

# Chapter 8

## Critical Praxis and Teacher Language Awareness: What Should Teachers Know About Students' L1?

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### ABSTRACT

*Within the field of TESOL, opinions often differ about the role of learners' first language (L1) in second language learning. When teachers are aware of their students' L1, this awareness can increase their understanding of second language acquisition processes and issues. It can also provide teachers with insights into learners' backgrounds and cultures that may influence their approach to studying English and attitudes towards multilingualism. Specifically, the chapter proposes that the notion of teacher language awareness (TLA) should be expanded to include awareness of students' language backgrounds. TLA is regarded as an important component of the knowledge base of a language teacher. Two questionnaires are provided to assist teachers with the elicitation of information about students' L1: (1) a language-focused set of questions to allow comparison between a learner's L1 and English and (2) a sociolinguistic-oriented questionnaire that explores issues related to status and use.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most depressing facts about language learning is that while most of us manage to acquire our mother tongue successfully by the age of six or seven, the majority of second language learners experience frustration and often failure in their efforts to master a new language. Around the world, typical ESL classrooms are filled with students from different language and cultural backgrounds. Although all these individuals may count as instances of successful L1 acquisition, the first languages that they acquired may have little in common with one another in terms of grammar, syntax, phonology, discourse and writing

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system. While some students grow up speaking a world language, others acquire a first language that is not widely used and whose official status may be uncertain within their own country. Yet, whatever a learner's first language may be, we can assume it has had a strong influence upon the individual's perception and understanding of the world, including their approach to learning a second language.

This chapter proposes that raising students' awareness of their own and their classmates' native languages can allow students to function as language informants and provide their class with insights into the wider second language learning experience. Student-centered classrooms can create a valuable sense of inclusion for all members, especially those who are studying English to realize ambitions involving new cultural contexts which can challenge individuals' notions of identity and self-esteem. It is proposed that teachers should be encouraged to pay attention to their students' L1 profiles, with a view to increasing learners' engagement with second language acquisition (SLA) and providing them with resources to articulate their views about their experience of learning of English in relation to their individual language background. For the L2 teacher, regarding students' individual language backgrounds as a learning resource may require some adjustment to the regular teaching repertoire and our traditional conception of the teacher's knowledge base. The chapter explores how language teaching and learning might be strengthened by extending our notion of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) to reflect critical praxis through enhanced awareness of students' L1 profiles. The chapter is mainly intended for teachers of English as a second language who teach on pre-university and in-session courses at English-medium institutions.

## **CONCEPT**

### **Why Does L1 Matter?**

Much has been written in our field about the connection between language and thought. Nowadays, most scholars subscribe to a weak form of the Whorfian hypothesis, which states that language influences (rather than controls) thought. For example, Hunt & Agnoli (1991) point out that recent models of cognition indicate ways in which thought can be influenced by cultural variations in the lexical, syntactical, semantic and pragmatic aspects of language and offer the following conclusion: "In many ways the language people speak is a guide to the language in which they think." (p.377). For example, research by Boroditsky (1991) provides interesting insights into the way speakers of English and Mandarin perceive time, with English speakers thinking of time horizontally and Mandarin speakers vertically. It is concluded that L1 can play an important role in shaping habitual thought. The features of a learner's L1 are likely to influence their acquisition of a second language. In classrooms where all of the students speak the same L1 and their L2 teacher is also a speaker of the L1, the teacher is generally aware of L1 influences upon students' L2. These may affect learners' control of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation, register and pragmatics. However, in multilingual classrooms, teachers seldom have a sufficient knowledge of their students' languages to allow them to identify all their influences upon L2 acquisition. So, how much should an ESL teacher know about other languages? It is obviously not practical or reasonable to expect teachers to have studied many other languages. However, it is proposed that our notion of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) should be expanded to include familiarity with the main respects in which languages can differ from one another, both structurally and functionally. It

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