

# ELT AND CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

By

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper highlights the concept of consciousness-raising. It relates it to different aspects of ELT such as explicit teaching, language awareness, language acquisition and practice. How these terms are related to the concept of consciousness-raising within the English Language teaching. Its main aim is to help learners to notice for themselves how the language is used naturally is highlighted as well as that C-R is mainly seen as getting learners to notice the grammar features, by applying them in tasks. C-R can be considered as different degrees of explicit teaching of grammar, the first step of the language acquisition process and language awareness. The paper also shows two examples of using this and their implications into the classroom. These were conducted in a class of grade 7 aged between 12-13 years old, in an Omani school. The paper highlights how pupils feel about doing the activities which allow them to practice the language more. This stresses that pupils can work on more than one structure at a time. Therefore, it helps to save time and effort instead of presenting each item in a lesson. On other hand, it also attempts to raise the pupils' awareness of the target grammar which may lead to independent learning later on.*

*Keywords: Consciousness-Raising, Explicit Teaching, Language Awareness, Language Acquisition and Practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many researchers (van Lier, 2001; Johnson, 1996) and teachers argue that awareness of, attention to and noticing particular features of language aid in learning that language. Developing learners' awareness of target language features by drawing their attention to the language's patterns might help them to notice how the language works. In this article, the author highlights the term consciousness-raising (C-R) and discuss how it can be used in the ELT context. The author also define the term, suggest C-R activities for use with Grade 7 students and then evaluate those activities.

### What is Consciousness-Raising?

Some authors illustrate the term consciousness-raising by relating it to other areas of teaching, explicit teaching of grammar, language awareness, language acquisition and practice for example. It has been stated that C-R refers to gaining learners' attention regarding specific grammar structures (Ellis, 1997; Cook, 1996 and van Lier, 2001). Therefore, it is mainly an approach to show how the target language works. Learners would be expected to notice the features of the target language as a result of this awareness raising.

### • C-R and Explicit Teaching

Most authors illustrate the term C-R by relating it to the explicit teaching of grammatical patterns and structures. However, for some authors such as Ellis (1991, cited in Doughty and Williams, 1998) the level of explicitness is not very important, it is rather the result of noticing the target language which is significant in C-R. C-R may not be seen clearly in an implicit teaching of grammar such as in songs, rhymes and stories. In implicit teaching, the language is seen as a whole unit of meaning via discourse, in which it might not be easy to observe grammar patterns unless the learners themselves or the teacher guides them to notice. However, Sharwood-Smith (1981) argues that we need to take account of "different degrees of explicitness and the possibility of interaction between different types of competences" (p. 159).

### • C-R and Language Awareness

Others, such as van Lier (2001), see C-R as synonymous with language awareness. This might show that there are not many differences between the two terms except that language awareness might cover other aspects of language besides its structure. On the other hand, one of the key elements for language awareness is helping

learners to discover the language for themselves and this is also the aim of the C-R approach (Bolitho et al., 2003).

From another perspective, C-R should not be seen as synonymous with language awareness since language awareness is a product, while the other is a process. However, C-R can also be seen as one of the stages learners go through to build their language awareness as it gives learners the pace and time to think about the target features. However, more C-R activities might lead to achieving some kind of language awareness as the learners notice more grammatical features.

- ***C-R and Language Acquisition***

Helping learners to notice a specific feature of the target language in a context is seen as the first step towards language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990, as cited in van Lier, 2001). He continues by saying that C-R encourages and pushes learners to make hypotheses and generalizations about the language which they continue to use in present and future learning. This would encourage learners to undertake independent learning.

Learners who are exposed to authentic texts or sentences from outside the classroom are thereby encouraged to notice other similar grammatical features. However, pupils might plan and perform slowly and consciously in a way that develops into automatic behaviour. So, providing pupils with authentic texts is not necessary in C-R activities (Sharwood-Smith, 1981).

- ***C-R and Practice***

C-R is also illustrated by contrasting it with practice. Ellis (1992) and Larsen-Freeman (2001) state that C-R is unlike practice. C-R does not require students to produce the target structure being introduced. Learners are mainly expected in the last stage to formulate it only by rephrasing the rule into different words after noticing the target language feature. Sharwood-Smith (1981) argues that learners should not be asked to articulate a rule as it is not a necessary element of C-R. Therefore, C-R aims at raising awareness of grammatical structures rather than productive mastery (Ellis, 1992).

- ***C-R Aims***

An alternative means to understand the term C-R is by

looking at its aims. Its main aim is to help learners to notice for themselves how the language is used naturally (Bolitho et al., 2003). In C-R activities, pupils note the gaps between what they already know about notions and concepts such as colours, size and feelings to notice the target feature describing words. They may try to fill the gap by relating the new feature to previous experiences and knowledge.

According to Rutherford (1987) learners will also notice the resources and various genres, such as stories, available within the target language which they can harness to create meaning. He believes this is a real goal of language learning, as learners need to know about the learning resources which would encourage independent learning. Exposing learners to different kinds of sentences will give them the chance to observe different kinds of texts. This will help them to be familiar with these texts and build a better understanding of the language features used in each, if the sentences are shown in the context of the whole texts.

Other aims include helping learners to develop cognitive skills such as connecting, generalizing and hypothesizing. These skills are very important to every language learner. They develop learners' thinking towards a better understanding of the language. Therefore, C-R creates positive attitudes towards the language and to learning the language beyond the classroom. This is because learners may use these strategies on their own as soon as they acquire them. This will also lead them to undertake independent learning, as they are free to take risks with the language.

- ***C-R Characteristics***

Ellis (1992) states clearly a number of characteristics of C-R. A specific grammatical feature is isolated in the sense of being identified and held up to be examined. The grammatical feature, such as adjectives in the attached activities, is used without any adaptations such as simplification. Using authentic examples makes the tasks more realistic and provides demands which might be faced outside the classroom. However, it might be possible to use made-up texts for some reasons which the author shows below in depth. In C-R, data or an explicit rule is given to learners to help them notice the grammatical feature. Learners are expected to make ample intellectual effort to

understand the target feature. Learners in such activities are not spoon fed as in some other activities.

Ellis (1992) argues that if the learners were unable to understand the grammatical feature, teachers would give clarification in the form of further data and explanation. However, this might lead to practice tasks where teachers rush to finish the procedure without giving the learners enough time and space to think and notice the target language feature. The author expects teachers to start again with some more examples before pushing their learners to memorise what they say in the clarification stage where learners become passive receivers.

To sum up, C-R is mainly seen as getting learners to notice the grammar features, by applying them in tasks. C-R can be considered as different degrees of explicit teaching of grammar, the first step of the language acquisition process and language awareness, as discussed above. The next section, describes and analyses the C-R activities which the author has developed.

#### **Application of the Idea**

The author developed two C-R activities (Appendix 1 and 2) based on his understanding of the research. The two activities are presented and there is a discussion of how my Grade 7 pupils dealt with them. The activities were tried on a whole class, 32 pupils. The class was in a school in Muscat, Oman.

- **Activity 1**

The activity contains two different tasks. These tasks focus on the uses of the target grammatical feature 'adjectives'.

In the first task, pupils read some sentences and underline the words which help to describe how a person feels. This is a direct way to draw pupils' attention to one of the uses of adjectives. The activity initially isolates only one use which makes it easy for pupils to follow and start the process of noticing. As it is the first task, pupils start with adjectives which are common for them.

In the second task, pupils are asked to read some words and sort them into the categories of size, pattern, feelings, colour and number. Pupils are encouraged in this task to think and use their schemata as they have already studied these words separately.

In these tasks, pupils are encouraged to notice the uses of adjectives by underlining and sorting them into groups. Substantial input is given to pupils especially in the second task by practising categorising adjectives into common groups.

- **Activity 2 (Appendix 2)**

This activity contains two tasks. In the first task, pupils are asked to read an email and underline specific words. They are encouraged to notice the uses of adjectives through underlining the words which describe things. This helps to reinforce their knowledge of the use of adjectives. Directing learners' attention to target language features by flagging (highlighting, underlining or colouring) them was mentioned by Sharwood-Smith (1981, as cited in Doughty & Williams, 1998).

In the second task, pupils were asked to read through their books to look for words which describe things. Pupils worked individually and then in groups. The author supported weaker pupils and groups by guiding them to texts in the book which contain some adjectives. Pupils were encouraged to search and read in different kinds of genres such as stories, songs and emails.

This activity encourages pupils to apply what they have noticed from the previous activity. Pupils in both tasks are not exposed to grammatical terms. This is one of the C-R characteristics which will be discussed in depth in the next section.

#### **Results of the Application**

In this section, the author presents the advantages and limitations of the C-R activities which he has developed and tried with Grade 7 pupils.

- **Advantages of the C-R Activities**

The text and the sentences used are mainly made up sentences. Sharwood-Smith (1981) suggests that authentic texts are not a necessary element of C-R activities. The aim of C-R is to draw pupils' attention to the use of adjectives.

The pupils faced some challenges with some of the tasks, especially the second task in Activity 2, as they had to look for specific words in different texts. The focus in that task was also on lexis in addition to the grammatical features. The possibility of presenting a number of lexico-grammatical

items in a single lesson or in a single task helps pupils face and learn about these grammar items. Learning more than one language feature might motivate pupils, as they could come across a feature which they already know or like.

In C-R activities, pupils are not expected to produce the target forms immediately. However, they are given the chance to try things out, and get more training on the form and the use too. This might feed into their production later. These activities helped the pupils to think and decide on the use of different language features. They were given enough time to do things on their own.

The author used rubrics followed by detailed instructions (see appendices) which showed pupils what they were expected to do in each task. Rubric one in Activity 2: "Read and underline" (Appendix 1) is very clear. It indicates that pupils should read first, think and then underline the adjectives in the e-mail message. Rubrics and the instructions can lead pupils to independent learning, as it is easy for them to understand what they are expected to do in each task.

• **Limitations of the C-R Activities**

Unfortunately, the C-R activities did not provide a summary of what the focus was. The pupils might have been unaware of their learning. This might also have affected pupils' motivation and their ability to master the grammar of the language. This might be addressed by giving a summary of what pupils have covered in the two activities. This would give pupils some sense of achievement. Another method which the author has tried with his pupils is giving them a final task which summarises the activities

**Read and Complete**

Read the sentences and complete them using the words in the box.

- 1. .... are naming words.
- 2. .... are acting words.
- 3. .... are describing words.

Nouns
Verbs
Adjectives

Pupils were happy to do the activity as it summarises the features into one simple task and encourages them to think about the different language features they have faced. It also gives them a sense of achievement.

While they were doing the tasks, the author found that his

pupils, especially as they are still young, felt overloaded. After the activities finished, the author felt that stopping at some points and doing some checking or a quick practice helped them feel better. Another way to solve this is by providing a game or a song which contains the target language features. This should encourage the pupils to practice the features over and over again.

**Conclusion**

From the analysis of the two activities, one can conclude that C-R activities provide pupils with a variety of input which allows them to practice more than one language feature at a time. They save time and effort instead of presenting each item in a lesson. It also attempts to raise the pupils' awareness of the target grammar which may lead to independent learning later on. Although C-R is a very good example of language teaching methodology, it requires some extra tasks at the end to sum up things to create a sense of achievement, especially with young learners.

**Appendix 1**

Activity one

1. Read and underline

*Look at these sentences. Which ones tell us how a person feels? Underline the words in the sentences that help us decide how a person feels.*

- a. I feel really happy today
- b. He's very tall.
- c. She's got brown hair.
- d. I feel very tired.
- e. He is angry with me.
- f. It's a checked scarf.
- G. I am eleven years old.
- h. She's very sad.

2. Think and sort

*Look at these words. Sort them into the groups below and write them in the correct spaces.*

**Appendix 2**

Activity two

1. Read and underline

*Read the email and underline words which describe things.*

To: Nasser@yahoo.com

From: Rashid@hotmail.com

Hi Nasser

I arrived back in Dubai today. I left Oman two days ago. I went to Salalah to visit my colleague Said, the fat boy. I stayed there for three weeks and did many interesting things.

On my first day, we went on a big ship to see the dolphins. I took many wonderful photographs. I saw some spotted blue dolphins. The next day we visited an old fort in Salalah town and then went shopping in the traditional souq. It was amazing!

The most exciting part of my holiday was the second week. Said took me to the Green Mountains where there was lots of rain. It was dark and he drove carefully. I was very scared. Suddenly, Said saw something moving in the mountains a few meters away from the car. There was just enough light to see... an oryx! A white striped oryx. It was standing right in front of the car. Said stopped the car very slowly. I was very excited and wanted to take a photograph of the oryx. I quietly picked up my camera and took three photographs. Click! Flash! three times. The oryx turned around and quickly ran away.

See you soon in Dubai.

Rashid

## 2. Find and write

Look through your Coursebook and find words that describe things and write them in your exercise book. Share them with your group.

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thin	pink	bored	striped	excited
Yellow	fat	short	three	scared
spotted	happy	tall	brown	tired
angry	checked	eleven	sad	
<u>Size</u>	<u>Feelings</u>	<u>Colours</u>		
<u>Pattern</u>	<u>Number</u>			

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