



## EXPLORING FIRST GRADERS LANGUAGE AWARENESS

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### **Abstract**

This article reports a study, carried out at a private school in Tunja, with ten first grade students. The aim was to explore and analyze the characteristics of first graders language awareness. In order to achieve this objective, a case study was developed. Thus, a description was made of the way students experience the process of learning English and identifying the features of their language awareness process. Observations and interviews were used for data collection. The main findings suggest first graders features of language awareness are: mother tongue as well as foreign language, peer correction and motivation to contribute to language awareness.

### **Resumen**

En este artículo se reporta un estudio que se llevó a cabo en un colegio privado en Tunja, con diez estudiantes de primer grado. El objetivo fue explorar y analizar las características de la conciencia del lenguaje de los estudiantes de grado primero en el Colegio Los Angeles. Para alcanzar este objetivo, un estudio de caso fue desarrollado ya que se realizó una descripción de la experiencia vivida por los estudiantes cuando aprenden inglés. La recolección de datos se hizo mediante observaciones y entrevistas. Los principales resultados indican que la lengua materna, la lengua extranjera y la corrección de errores entre compañeros contribuyen hacen aparte

**Key words:** young learners, language awareness, English language learning process,

importante del proceso de conciencia del lenguaje.

**Palabras clave:** niños, conciencia del lenguaje, proceso de aprendizaje del inglés

## Introduction

This document presents a report on a small scale case study. This study aims at analyzing first graders' language awareness, in order to understand the way students experience the learning process and evidence awareness of it, since early ages. Thus, it is essential to explore different aspects which may evidence language awareness such as: students' engagement during the lessons, the analysis they are able to do when learning, as they compare and describe how language is used or how it works and some other additional aspects. This analysis on language awareness provides teachers with some reasons to understand the process young children go through in order to transform teaching practices, bearing in mind students' particular contexts, needs and interests.

Thus, this mini scale project aims at exploring first graders' language awareness features. Therefore the following research question was stated as follows:

**What language awareness features are revealed when first graders learn English as a foreign language?**

## Theoretical Background

Two areas are relevant in order to carry out

this case study. First of all, the concept of language awareness, as the core concept of this study, needs to be described. Secondly, it was pertinent to understand the process; young learners go through when learning a language and identify some key aspects. Finally, some research studies in the field of language awareness and language learning are addressed.

## Language awareness

Language awareness is an important component in the process of teaching and learning a language. Although, it has not often been a matter of discussion in our contexts, it really deserves to be studied, in order to have a better understanding and a more particular perspective about how teachers and students experience language in our current contexts. Language awareness is an essential component in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language, as it embraces and can be related to aspects that go beyond knowing the language system itself. Language awareness is relevant for teachers, students, the context in which teaching and learning practices take place.

From the perspective of students' role, language awareness can be understood as the way students experience learning the language by actively participating during the

lessons and showing interest, the attitudes they reflect during the process demonstrating their feelings when experiencing this process and expressing their insights about language learning. One of the most important factors is motivation as, students are likely to be interested in learning when they are affectively engaged and demonstrate interest and desire of learning (Tomlinson, 2003).

Language teachers also influence how aware students can be about language. They are mediators who provide the students with opportunities to explore language. The perspective of language teachers reflect influences the way students understand and perceive language. For that reason, the teachers' task is to involve students in asking questions about language and allow them to explore dimensions of language (Bolitho et al, 2003), others than considering it as a mere system of signs and symbols. Thus, it depends on teachers, whether students see language as a complete system of signs, symbols and rules or, as a way to explore the world, to have contact with other people and other ideas, to communicate, interact and negotiate meaning. Then moving to a critical language awareness perspective that consists of conceiving language as a tool to understand the world and power relations (Clark & Ivanic, 1999 as cited in Bolitho et al, 2003)

The context, in which language is used, plays an important role when factors such as school policies, the social and economic situation and the teaching practices may influence the perspective of language, students may have. Thus, having a common perspective about language as a mean of

conveying meaning will lead to achieving this common goal. Teachers create the environment they want their students to be immersed in, using methodologies and materials which are particular to meet students' needs and promote an exploration of language.

### **Language Learning**

Language learning is closely related to language awareness. Promoting and developing language awareness may contribute to carrying out a better learning process, in this way; students have a better understanding and a clear view of language. Thus, having in mind the definition and assumptions of language awareness previously presented language learning is a process in which students and teachers have a particular perspective of language. Language surrounds us everywhere and is the main tool which allows communication and interaction among people. Clark (2000) proposes a whole overview with some important aspects surrounding language learning. He states children's language is changing constantly. Since, children are learning to communicate, they feel engaged in the process, as they interact and live different experiences, they understand how language works and get involved in a communicative competence. Students acquire the ability to understand grammar rules as they use the language. As children develop the ability to use language, it is easier for them to understand different situations and they are able to control their own actions and thoughts. As children are socially competent, their language competence is also influenced. It is to say that interaction and being competent, socially determine and

give some tools in order to develop their language competence. Stimulating and rich environments support language development and encouraging them to express their opinions according to real situations helps them to build language experience.

There are various research reports that relate language awareness to language learning,

Muñoz (2012) asserts that there is little research on how young learners perceive the foreign language and the learning experience. She carried out a comparative study across seven European countries and it lasted from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. It was observed an evolution of learners' beliefs and their self-perceptions as language learners. The information gathered, presented young learner's self-perception, feelings about foreign language learning, language learning and language awareness

Restrepo (2006) shared a proposal in which the teacher-researcher took into account the students' interests and through the implementation of the Language Awareness approach to grammar instruction, the learners of 9<sup>th</sup> grade had a better understanding of how grammatical structures work and how to integrate them in written ways. Besides, learners were conscious of their own learning, presenting positive attitudes in the language use not only inside but also outside the classroom.

Another research project based on Multilingual Virtual Talking books analyzed how a storybook software fostered the development of language awareness in primary school children, in this study

Language Awareness was defined as "explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use" (ALA 1992). Twenty-seven primary school children applied a performance test in which the cognitive level of Language Awareness was assessed and through a questionnaire their affective level of Language Awareness was evaluated, the results led to confirm that Multilingual Virtual Talking Books software enhanced Language awareness on both the cognitive and the affective level.

Thus, from the previous review, it can be seen that language awareness. These studies in which the participants are children have shown that Language Awareness allows the development of students' independence in their language learning process.

## **Methodology**

Case study has been the research method used in this mini-scale project. For Cohen & Manion (1994) and Yin (2003), case study can be used to observe the characteristics of an individual unit within a real life context, in this case a group of ten first graders. This project aimed at analyzing and describing first graders' language awareness features, as they take place in everyday class activities. The students demonstrated during their classes a previous knowledge about language, how it works and how it is used.

## **Setting and Participants**

This Project took place at a private school in Tunja. It holds preschool, elementary and

high school. It has about seven hundred students in one shift. One of the school's emphasis is English because of the number of hours established in the curriculum.

The students selected at random for this study were ten students, chosen out of an entire group of thirty one first graders; they range in age from six to seven years old. There are twenty boys and eleven girls in the group. They have been learning English as a foreign language since preschool. They take seven English hours per week, four hours of science in English and one hour of speaking. Each session is forty five minutes long. They were given nicknames when quoting them. We asked for permission to collect information by using a consent form. (See Annex 1)

### **Data collection**

The main instruments that were used to collect information were video recordings and interviews in order to describe, analyze and evidence the students' reactions through their understanding about their language learning process.

### **Video recordings**

Video recordings were used to record five sessions of the English class based on different activities in the books, workshops, exams and through the information gathered to analyze the different reactions and interpretations students lived when learning a foreign language and how these revealed characteristics of their language awareness from their experiences. The instrument was used one and two hours each week during all the English classes.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were used at the end of our research study; it allowed gathering more specific information on students' spontaneous responses, taken from video recordings. Ten students were selected for the interviews as they showed participation during the five sessions and revealed features of the language awareness. The questions were asked to know students opinions and experiences towards the process of their language learning. (See Annex 2).

### **Data analysis**

This part of our study describes the process we followed to analyze the gathered data in order to answer the research question: **What language awareness features are revealed when first graders learn English as a foreign language?** Additionally, research findings are presented in three categories that emerged from the current research project. In order to analyze data, first common patterns were found in the class observations and the answers given by the students in the interviews. The interviews were about some situations students lived during the classes and which were related to how aware they were when learning the language. Students' answers and attitudes reflected important aspects related to their process of language awareness. We used the next codes in the data analysis: VR=Video Recordings, SI= Student Interview, T: teacher. We proposed the following codes: S1, S2, S3, S4 and STS to refer to the students who participated in this research. Three categories emerged from the data analysis. These are L1 and L2, peer correction and motivation.

## L1 and L2

During the observation of the English classes, it was observed that learners' mother language took an important place in their foreign language learning process. Students used their mother language as a tool to demonstrate understanding of the foreign language. It is important to highlight that this is an evidence of how students firstly being aware of their mother language influences being aware of the foreign language and vice versa. This compensates their need of learning, and leads them to acquire new knowledge. Adapting words from Spanish to English allows them to participate even when the words are not appropriate or correct in English

*(Excerpt No. 1 VR. 16/05/2013)*

*T: Do you remember what the story is about?*

*STS: house*

*T: House and what else?*

*STS: a boy and a girl*

*T: What are they doing?*

*STS: "jugando a las escondidas"*

*T: they are playing hide and seek*

*S1:B1: "escondid"*

*T: ok! And do you remember what happen here?*

*STS: esta contando*

*T: they are counting. How do you count?*

*STS: one! Two!...ten!*

*T: and then you go and look the one you are looking for*

*S2: "esta viendo por todos los lados haber si lo encuentra"*

*T: ok! He is looking for a girl. Please Alejandro*

*S3: "están en la habitación"*

This category reflects one of the characteristics of language awareness. Students knowing how language works is an important aspect in order to be aware about language. Data shows that students are able to build up their own knowledge about language. During the classes, it was observed that students had the ability to ask questions about language and how it worked, in order to construct meaning from the given answers (Tomlinson, 2003). During another session of the English class, the teacher was working on the identification of personal pronouns. Students were learning about how to differentiate "he and she". In order to confirm knowledge, a student was asked why he should write "she" to complete a sentence. After some practice, the student was able to express some reasons to support why his answer was correct.

This is evident through the answers provided by the students in the video recordings.

*(Excerpt No. 1. VR 16/05/2013)*

*T: Por qué "she" Santiago?*

*S1: Porque es niña*

*S1: escribimos She?*

*T: yes, Santiago*

*S2: she*

*T: really if I say my brother. I say he or I say she*

*STS: she... he*

*T: what is brother? Listen I can say Cesar is my brother. Do I say he or do I say she.*

*STS: he*

*T: uhmm is the same as I say Santiago is my brother, do I say he or she*

*S4: she really?*

*T: if I say Paula Sofia is my sister,*

*STS: she*

*T: she is in the classroom. If I say Zack is*

*my brother, do I say he or she?*

*STS: he*

*T: he is in the bedroom, very good!*

### Peer correction

During the observations and the interview, it was observed how students play an important role in their peers' foreign language learning process. Students were able to identify and correct their classmates' mistakes. Thus, they evidence consciousness on how language works when they are able to differentiate words. For instance, in a class in which the topic was the parts of the house, the teacher elicited some words. One of the students said "chicken" instead of "kitchen", after listening to the words; she was able to select the word she wanted to communicate in her message. Peer correction allows students to pay more attention to how language works and notice the gap between his performance and that of others. This will lead to readiness and attention where the same situation takes place Tomlinson (2003). In this case, the student will remember how to use the words kitchen and chicken.

(Excerpt No. 2. VR 22/05/2013)

*T: ah! Ok! Which are the parts of the house? Tell me one*

*STS: garage!! Yard!*

*T: what do you do in the yard? Do you eat in the yard?*

*S3: nooo! "chicken"*

*T: chicken or kitchen?*

*STS: kitchen*

In the interview a student talks about how she explains to her classmates when they ask her for clarification on the activities from

the class. Giving explanations to their classmates and clarifying them what they have to do in the activities of the class, shows how learning becomes a social process in which the peers help build knowledge and contribute to the learning process. This helps learners to notice for themselves how language works and interaction allows achieving their own mental representation of language Tomlinson, 2003)

(Excerpt No. 3. SI 22/06/2013)

*T: ¿tus amiguitos hablan en inglés en la clase?*

*S4: mmm algunos no*

*T: y cuando ellos no saben qué hacer en la clase de inglés tu les ayudas?*

*S4: si*

*T: y como les explicas*

*S4: les explico que hay que hacer como que hay que poner "elephant" o toca poner así como "gato" en inglés*

### Motivation

This aspect is one which is highlighted by Tomlinson (2003), by stating that students learn well when they are affectively engaged. This factor is part of language awareness as it evidences how important is language for learners and how this importance can influence their involvement in the process. Their preferences and interests from an early age, makes them think about big dreams they want to accomplish and learning the language will take them closer to achieving it.

During the interview a student was asked if he would like to learn some other languages. The student expresses his desire of learning

another language because of his interests of traveling to another country. Since an early age, students understand that learning a different language goes beyond an academic requirement but, it provides different opportunities such as traveling and discovering new perspectives.

(Excerpt N. 4 from SI 22/06/2013)

S5: *yo quiero aprender frances*

T: *Por qué quieres aprender francés*

S5: *porque mi papá sabe francés y me está enseñando*

T: *tu papá ya estuvo en Francia*

S5: *si cuando era chiquito*

T: *Te gusta las clases de inglés?*

S5: *si.*

T: *Por qué?*

S5: *son divertidas*

In the previous example, a first grade student says he wants to learn French because he wants to travel to France. He is aware that learning this language will open up the opportunity to travel to a different country and perceives language as the means to achieve his goal. In this way, students move from considering English and other languages as the mere subjects at school, towards considering them as means to explore the world around them. Consequently, they have more reasons to be interested in learning the language. Despite their age, they are conscious of the benefits of learning a foreign language.

## Conclusions

The features of language awareness which are evident when first graders learn English are represented by the roles of mother language and foreign language, peer correction and motivation.

The mother language plays an important role when referring to language awareness in the foreign language learning process. Strategies used in the mother language are transferred to foreign language and this may contribute to a more conscious and meaningful learning process.

Students since early ages are able to show evidence of being aware of their language learning process as they ask questions about how language works. They are conscious of the importance of learning a language and they express the willingness of learning it, in order to have other opportunities such as traveling and knowing different things.

Research on language awareness allows analyzing students' role in the process of learning the language. Moreover, it offers the possibility to design activities which empowers learners to take a reflective position towards their process of learning the language.

Language awareness implies more than understanding language as a group of signs and symbols. It implies allowing students to explore language as a means to share experiences and know about the world around them.

## Pedagogical Implications

Research on students' language awareness will benefit teaching and learning practices as it allows taking a closer view to the process students go through, in order to understand it better and giving the possibility to teachers for planning specific activities related to the particular characteristics of the students.



Language awareness is a field which needs to be researched more deeply concerning to how it is experienced by different participants from different ages and different contexts, in order to modify teaching practices and understand how students really go through the process of learning the foreign language.

Additionally, understanding the process of language awareness may contribute to facilitate students' involvement in order for them to become active participants of their own learning process and be conscious of the importance of this role.

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## ANNEXES

### Annex 1. Consent Form

Estimados padres de familia,

Las docentes de Inglés Liliana Fagua y Angélica Parra estudiantes de la maestría en docencia de Idiomas de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia desarrollaremos un proyecto investigativo basado en examinar la consciencia del aprendizaje de la lengua que tienen los estudiantes de grado primero.

Dicho proyecto es conocido por las directivas de la institución, quienes han permitido realizarlo como parte de nuestro proceso de formación como futuros investigadores en el campo de la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera y en segundo lugar por la M.A. Yolanda Samaca, orientadora del proyecto.

La información para esta investigación se recolectará a través de observaciones de clase, trabajos de los estudiantes y grabaciones de audio. Esta investigación no tendrá incidencia en notas de la materia y se llevará a cabo únicamente en la jornada escolar, adaptada a las temáticas del plan de área de la institución sin afectar a los estudiantes en su programa académico. Se usarán nombres ficticios para mantener la identidad de los participantes en el anonimato.

Agradecemos de antemano su valiosa colaboración en esta investigación.

Atentamente,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Lic. Liliana Fagua  
Docente de Inglés.  
Colegio los Ángeles  
Estudiante de Maestría UPTC

\_\_\_\_\_  
Lic. Angélica Parra  
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### AUTORIZACIÓN

Yo, \_\_\_\_\_ autorizo a mi hijo (a) \_\_\_\_\_ para que sea participe del proyecto de investigación “EXPLORING FIRST GRADERS’ LANGUAGE AWARENESS” y doy mi consentimiento para que las docentes Liliana Fagua y Angélica Parra utilicen los datos proporcionados para su análisis en el proyecto en mención. Propongo el siguiente seudónimo para que sea utilizado en lugar del nombre real de mi hijo(a) \_\_\_\_\_

## **Annex 2. Interview Protocol**

- ¿Por qué te gusta aprender inglés?
- ¿Por qué es importante para ti?
- ¿Cómo utilizas el inglés en las clases?
- ¿Qué otro idioma te gustaría aprender a parte de inglés y español?
- ¿En el colegio, te gusta la clase de inglés? Por qué?
- ¿Qué actividades te gustan?
- ¿Te gusta hablar en inglés en las clases?
- ¿Cuándo no entiendes las instrucciones en inglés, qué haces?
- ¿Y cuándo un compañero no entiende, Cómo le ayudas?

#### THE AUTHORS

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ANGÉLICA PARRA RODRÍGUEZ holds a B.A. in Foreign Languages from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) and currently is an M.A. Language Teaching Candidate. She works as an English teacher and as an English Area Coordinator (Elementary) at Colegio Los Angeles in Tunja. She has been researching on exploring the Intercultural Competence in young learners through the work by projects in an EFL class.