

Evaluating 6 Examples of Empirical Research in Teachers' Language Awareness

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates six empirical studies on Teacher Language Awareness (TLA), with a focus on the beliefs, cognition, and pedagogical practices of language teachers across various contexts. The review identifies key debates in the field, including the influence of teachers' identities, prior learning experiences, and external factors such as curriculum design. The studies reveal that while TLA is difficult to alter in the short term, it can be nurtured through sustained reflective practice, explicit instruction, and well-designed training programs. The paper further highlights methodological trends, noting a preference for qualitative or mixed-method approaches that prioritize teachers' perspectives. Despite growing scholarly attention, the field remains under-researched, particularly regarding the long-term impacts of TLA development and the dynamic interplay between beliefs and classroom practices. The paper concludes by proposing future research directions, emphasizing the need for longitudinal, ethnographic, and context-sensitive studies that bridge theoretical insights with practical classroom realities.

Keywords: Teacher Language Awareness (TLA), teacher cognition, reflective practice, language teacher education, beliefs and pedagogy

1. Current Topics of Debates in the Field

Teacher language awareness (TLA) is gaining more and more attention in the studies of language teaching and learning area. Language awareness (LA) is explicitly defined as knowledge about language and language use, the ability and sensitivity of language teaching and learning, the metacognitive skills and process of learning about the language (Dubiner, 2018). Dubiner (2018) also emphasized the importance of language awareness education in teachers, indicating that when teachers are aware of how language work, they would know how to teach and also understand students' struggles. In the same vein, Swierzbinska and Reimer (2019) had a literature review on how teachers' beliefs impact their teaching practice and how their previous experiences influence their latter learning processes. As Gage (2020) justified that the construction of teachers' beliefs varies considerably and these beliefs might be difficult to change.

Furthermore, teachers' identity is a big issue mentioned in many studies, which also influenced the methodologies to some extent in terms of selecting participants. For instance, Gage (2020) addressed teacher's roles as an agent of social change for transformative citizenship education and as an arbiter of primary school education, while in Dubiner's (2018) and Bergström et al.'s (2021) researches about TLA, they observed that non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) are both language learner and teacher at the same time, which means that they perceive language difficulties from a learner's perspective and can be a pedagogical resource in language teaching. In other words, teachers form a teaching-learning bridge between language knowledge and language use, but their awareness and cognition about language can impact their teaching practice in certain ways. Thus, it is essential for researchers to dig deeper in the TLA field.

While Young (2018) raised the question about whether teachers' language awareness can be taught, numerous researches have been conducted, focusing on TLA with different topics such as general perceptions, grammar, vocabulary, and the relationship with curriculum, trying to find ways to improve teachers' language awareness for better language education. For example, in order to unravel teachers' general understanding of language awareness, van den Broek et al. (2018) initiated interviews with EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers to look into their beliefs about language awareness, figuring out the extent to which they have similar ideas about LA as a concept, what the conflicts are among these ideas as well as the challenges derived consequently, and how these findings can fit into the current language curriculum. In relation to vocabulary knowledge, Bergström et al. (2021) investigated EFL teachers' conceptualisation about L2 vocabulary knowledge and learning, as well as how they embodied it in their classroom teaching practice. Another case in terms of grammar is a study conducted by Graus and Coopen (2015), showing student teachers' cognitions about grammatical difficulty and the relation to that of their SLA (Second Language Acquisition) literature findings. Besides, empirically, Gage (2022) designed a collaborative TLA training course, Swierzbinska and Reimer (2019) conducted an SFL (systemic functional linguistics) grammar course, and Dubiner (2018) used the vocabulary notebook as a reflective tool of teachers' awareness, all of which are researchers' efforts in the TLA field.

In sum, TLA researchers are both theoretically and practically devoted to figuring out what teachers' beliefs about language awareness are in terms of specific topics, how these beliefs are shaped, what impact they might have and how TLA can be improved in teacher education in order to make contributions to better language teaching practice.

2. Previous Problems in the Field

Although there are some researches about TLA, these studies focused on rather narrow linguistic topics such as grammar and vocabulary. There is still a lack of investigation into teachers' beliefs about LA as a concept, including their similar and conflicting perceptions, as well as the challenges derived in relation to be fitting in the current curriculum (van den Broek et al., 2018). Gage Ondine (2020), too, has the similar concern that TLA is a less explored field, but from a different, sociocultural perspective. He took into consideration the multilingual context and primary teachers' role as a language awareness arbiter and observed that there is an urgent need of developing a praxis of language awareness in primary education.

Generally speaking, apart from what Andrews and Svalberg (2017) have criticised that TLA is still under-researched and remains fairly ambiguous, the current problems in the TLA field can be categorised into three aspects: a) the research participants, b) the related linguistic topics and c) the approaches used in TLA researches.

As mentioned above, teachers bear multiple identities and play different roles in language teaching practice, which may differ depending on their backgrounds. Graus and Coppen (2015) believed that teachers' cognition, meaning what they know, think and believe, is influenced by various factors, such as their previous education and teaching experience. According to teachers' teaching experience, they can be seen as pre-service teachers (beginner student teachers without teaching experience) and in-service teachers (teachers who have completed their basic training and are now teachers) (Graus & Coppen, 2015). Yet not many studies have focused on the difference between these two types of teachers. Only in Graus and Coppen's (2015) research did they also consider how teachers' previous knowledge and experience may influence their language awareness about grammar difficulties.

Rather, another more popular perspective in relation to the participants in TLA researches is whether they are native English speakers or not. Bergström et al. (2021) have found that studies in language teacher cognition (TLC) have mainly focused on native English-speaking teachers (NEST). They instead valued the non-native English-speaking teachers as a pedagogical resource for being successful in multilingual learning as well as being successful users of a second language. They also proposed that the distinction between native and non-native English-speaking teachers should be their linguistic experience rather than their language proficiency and deficiency (Bergström et al., 2021). In the same vein, Dubiner (2018) addressed the 'double-agent' identity of NNESTs as the learners and teachers of the same language and that worldwide NESTs are outnumbered by NNESTs. He then claimed that it is urgent to explore the NNESTs' conscious reflection on the language learning process. Besides, Dubiner (2018) and Bergström et al. (2021) all agreed that TLA about vocabulary acquisition is neglected both by the researchers and teachers.

As for the research topics related to grammar in TLA studies, Graus and Coppen (2015) found that grammatical difficulty is somehow defined heterogeneously while the research scope of these definitions is limited, which seems to hinder further studies, with another problem that traditional SLA literature often marginalizes student teachers' perspective. Similarly, focusing on teachers' beliefs about grammar, Swierzbinska and Reimer (2019) concluded that using structural approach to teach traditional grammar has been around for a long time in grammar teaching. While there is a tendency of shifting from traditional grammar to functional grammar via

SFL, which relates grammar teaching to everyday life and practical using context, there is still little attention to the effects of SFL training on teachers' beliefs (Swierzbina & Reimer, 2019). Even within limited these studies, they only involved short-term training and the results are often reported on either teachers' pedagogy or students' achievement, instead of on the impact on teachers' beliefs. Also, previous studies have shown that their SFL training courses did not fully succeed in helping teachers internalising new knowledge and grammar teaching pedagogy, partially due to their previous learning experience (Swierzbina & Reimer, 2019). They also criticised the methodologies adopted in previous TLA researches, which would be discussed in the following methodologies section.

3. Methodologies

TLA studies have been conducted with various approaches, including qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodologies. However, qualitative methodologies seem to be a preferred choice, which are often combined with data analysing methods such as coding and thematising.

Qualitative methodologies are popular among the TLA researchers. Dubiner (2018) quoted Nassaji (2015: 129), applauding those qualitative methodologies allow researchers to deeply examine the data of individual experience at the level of both learning behaviour and language awareness. Aiming at exploring participants' reflections on their vocabulary acquisition process by using the vocabulary notebook, the instruments Dubiner's (2018) used for data collection were comprised of vocabulary notebook entries, guided written reflections and in-depth semi-structured interviews. All the data were transcribed, then coded into themes for further analysis. Another similar case is the research of van den Broek et al. (2018). They adopted a qualitative methodology, using a coding scheme to analyse the data from post-session observation interviews with 10 upper-secondary EFL teachers, in order to gain a better understanding of teachers' beliefs about LA in the context of Netherland.

By contrast, quantitative methods like questionnaires are problematic especially in teacher cognition studies, for the data may reflect the researchers' presumptions rather than the participants' personal perceptions (Kagan, 1990). Woods (1996) also pointed out another problem about questionnaires that they often comprise decontextualized questions that are likely to be answered based on perceived norms. These problems of quantitative methods became reasons for Bergström et al. (2021) to carry out their research through interviews with open-ended questions, in order to elicit teachers' actual beliefs from their own experience. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 Swedish EFL teachers at secondary school. Questions were around teachers' understanding of L2 vocabulary learning and teaching. Besides, they used a thematic method to analyze the data and finally categorized them into different themes. However, since the interviews were conducted in Swedish and translated into English, it may lead to information misrepresented. Yet no solid methods were mentioned by the authors to ensure the validness and accuracy of the translated data. In other words, qualitative methodologies have their own disadvantages, too. As Gage (2020) said, a qualitative interpretive analysis means some extent of subjectivity from the investigator and the validity of the data is concerning due to the subjective nature of reflection.

In order to make the best of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, there are some researchers using mix methodologies in their studies on TLA. For instance, Swierzbina and Reimer (2019) argued that previous researches on teachers' beliefs about grammar mainly used questionnaires, tests and tasks to evaluate teachers' knowledge about language (KAL), which were all designed from the researchers' perspective and so inevitably embodied investigators' beliefs about what grammar is. Therefore, with the attempt to elicit participants' own ideas about grammar, they firstly used a concept map methodology, which was drawn entirely by the participants, to collect data before and after they had taken an SFL grammar course. The researchers then compared the data of two maps statistically to see if there were any changes in participants' beliefs about grammar. Next, participants were asked to write reflections after they compared their own maps, for further qualitative descriptions. Similarly, in the research of investigating how student teachers identify grammatical difficulties, Graus and Coppen (2015) carries out two studies using the mixed methodologies: a pilot study to gather participants' opinions on what factors contribute to grammatical difficulty. They qualitatively analyzed and coded the responses into categories and themes, then calculated the frequency of the factors and made a raking list. The main study was a questionnaire about how participants perceived the difficulty level of each grammar point and asked them to rate 5 specific causes of the difficulty of 9 grammar features via a five-point Likert scale. In this way, the researchers were able to identify how the variables differ statistically, but also to understand why they differ qualitatively.

Interestingly, designing an experiment seems to be another way to gather data. In addition to designing an SFL course to investigate its effect on teachers' beliefs about grammar (Swierzbina & Reimer, 2019), also in response to Young's (2018) question about whether language awareness can be taught, Gage (2022) carefully designed a TLA training course comprising collaborative student-centred activities, only to prove that it is useful for as a praxis of language awareness for pre-service primary teachers.

In sum, one type of methodology is sometimes not enough for deep research. Especially in the TLA field, qualitative methodology like questionnaires assisted by thematic analysis is better for individual behaviour and awareness investigation. Mixed methodologies can be well used to avoid the disadvantages and make much of the advantages of each one. Also, novel designs and experiments can be applied to empirical researches to explore new ways of TLA educational practice.

4. Main Findings

The main finding of six TLA articles can be concluded in five points as following:

4.1 *Teachers' Language Awareness Is Hard to Change in a Short Time*

Much evidence among these six researches shows that it is difficult to change teachers' beliefs about language in a short time. For example, Swierzbinska and Reimer (2019) asked participants to draw maps about what they think grammar is and how they would refer to grammar in their teaching practice, respectively before and after they took a grammar-based SFL course. After researchers compared the maps, they found that although participants had a deeper and broader understanding of grammar, their knowledge of grammar was still dominant at the morpheme/word level instead of at the discourse level. This pattern was also backed up by their written reflection. Teachers' language awareness about grammar did not change much regardless of taking the grammar course, indicating that the SFL training course had little impact on teachers' beliefs, and that what they would learn from the course was influenced by their precious beliefs. This finding is also in line with other similar researches that they referred to in the introduction section in their paper (Swierzbinska & Reimer, 2019), where other researchers found that even though there was obviously positive impact from the SFL training, participants still tended to shift back to the structural approaches that were more familiarly to them. Teachers' intuition and experience will be discussed in Finding 2.

4.2 *TLA Largely Depends on Internal Factors such as Teachers' Intuition and Experience*

As Finding 1 has mentioned, TLA is difficult to change not only because of the short pedagogical training time, but also due to teachers' intuition and their previous experience. Related evidence can be traced in another TLA research. Bergström et al. (2021) conducted interviews with EFL teachers on their cognition about vocabulary knowledge and learning. They found that in regards to what words should be learnt and the assessment criteria of knowledge level, teachers' responses largely depended on their intuition and experience, instead of giving grounded reasons and supports. Besides, Bergström et al. (2021) reported in the same research that participants heavily relied on incidental learning especially reading as a major way for vocabulary acquisition. However, researchers pointed out that their belief of positive impact of incidental vocabulary learning was inconsistent to relevant studies showing that there are restricted conditions to incidental learning and reading by itself is not productive enough, which means that their integrated vocabulary learning approach is intuitive without consulting scientific researches.

Teachers' experiences also affect their understanding of grammar difficulty. Graus and Coppen (2015) found that there were differences between undergraduates and postgraduates about their views on grammar difficulty. Firstly, undergraduates considered teacher quality as a factor of grammatical difficulty, which did not appear to the postgraduates for they may be unwilling to criticize themselves as teachers with their increasing confidence and pride. Besides, undergraduates were more likely to exaggerate the level of grammar difficulty due to their lack of confidence and inadequate knowledge, while postgraduates might underestimate it as they became more advanced and lost their learner perspective. Noteworthy, both groups of student teachers shown similar intuitions about the difficulty level of the grammar features, which the researchers referred that 'learner' and teachers' intuitions are strong predictors for learners' performance' (Graus & Coppen, 2015).

4.3 *TLA Can Be Influenced by External Factors such as Curriculum and Extra Guidance*

Although we discussed in Finding 1 and Finding 2 that TLA is hard to change due to some internal factors, it is still possible to be influenced by external factors. Bergström et al. (2021) indicates that since extramural English activities were proved to be beneficial to students' language acquisition, they also impacted teachers' conceptualization. Moreover, researchers suggested that participants' belief that the objective of vocabulary learning is for better communication was possibly influenced by Swedish national curriculum which emphasized specific communicative skills of English learning. Similarly, in another Dutch research of investigating EFL teachers' language awareness, van den Broek et al. (2018) found that there was an obvious conflict in terms of teachers' beliefs about the curriculum. They believed that the space for creative teaching practice and for LA to fit in was restricted by the curriculum, although there was some freedom within the boundary.

However, TLA can be influenced in a more positive way by proper guidance. In Gage's (2020) study, he carefully designed a TLA training course comprising collaborative student-centered activities, which was proved to be a useful way to improve pre-service primary teachers' language awareness. Specifically, students grew in multiple ways through collaborative activities. They felt more confident and supported, learnt metacognitive

skills, linguistic and technological knowledge and were informed of language teaching pedagogy in a languacultural community. Students also developed language awareness in terms of education equity through the curricular materials, such as the impact of teachers' attitude towards students as well as a deeper understanding and self-criticism of discrimination and biases in education in current society.

4.4 Explicit Instructions Are Needed in TLA Education and Reflection Is an Essential Method for Teachers and Investigators

Last but not least, these researches also suggested a lack of instructions in TLA education. Bergström et al. (2021) noted in their findings that in terms of vocabulary teaching, participants could not give out particular methods to decide what words to learn, to increase students' vocabulary size, to assess their knowledge level, or to their more effective teaching approach. In addition, Dubiner (2018) indicated that learners needed guidance to use the vocabulary notebook because they did not have the knowledge of notebook as a reflective learning tool. Even during the research, participants were given reflective guidance and feedback from the researchers, in order to help them achieve on their notebook reflections.

Regarding the term *reflection*, half of the six articles shows that it is not only an essential skill, but also an effective tool for both teachers and researchers in relation to teachers' language awareness. For example, in Swierzbinska and Reimer's (2019) research, they asked students to write a reflection after they compared their pre- and post-course maps, which was used for further qualitative analysis. Gage (2020) collected and analysed students' reflection on what they have learnt after each unit during the course. Vocabulary notebook reflection was one of the main data sources in Dubiner's (2018) study, which supported that reflective learning is conducive to the development of teachers' language awareness and pedagogical skills.

Thus, explicit instructional methods should be provided and the value of reflection should be recognized in TLA research and education.

5. Remaining Gaps for Future Research

Although these articles focus on different topics in TLA, there are some similarities and overlaps among them. Also taking the methodologies and findings into consideration, there are some suggestions for future researches.

The first insight is to look into teachers' previous learning experience since it is an important factor of TLA, specifically, the impact they have on teachers' language cognitions as well as their teaching practice (Bergström et al., 2021). Besides, studies can focus on how general curriculum, instruction and requirements in the language educational policies shape or influence teachers' and students' LA in their teaching and learning practice respectively (van den Broek et al., 2018). Moreover, to take the relatively developed qualitative researches a step further, ethnographic approach like actual classroom observations can be applied to investigate the relationship between teachers' belief and practice. It is worth to investigate the relationship between teachers' own experience, classroom practice and beliefs about LA.

As for the present empirical and experimental researches, follow-up studies and long-term researches can be carried out. For example, a follow-up study about how the participants in Dubiner's (2018) study apply their pedagogical skills of applying vocabulary notebooks reflections as a tool in class; a follow-up study of Swierzbinska and Reimer's (2019) current research to see the changes of students' perceptions after the implementation of the modified course. Or alternatively, a longitudinal study on changes in teachers' KAL during the whole teacher education program (Swierzbinska & Reimer, 2019) or research on the long-term effectiveness of using vocabulary notebooks reflections, e.g., the retention and application of the lexical items (Dubiner, 2018). However, there are some exceptions to be considered. Gage (2020) mentioned in his case that neither the methodological design nor the findings are likely to be replicated, due to the different social and community factors such as students' background involved. Therefore, future research can look into the area of classroom ecology to investigate how languaculture evolve in certain context.

Other research possibilities can be the impacts (i.e. advantages and disadvantages) of incidental learning, or the effective ways to overcome the challenges posed by 4 conflicts found by van den Broek et al., (2018), or teachers' beliefs on form-focused instruction during different stages, and the relationship between grammatical difficulty and type of instruction, e.g. what type of instruction is effective to tackle grammatical difficulty from teachers' perspectives (Graus & Coppen, 2015)?

6. Conclusion

In evaluating six empirical studies on teacher language awareness (TLA), several consistent themes and findings emerge. It is evident that TLA is a multifaceted and deeply ingrained aspect of language teaching, resistant to change through short-term interventions. The studies highlight the difficulty of altering teachers' beliefs about language, which are often rooted in their prior experiences and intuitions. This suggests that sustained, reflective practices are necessary to effect meaningful change in TLA.

Moreover, while internal factors such as teachers' intuition and previous experience play a significant role in shaping their language awareness, external factors like curriculum and targeted training can also influence TLA. However, the impact of these external factors is often limited without explicit instructional methods and opportunities for reflection, underscoring the importance of well-structured professional development programs.

Despite these insights, the review also identifies gaps in current TLA research, particularly in understanding the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Future research should explore the longitudinal effects of TLA training, delve deeper into the influence of prior learning experiences, and employ more ethnographic methods to observe the real-time application of TLA in classrooms.

Overall, the review underscores the complexity of TLA and the need for a holistic approach in both research and practice to enhance language teaching effectiveness.

Reviewed Articles

This paper mainly refers to six particular research articles related to teacher language awareness (TLA), respectively from Dubiner (2018), Swierzbins and Reimer (2019), Gage (2020), Bergström et al. (2021), van den Broek et al. (2018), Graus and Coopen (2015). Details can be found in the References.

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