

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LANGUAGE NEEDS AS FUTURE ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Knowledge about language is first and foremost an enabling knowledge that provides the teacher with tools to carry out such basic tasks as interpreting a syllabus document and translating it into a scheme of work, explaining code errors to learners, providing accessible information about the language to learners, making decisions on behalf of learners regarding the content of instruction and ensuring that there is a linguistic focus — either on language skills or language items or both — in any particular lesson.

TOM WRIGHT

Language awareness in Teacher Education Programmes for Non-native Speakers

These words by Tom Wright (1992) illustrate clearly the purpose and importance of language study in a curriculum for prospective foreign language teachers. In his definition and development of the construct of Language Awareness (LA), he adopts the view of «the development process for the trainee as moving from user to analyst to teacher of language» (Edge [1988], his quotation). According to him, «the first priority in initial training [...] is to begin the transition from user to analyst — to begin the often painful process of standing outside language, dissecting it, reflecting upon it, hypothesising about its nature from existing knowledge; in short, challenging assumptions and views». All this newly acquired expertise may, however, create in the student teachers «the possible desire to show learners that (they) have this knowledge». It should then be the trainer's responsibility to ensure that this doesn't happen.

In a study conducted to explore teachers' views of language knowledge, Mitchell and Hooper (1992) found out that «the MLs (Modern Languages) teachers (inquired) generally believed that a clear positive relationship existed between explicit knowledge about language and the development of practical language proficiency» and that for them «explicit knowledge about language is required to move beyond phrasebook learning to the creative use of the target language», a position in contradiction with recent research in second language acquisition theory. This study also showed that «the MLs teachers tended consistently to close down their interpretation of KAL [knowledge about language] to embrace only (morpho)syntactic knowledge. When comparing English teachers' with MLs teachers' views of language, Mitchell and Hooper found out that (a) «both groups shared a strong tendency to equate KAL with morpho-syntactic knowledge of a traditional kind»; (b) «generally speaking, the English teachers were sceptical of its value to many pupils» while «the MLs group [...] retained a surprisingly strong consensus that KAL in this narrow sense did contribute vitally to language learning, at least for some pupils»; and (c) «the English teachers' view of language had

other fairly well-developed, non-traditional aspects, notably their concern with, and ability to analyse, language variation», a «socio-linguistic dimension (that) was largely absent from the MLs discussion, rather surprisingly, given the promotion of the concept of 'communicative competence' in relevant theoretical literature over the last decade at least».

When discussing the place of linguistics in language education in 1982, Michael Halliday stated that «at the heart of language are its semantic, lexicogrammatical and phonological systems; or what we call in everyday parlance the meanings, the wordings and the sounds». He considered that «this is where grammar comes in. Language teachers [...] ought to know something about grammar» and after arguing about the advantage of functional grammar over formal grammar he added: «This is not, of course, so that they can teach grammar in the classroom. [...] The purpose is so that they, as teachers, will understand about language and how it works». And he reiterates this assertion when he says that «the place of linguistics in teacher education is not simply, in my view, its contribution to the teacher's professional expertise — that is one aspect of it. In this respect it resembles psychology and sociology; it is not something to teach, but something to enhance a teacher's understanding of the processes of learning and the content of what is being learned».

All these authors, among many others, convey to us this important message: competent language teachers are those who are competent language users and competent language analysts. It doesn't really matter how this analytic expertise is acquired, whether in language sessions by means of language awareness or consciousness-raising activities, or in a linguistics course. What really matters is that they understand what language is and how it works. They obviously also need to understand how it is learned. Anyway, planning language contents for a lesson requires all these competencies.

Some of the assumptions of the new English syllabus for preparatory schools accord with the bearings cited above. The considerations about language and language learning and the definition of language objectives, too restricted to morpho-syntax, point to language awareness or consciousness-raising activities. This entails on the part of the teachers an awareness of the language functioning, an ability to use metalanguage, and familiarity with awareness raising activities, although the latter, as part of methodological expertise, is not under analysis. The considerations about the contexts of learning and the nature of communicative competence, together with the definition of objectives for skill development suggest activities leading to awareness of the process of communication itself. This implies on the part of the teacher the mastery of metacommunication knowledge and language.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

It is this type of *knowledge of* and *knowledge about* that student teachers need to have when confronted with the task of lesson planning and language teaching. Expectedly, prospective teachers would at least show their concern about what they have to teach at the level they are being prepared for. With this study I aimed at exploring the language areas my 3rd and 4th year students thought they were supposed to teach, as well as those they should master. Further, I hypothesised that if they thought they should teach a language area or item, they would perceive it as an important area or item to be mastered.

2. THE SUBJECTS

The **Year 3** group, so called because it included my 3rd year students, had language lessons all through the three years. They also learned about language learning, the nature of communica-

tion, and communicative competence and its subcomponents as defined by Michael Canale (1983). They didn't have access to the language syllabus and would thus be likely to consider as content to be taught what they themselves had been taught at that level, as most of them are young enough to be able to recall at least some of the things they had learned. They could also use for that matter the knowledge acquired in the study of communicative competence.

The Year 4 group, which included my 4th year students, had the same preparation as Year 3, plus explicit language study lessons, methodology and language teaching practice in preparatory schools. In their teaching practice in the schools they had to follow the coursebooks that were supposed to be based on the «old» syllabus (but weren't indeed) and in my classes they were acquainted with the new language syllabus. They should thus be able to easily identify the contents they would have to teach.

3. DATA-GATHERING AND ANALYTIC PROCEDURES

I decided to use a questionnaire to raise a number of main topics that would be explored further on when interviewing the students. I searched but could not find in the literature examples of questionnaires which might be adapted to the purposes of this study. Lack of help from the literature and colleagues along with lack of time as the end of a school year approached with much work and commotion resulted in a not very satisfying questionnaire. Some inadequacies in its design have to be taken into account in data analysis, discussion and conclusions. Also, interviews with the students were unfortunately not possible. They could have possibly helped to clarify some of the results obtained.

The questionnaire was divided in three parts. The first part tackled the students' motivations to teach English. The second part elicited the students' self-assessment of their knowledge of and knowledge about language in general and in specific areas. The third and main part of the questionnaire, and the only one I will analyse in this paper, probed into their needs awareness as future teachers in terms of the specific areas included in the second part. This part proved to be the most difficult one for the students to answer and for me to analyse. Language areas were organised according to six subheadings: *pronunciation*, *semantic relations*, *word formation*, *grammar*, *discourse* and *conversational interaction*. After the students had answered the questionnaire, I realised that the term «grammar» had been left where the corrections I had

A	1	I know this and I'm able to use/do it.
	2	I know this but I'm not able to use/do it.
	3	I don't know this.

B	a	I must teach this.
	b	I don't have to teach this.
	c	I don't know wheter I have to teach this.

C	i	I must know and be able to use/do this.
	ii	I must know but need not use/do this.
	iii	I don't need to know this.

- 12 Conversational interaction
 12.1 conversation rules.
 12.2 turn-taking signals and fillers.
 12.3 registers and styles.

A	B	C

- 18 Conversational interaction
 18.1 Say only what you believe is true.
 18.2 *I mean, well* are words you can use in speech to fill silence while thinking.
 18.3 'Language, young man. I'm your mother.'

A	B	C

made had required «syntax». No student, however, noticed the error. But, as the authors quoted before stated, grammar has too often been equated with syntax. For this reason I will maintain this subheading.

The following is an example of the code students had to use to express their attitudes towards those language areas.

The use of this code yielded a profuse amount of information which would be very difficult to handle statistically without the use of computer analysis. Each particular item could have one out of 27 possible answers. My curiosity was not, however, quantitative but rather qualitative in nature. Together with the students' perceived needs I was also interested in their attitudes towards what they knew or didn't know.

For these reasons, I chose the results and the comparisons that I envisaged as more enlightening, more contradictory, or even worrying. And these I treated only in percentage terms. No attempt was made to present conclusive results. Rather, I viewed this study as just the threshold of my understanding of students' attitudes towards the English language, an understanding that surely will need much improvement.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All answers corresponding to each language area were summed up and converted into percentages. These percentages were compared within and across the two groups. The Year 3 and Year 4 results which are illustrated below refer to the two composite answer types that proved to be the most productive ones.

1. knows and uses, must teach, must know and use
2. doesn't know, doesn't have to teach, doesn't need to know/use

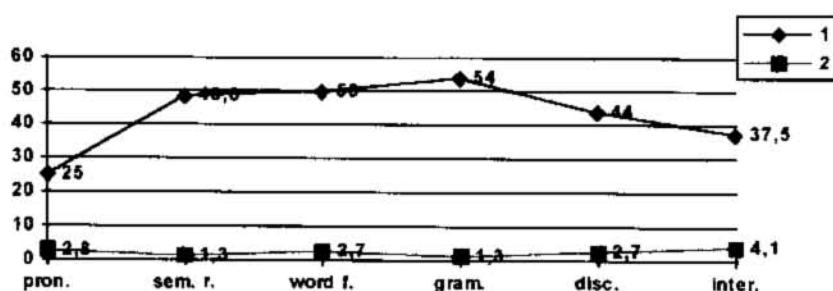


FIGURE 1 — Illustration of Year 3 frequency results for the two answer types analysed.

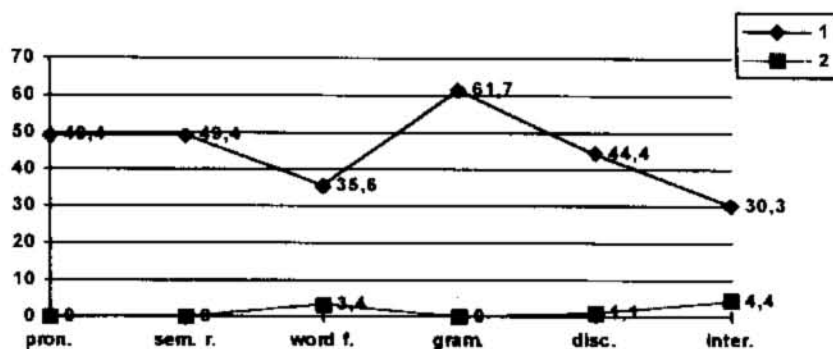


FIGURE 2 — Illustration of Year 4 frequency results for the two answer types analysed.

Both groups showed strong positive attitudes (type-1 answer) towards their knowledge and needs in all language areas. Year 3 type-1 answers are more levelled than those of the Year 4 group, with *pronunciation* and *conversational interaction* as the areas which they are not so positive about. But this type of answer is less frequent than in the Year 4 sample, except for *word formation* and *conversational interaction*. Year 4 places more importance on *grammar* as compared with the lowest importance attributed to *conversational interaction*. This is an interesting finding, since their attention had often been called in varied ways to the importance of interaction in the development of communicative competence.

Type-2 answers seem to express the following attitude: «I don't know this, I don't know if I need it, and I don't care to know». Although the use of the code I had chosen opened up a whole range of possible answers, 27 as I said before, this particular one struck me as worrying or even intellectually dangerous when we think of future language teachers. Having one's mind closed to knowledge, whether needed or not for practical reasons, may be in the case of teachers a serious indicator that they will not arouse their students' curiosity about language, also not help them to yearn for knowledge about the world. Consequently, they will not help them to become responsible, critical and participating citizens. Though this type of answer shows a low frequency, the fact that it does appear gives us teachers something to think and be concerned about.

Year 3 type-2 answers contemplate items in all language areas studied while year 4 students consider as dispensable knowledge items related to *word formation*, *discourse* and mainly *conversational interaction*, an attitude that once again seems a bit odd for Year 4 students.

These results are more clearly seen when comparing the answers to column C:

- i must know and use
- ii must know but needn't use
- iii doesn't need to know

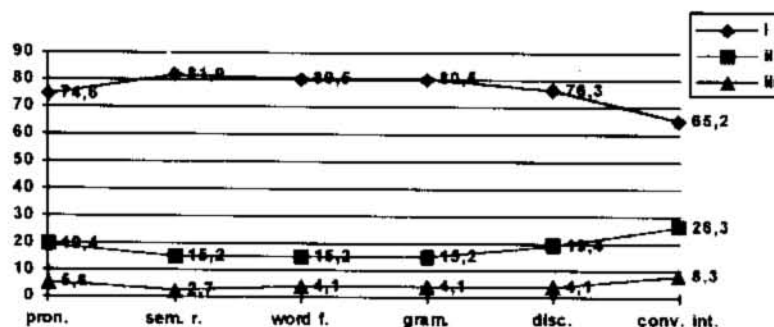


FIGURE 3 — Illustration of Year 3 column C frequency results in all language areas.

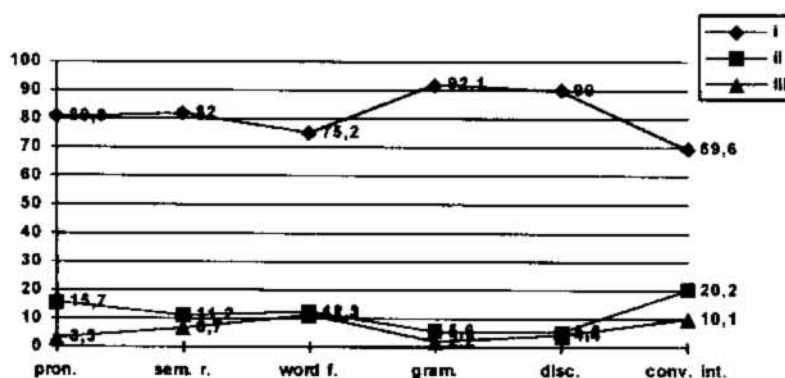


FIGURE 4 — Illustration of Year 4 column C frequency results in all language areas.

«Must know but needn't use» answers might mean that, for these students, there is knowledge about language that is worth having just for its own sake. That would lead to the following example: we should know about assimilation and elision in connected speech but we wouldn't need to apply it in speech. This is indeed a very peculiar attitude towards language. It is also revealing of the students' lack of understanding of the role of knowledge about language and its relationship with language proficiency and language teaching.

The results which are more closely related to the main aim of the subject, i.e. to determine whether students were aware of what language aspects they would have to teach, derive from column B of the code used.

- a — must teach
- b — doesn't have to teach
- c — doesn't know whether s/he has to teach

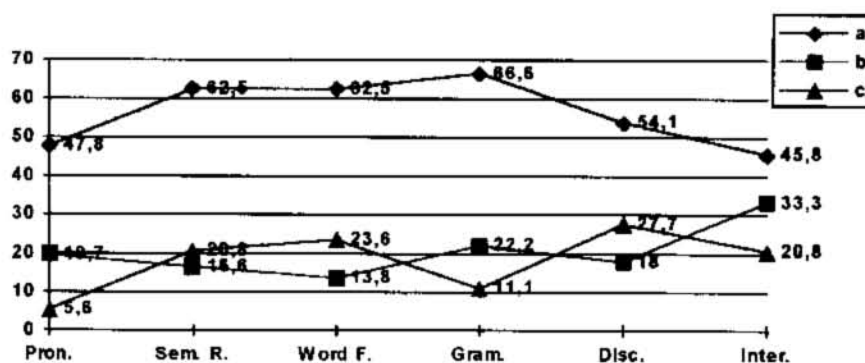


FIGURE 5 — Illustration of Year 3 column B frequency results in all language areas.

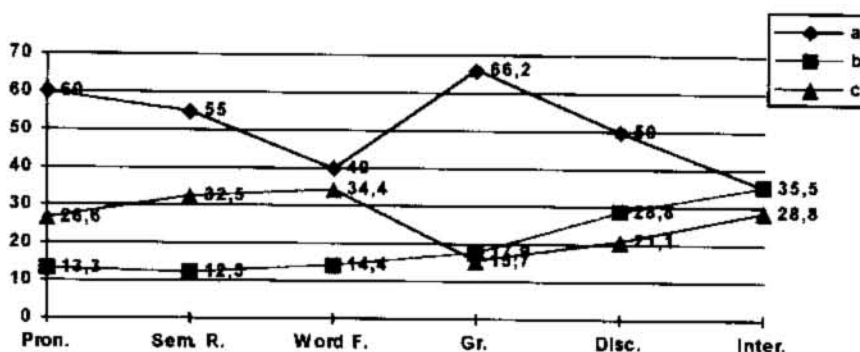


FIGURE 6 — Illustration of Year 4 column B frequency results in all language areas.

It is interesting to notice that the only language area in which Year 4 «must teach» answers outnumbered those of Year 3 is *pronunciation*. It might be due to the experience they had while teaching. But contradictorily, Year 4 produced more than 25% per cent of «doesn't know» answers to this language area. Both groups seem to be pretty sure that they will have to teach *grammar* although they also reveal a good frequency of «doesn't have to» answers. Surprisingly, Year 3 students believe they have to teach *word formation* much more than their Year 4 counterparts do, the same happening to *semantic relations* but with a narrower gap. Both groups consider *conversational interaction* to be the language area they will least have to teach.

«Doesn't have to» answers are about as common to Year 3 as to Year 4 with the exception of *discourse*. However, the most striking findings are those of «doesn't know» answers. Year 4

students seem to be less aware than Year 3 of what they will have to teach, even after teaching practice and acquaintance with the syllabus as they produced this type of answer more frequently. These comparisons are clearly illustrated in the following graphs.

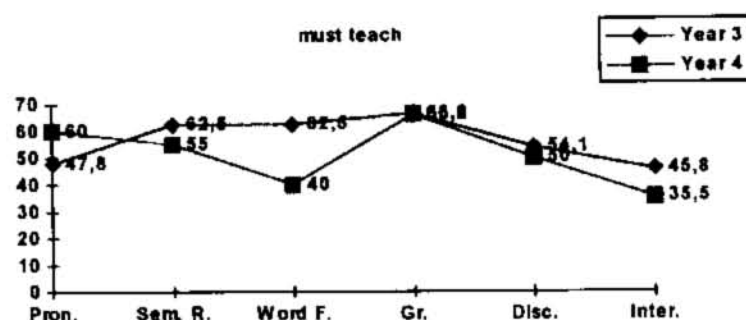


FIGURE 7 — Illustration of Year 3/Year 4 «must teach» answers

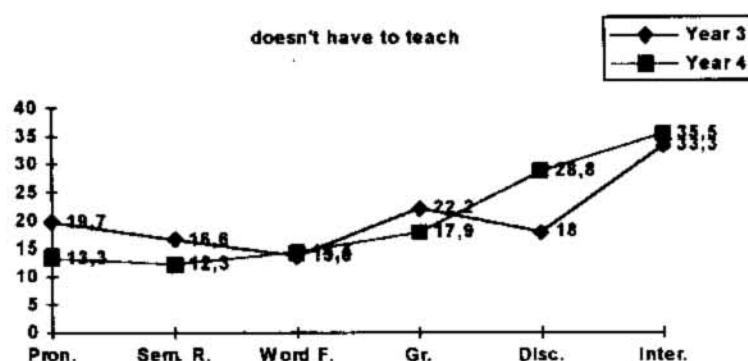


FIGURE 8 — Illustration of Year 3/Year 4 «doesn't have to teach» answers

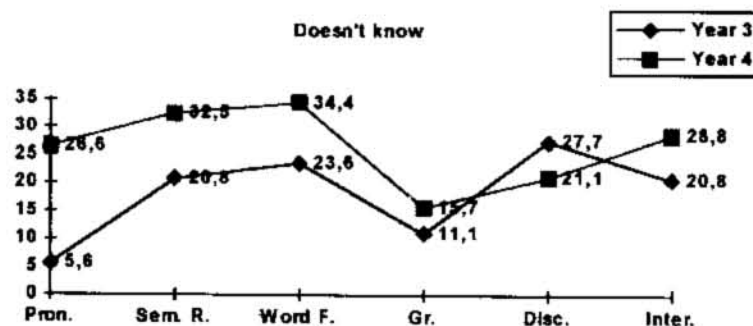


FIGURE 9 — Illustration of Year 3/Year 4 «doesn't know» answers

It seems that much needs to be done with students in language study before communicative language teaching enters into their minds and practice.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The data obtained in this study, if more deeply analysed, would raise a lot more interesting topics for discussion.

Anyway, I believe that I can generally state that my subjects proved: (a) that their attitudes towards language and language knowledge are often inconsistent; (b) that they are weakly aware of what they have to teach, even after having had the experience; (c) that they are, however, pretty sure they have to teach grammar but they doubt whether they have to teach conversational interaction; (d) that they are frequently unsure about what they need to know.

To conclude, I would say that what they greatly need is a sound language awareness training much before than and in close connection with their own still incipient teaching practice.

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