Improving Speaking Accuracy Through Awareness

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Abstract

Increased English learner accuracy can be achieved by leading students through six stages of awareness. The first three awareness stages build up students' motivation to improve, and the second three provide learners with crucial input for change. The final result is "sustained language awareness," resulting in ongoing self-correction and improvement.

Introduction

Dewi [fictitious name] is an Indonesian who immigrated to the United States 10 years ago. After raising her family she would now like to return to the vocation she had in Indonesia–that of teaching English. However, she knows she needs to improve her English in order to do that, so she looks for an ESL class.

Upon meeting her in your adult ESL class, you are immediately impressed by her fluency in English. She speaks confidently and without hesitation. At the same time, however, you are sometimes a bit unsure of her exact meaning and are struck by certain persistent errors. You notice an absence of articles and plurals and occasional incorrect use of prepositions. Verb forms sometimes lack correct tense endings, and as a result occasionally you are unsure of the time frame that Dewi is referring to. You leave your encounter with Dewi wondering if it is possible for one so fluent in English to develop the accuracy that she needs in order to pursue her goals.

Dewi is not alone. Many English learners achieve impressive fluency without an equally high level of accuracy. Persistent errors like Dewi's in long-time language users have sometimes been labeled *fossilization,* or the cessation of language learning before a point of high proficiency is reached (Selinker, 1972). Fossilization may occur in immigrant populations because the pressure of work leaves no time for formal language study, or fossilized errors emerge when English learners speak mostly with their own language group even if speaking in English. Such speakers have certain errors in common and have often lacked adequate exposure to good language models.

In teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adults in the U.S. and abroad, I have worked with many students with fossilized errors.
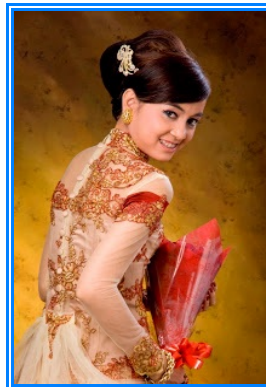
English learners like Dewi, who are advanced in their fluency and communication skills, have fossilized errors that may prevent them from accessing higher education or jobs for which they would otherwise be very qualified.

### Awareness as a Key to Correcting Fossilized Errors

What can help such students develop a higher level of English? I looked to learners who improved in accuracy during advanced English classes for answers to that question. Such students seem to have one important characteristic in common: *language awareness.* Carter (2003) has defined language awareness as "an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (p. 64).

In my experience, language learners who successfully attain higher levels of accuracy despite previously "fossilized" errors demonstrate language awareness on several different levels. First, they actively seek to see the errors in their language use. Building on that knowledge, they are receptive to a new understanding of the impact of their errors on their overall communication. Finally, they commit to continued noticing of this aspect of their language use, engaging in self-correction and gradually improving their overall accuracy.

In an effort to formalize these steps so that they could be used by other teachers to help learners tackle fossilized errors, I developed *stages of language awareness,* as seen in the model in Figure 1. The first three stages of awareness provide the "why" of error correction. These help the language learner develop a rationale for working to correct fossilized errors. These provide motivation for change. The second three stages of awareness provide the "how". English learners are given the knowledge, tools, and skills which they can use to begin self-correction and change.

Figure 1: Stages of Language Awareness

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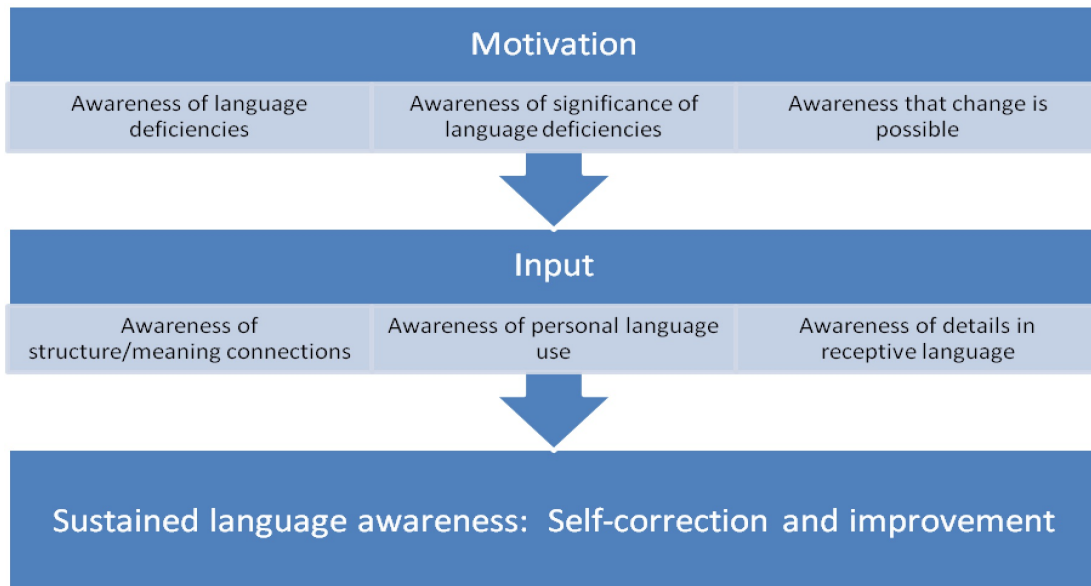
We will now discuss each stage of awareness. The three stages providing *motivation* for change will be addressed first, followed by the three stages which provide increased language *input* on which change is built. The discussion of each stage is two-fold. First, each stage is explained and illustrated. Then, "Dewi" provides commentary on each stage from the perspective of a learner. These learner perspectives, which have undergone minor editing for grammar and clarity, are intended to help us move beyond theoretical formulas to grasp the meaning and understanding that English learners may find in these processes.

Stages Providing Motivation

The first three stages build the learner's interest in and motivation to change. Teachers sometimes underestimate the importance of cultivating motivation before asking learners to engage in the difficult tasks involved in language acquisition. Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) point to motivation as an essential starting place for learner engagement in language learning, and it certainly must be the starting point for a goal as difficult to attain as the correction of fossilized errors.

Awareness of Language Deficiencies

Explanation: The catalyst for change occurs when errors are recognized. For students coming from systems in which their English teachers had either poor proficiency or poor teaching skills, or both, having

speech and writing corrected by a proficient English speaker can be very eye-opening. Such students often discover multiple language deficiencies that they did not really know they had. Through various types of interactive course work, students are able to discover discrepancies between their passive grammar knowledge and their active language use.

Is contact with a proficient speaker within a context appropriate for correction a requirement for this first stage of awareness to take place? For many students, it is. Without such intervention, students may know that their English is not perfect, but they may likely believe that the problem is that they do not know *enough* English. They do not understand that the much greater problem is their failure to *use* what they theoretically do know.

Learner Perspective: "In the past, I thought that my English would be good enough to teach English, communicate, and fully understand in-depth conversations because I graduated from the English Department in my country and taught English, but I was wrong. I did not really recognize my own errors in speaking and writing before this. Then, I came to the realization that I had poor proficiency in English. I was very frustrated and embarrassed with myself. At that time I started recognizing my own weaknesses, especially in my pronunciation. It sounds like I am blaming my language teachers when I say that I was never taught how to pronounce English words correctly during my language learning, but in reality I did not have enough support or opportunity to hear correct pronunciation or accurate word choices. In addition, I did not know how to correct myself when I did notice myself making mistakes."

Awareness of Significance
of Language Deficiencies

Explanation: Because language both "embodies" and "expresses" culture (Kramsch, 1998), it can be extremely difficult for those outside the culture to fully grasp language/meaning connections. For example, the Indonesian language does not have articles, verb tenses, or gendered pronouns. The sentence "Dia ambil buku"

translates literally as "He/she take book." In Indonesian, one would know from context whether the event had already happened or not, whether the subject was male or female, and whether the book was a specific one or not. When communicating cross-culturally, however, these contextual clues are not necessarily obvious to an outsider. I have experienced extended conversations with Indonesians in English during which I believed an event to be in the past, only to discover 15 minutes later that a future event was being discussed!

As I shared such stories with my advanced Indonesian students, they were aghast. Never before had they been told of the difficulty English speakers might have in interpreting statements lacking verb tense, articles, and other grammatical markers. It was a new concept to them that such errors were not simply "grammar mistakes" but did in fact impact communication. So, understanding the significance of seemingly small "grammar errors" can be a real eye-opener for many students. They may have never realized that such small omissions could have such significant consequences in communication.

Learner Perspective: "When I started learning English I needed to practice my English, so my youngest sister and I agreed to speak in English to each other everyday. It was great for developing our fluency; however, our accuracy was very weak as we did not have anybody correcting our errors, addressing our word choices, or helping us with tenses. It sounded like we spoke English, but it was kind of speaking English in an Indonesian way (English words were used, but the way we carried it out was like we spoke in Indonesian). I developed bad language habits without realizing I had them because I was never reminded or corrected. I agree that a language expresses culture, and this was what I did not really grasp. It was proven by my failures in understanding and communicating with native speakers. I knew and understood that I had problems with English. It was not only the pronunciation issues, but it was a complex problem."

Awareness that Change is Possible

Explanation: At this point, when students have begun to see the gulf in understanding created by persistent, common errors, they may feel a sense of hopelessness. It is crucial that at the same time that the communication gap is seen, a way forward to better English is also clearly evident. Students need hope, and it seems that this hope often comes in the form of interaction with former English learners who are *proficient* English users.

It is critical at this stage to introduce English learners to former English learners who have achieved a high level of language accuracy. Visitors to class, mentor relationships, and support groups can all be means of providing this kind of interaction. Even an online advanced ESL class can work. The online dialogue in one graduate course that I taught provided rich discussion and support which resulted in hope and change. Though I provided corrective feedback privately, many students chose to openly share and discuss their weaknesses and areas of growth. Perhaps contrary to popular understandings of "face-saving" cultural norms, I found my predominantly Asian teachers to be incredibly open regarding weaknesses, helpful and supportive in dialogue with classmates, and willing to provide encouraging yet honest feedback. These characteristics all contributed to a climate in which students could see their need for change–but at the same time see that change *was* possible.

Learner Perspective: "My past failure and bad language habits almost discouraged me from pursuing my goal as an English teacher. How could I teach a language which I was not good at? I was desperate for someone to guide me. I had a supervisor who coached me when I was working at a language center. It was a great experience to be able to have somebody who had English proficiency to help me. Unfortunately my coaching was brief, so I was on my own again. Even though it was a brief coaching time, I had learned a particular lesson I would never forget: pronounce English words properly. Since then, I have learned to say simple English words properly and to listen to my own speaking, especially with words ending with /d/, /s/

and /t/. I have seen myself change and develop a new awareness and over time have made more and more pronunciation improvements. After my coaching, I felt there was more hope for me to learn, change, and improve."

Stages Providing Input

After the first three stages, learners understand the need for change and believe that they *can* change. At this point they are ready for new knowledge, tips, and strategies which will help them begin to self-correct and change long-engrained speaking patterns.

Awareness of Structure/Meaning Connections

Explanation: Despite the fact that many English learners have been taught primarily through a grammatical approach, they often seem to lack the understanding that grammar is *meaning*. Many learners see English grammar as *rules* rather than as meaning. An example of this is students learning that "ed" is used to make past tense but not grasping the idea of "completed action" that is crucial to a full under-standing of the English meaning of "past." Another example in Indonesian speakers is the frequent use of "ever" to convey the idea that something hap-pened at an unspecified time in the past, such as in the statement "I ever go there." In English, present perfect tense is the mechanism for conveying this meaning–not a single word. When grammar is taught more as "meaning" and less as "rules", students more readily understand how grammar and words are used *together* to convey meaning.

As I share "grammar meanings" with students, my goal is to help them see the big picture that is English structure and meaning combined. Contrary to courses and texts in which discrete grammar items are digested individually and sequentially, grammar should be view-ed holistically, focusing on areas of logic and meaning which may have been previously unnoticed.

Learner Perspective: "A grammar approach was the only way I learned English. Rules and formulas were important to be learned and remembered. My teachers never taught me to make connections between the tenses and the meaning. I did not have a full under-standing of the relationship between English structures and meanings. This was one of the reasons I failed in conversing with native speakers, and I know I had taught my previous students inappropriate ways. I did not understand the connections between the structures and the meaning in a language when I was learning English. My new understanding and awareness came later."

Awareness of Personal Language Use

Explanation: In the final two stages of awareness, students zero in on real language in use. First, they need to begin to listen to and edit their own speaking and writing. Simply put, many students need to pay more attention to the language that they produce.

Many of the students with whom I have worked had erroneously believed that fluency and communication were much more important than accuracy. They were not in the habit of self-correcting speech, and many did not edit their writing very carefully–some not at all! Such students have been very surprised when I explain that I re-read and edit nearly everything I write–even emails to friends. While it is true that many people do not write quite so carefully, *good* writers *do* edit. Highlighting the need for accuracy in this way has proved helpful for the students with whom I have worked. If even native speakers need to edit their writing, how much more so for foreign or second language users.

By this point in the stages of awareness, English learners need to realize that they are not dependent upon "teachers" or more proficient English users to help them develop better accuracy. They have now become aware of some of their error tendencies and can learn to monitor their own language use. However, an English teacher can still help by guiding learners to identify tips and rules that can bolster their ability to self-correct. For example, I teach my students the grammar rule that "singular nouns always need determiners." Surprisingly few teachers or grammar texts teach this even though it is an easily applied self-editing rule through which a

great number of article omissions can be identified and corrected.

Learner Perspective: "I was worried that I would only blame and complain about my past language learning experience instead of realizing that I need to listen more and improve my own poor speaking habits. I know that I can't always have native speakers who will correct me, so I know I have to rely on myself to change and improve.

My professor reminded me to be aware of my own errors and bad habits, to learn to do self-correcting, and to pay more attention to what I say. It took me awhile to grasp her advice before I tried to do it. Over time of being consistent with self reminders, I have noticed that I have an alarm in me to pay more attention when I speak or write. I understand that I am still learning to develop awareness, so it will take time. I now slow down when I speak and hear myself. I self-correct when I am wrong in my English usage. I am more aware of my need to own the learning process so I decided to practice English for my personal usage, such as writing my personal journal, emailing people in English, speaking in English with native speakers, and listening to English stories, songs or movies. That has been helping me to be more careful of what I say or write."

Awareness of Details in Receptive Language

Explanation: Finally, most English learners need to increase their receptive language; they need to hear and read more English and need to know what to do with it. Exposure is not enough: *attention to details* is required.

Where listening is concerned, Hawkins (1999) emphasizes the "education of the ear" as a crucial component of language awareness. This awareness is beneficial both when dealing with *accurate* language sources and *inaccurate* sources. Language learners can learn from the mistakes of others just as they can learn from paying close attention to proficient speech.

Reading, as well, requires a greater level of awareness. Our tendency is to focus on fluency and comprehension in reading. Though these are certainly necessary goals, perhaps we have glossed over the attention to structure that can be fostered through careful and accurate reading. It is not sufficient to scan one's eyes over a page and to call it "reading", nor is it productive (in terms of the development of accuracy) to spend hours discovering the meanings of new vocabulary words in a difficult article. What is needed is *attention to details* in text that is *at the right level.*

Checklists and "noticing tasks" can be useful in both listening and reading. Some examples are keeping a checklist of the frequency of various verb tenses, underlining all the plural words in a passage, or listening specifically for words ending in /s/. The latter exercise for students whose first language is Indonesian is always an eye-opener. Students begin to notice these s-ending words and the fact that the word may not be understood if the final /s/ is not pronounced.

Learner Perspective: "I made a commitment to read English books. I have been developing a daily reading habit. When it comes to reading, if I don't understand what I read, I now force myself to reread it aloud and not just skip over what I do not really understand. Reading it out loud helps me to pay attention to each word and sound.

My first goal as a reader now is not only to get understanding but also to really see the sentences, words, and letters. Finally I don't want to be just a qualified language teacher, but I also want to become a proficient English user. I have learned how to develop and improve my English proficiency through awareness."

Conclusion

Many advanced English learners face the difficult challenge to become highly skilled English users despite fossilized errors, insufficient learning opportunities, and little contact with proficient English speakers who are able and willing to provide helpful feedback. A glimmer

of hope lies in the fact that a little awareness goes a long way. As students are given opportunities to see common errors, understand their impact on communication, develop a more integrated view of English structure and meaning, and implement techniques for increased self-monitoring and attention, they can make considerable gains in English proficiency.

Teachers of advanced adult ESL learners can begin by listing frequent, common errors made by their students. They can then create lessons to help students notice these errors and understand their possible negative impacts on communication. Teachers can then orchestrate relationally-driven encounters between highly successful English as a second language speakers and their students to develop the awareness that change is indeed possible. At this point, students are ready for in-depth learning about connections between language forms such as grammar, spelling and pronunciation, and the communication of meaning. Finally, teachers can lead students in exercises to develop sustained language awareness resulting in self-correction and improved accuracy.

Teachers have long lamented that fossilized errors seem nearly impossible to change. While we can certainly acknowledge that such change is not easy, students like Dewi show us that it *is* possible. Perhaps the students in your classroom just need a little guidance through the stages of awareness in order to develop more accurate speech and to achieve more success in pursuing their goals and dreams.

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