprehending to complete or perform a task	2.64	1.268
4. Scanning while listening X for specific information	2.69	1.621
5. Interacting and exchanging ideas	2.69	1.301

It should be noted that 'reading comprehension' was most favoured by the secondary education teachers since it was ranked as a more important sub-skill ( $m=2.31$ ) compared to primary education teachers ( $m=3.21$ ). On the other hand, 'using skimming to identify main ideas' while listening to a text was ranked higher by the teachers of primary education ( $m=2.13$ ) compared to those of secondary education ( $m=3.28$ ).

Concerning the students' participation in role playing, the teachers with less than 5 years of experience considered it to be a more important technique for developing speaking skills ( $m=1.36$ ) compared to the participants with a teaching experience of 6-10 years ( $m=3.40$ ) and those with experience of over 10 years ( $m=3.21$ ). Moreover, it was the primary education teachers who ranked it higher ( $m=1.95$ ) than secondary education teachers ( $m=3.72$ ).

#### **4. Discussion-Concluding remarks**

The aim of this paper was to investigate the role of language awareness from a teacher's perspective. Through their responses it was indicated that there is a certain number of EFL teachers who declared to be uncertain about their students' need to develop phonological and especially morphological awareness. This is in accordance with the findings of previous research into area of language awareness (Andrews 1999, 2001, Hales 1997, Wright & Bolitho 1993, Wright 1991, 2002). On the other hand, the teachers were highly concerned about the fact that different students have different ways of learning (White 1988) and stressed the need for the students' learning styles as well as their diverse needs to be taken into account prior to devising any language course.

Regarding the teachers' beliefs about language learning strategies there seemed to be a positive trend towards the need for the development of cognitive strategies (Oxford 1990) which are directly applied by the learners to 'the language itself' (Brown 1994). This is in line with the findings of much of the research published internationally (Anderson 2005; Oxford & Lavine 1992; Grenfell & Harris 1999; Peacock 2001). EFL teachers should have a comprehensive knowledge of learning strategies which are employed by EFL learners in order to be able to help them in making appropriate choice and use of effective learning strategies (see Carrell 1998, Chamot 2004, Maretat 2003).

Although the merits of 'self correction' (Mayo & Pica 2000) were highly regarded by the majority of the respondents, the teacher's role concerning feedback provision through immediate correction as suggested by methods based on behavioral theories of language learning (Nunan & Lamb 1996, Ur 1996) was also put forward.

Moreover, it should be noted that instead of opting for a balanced approach to fluency and accuracy development (Hinkel 2006), for the vast majority of the teachers 'developing fluency' was strongly supported however, there seemed to be a tendency towards accuracy being heavily prioritized by half of the target population. The more experienced teachers seemed to be more favourably oriented towards the traditional approach which emphasizes the need for accuracy in oral communication. 'Accuracy in speaking' was also highlighted by secondary school teachers, since focus on form is regarded as more closely related to students' preparation for examination and certificates at the more advanced language levels.

Moreover, the need to focus on phonetic accuracy in EFL teaching (Markus 2008) was put forward. In particular, 'accuracy while reading' was more valued by primary education teachers a fact which can be justified on the basis that primary education is the level at which students are introduced to learning to read in the foreign language and thus correct pronunciation is also in need of being pursued. With respect to writing, it is interesting that the teachers stressed the need for "teaching the mechanics of writing at the sentence level" (Cunningworth 1995:80), as well as the processes entailed in structuring paragraphs (Johnson 2001:289) and organizing content at the level of paragraph (Nunan 1989), since they regarded that a good writer should have a command of these skills .

The research findings also suggested that the EFL teachers could benefit from some INSET training in the areas of phonological, morphological and structural awareness.

Such training would enable them to provide their students with a clearer, more concise and detailed “understanding of language systems” (James & Garret 1992), since EFL teachers require linguistic and pedagogic knowledge (Wright 2002). As a matter of fact, LA functions as the link “between teachers’ knowledge of language and their practices in teaching language” (Wright & Bolitho 1993:292), and LA training could provide EFL teachers with the language and skills they need to operate effectively in the language classroom (Willis 1981; Spratt 1994).

Concluding, the study needs to consider some limitations in order to lead to a more refined and rigorous future research project. The first limitation incorporates generalizability, since a larger number of participants to investigate the aforementioned issues would secure external validity. Moreover, the need to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures, such as observation and interviews, in order to obtain a more complete and accurate picture by recording how EFL teachers convert their understanding of language awareness into teaching practice.

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