

Teachers' language awareness

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At the start of this scholastic year, a group of 230 teachers working within the primary and secondary sectors benefited from an in-service course aimed at enhancing their language awareness. All Year 3 and Forms 3-5 English teachers working in State schools in Malta and Gozo participated in the course. It was also attended by a number of teachers working in Church schools.

In his seminal book on the subject, Scott Thornbury defines language awareness as "the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively". The link that Thornbury makes between language awareness and effective teaching is crucial and, in fact, a sound understanding of the English language, how it works and how students learn it and use it, enable teachers to exploit their pedagogical knowledge and skills more competently.

Showing how much emphasis is placed on teacher language awareness in the EFL industry, the EFL monitoring board was

asked to help develop a course that would target this significant area in teachers' knowledge. A pre-course questionnaire confirmed that about a third of these 230 teachers had received little or no training in language awareness over the course of their career, the stress usually being placed on methodology.

The course was geared towards consolidating teachers' understanding of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. In the case of the primary school teachers, there was also a focus on content and language integrated learning (CLIL), an approach that enables teachers to exploit their mathematics, science and art lessons for the purpose of teaching English.

The fact that the course was designed by 12 teacher trainers from the private English language teaching industry specifically for the needs of mainstream teachers is one of its most innovative aspects.

The course was coordinated by the primary and secondary English education officers at the English Language Resource Centre. This crosspollination between the private language teaching industry and the mainstream educational sector posed a number of advantages and challenges, as confirmed in interviews with all the education officers and teacher trainers.

The main advantage was that the teachers on the course could learn from a group of trainers who, due to the demands of their industry, had become expert at the task of developing teacher language awareness.

Nonetheless, all the trainers indicated that planning and delivering a course tailored for teachers in the local context was a learning experience for them as well.

It was anticipated that one of the challenges to the success of this course would be the trainers' possible lack of knowledge of the context in which mainstream teachers operate in Malta. Thus, irrespective of the fact that most of the trainers had plenty of experience in training mainstream teachers from other countries, it was still deemed necessary to provide them with as much information as possible about the local primary and secondary classroom context and the respective needs of the teachers.

In the months leading up to the course, each trainer researched the mainstream

classroom context to ensure that the course would fully address those needs. The trainers' attitude was also fundamental in this regard and, in fact, they did not adopt the stance of all-knowing experts addressing a group of novices.

They were aware that the teachers were university graduates, most often with long years of classroom experience. Their intention was to help the teachers enhance their language awareness and not to provide them with something they lacked altogether. For this reason they engaged them in hands-on activities that, for the most part, used loop input.

Tessa Woodward describes this as a "type of experiential teacher training process that involves an alignment of the process and content of learning". Hence, for example, while engaged in a pronunciation activity the teachers were also actively learning about how to teach a particular aspect of pronunciation.

The feedback collected at the end of the course was testament to its success. The majority of teachers pointed out that the course was useful for their needs as teachers of English and would facilitate their task of teaching the language even more effectively.

The success of this course evinces the need for language awareness to become a priority of teacher training programmes at both pre- and in-service levels. This is crucial given that teachers' authority in the language needs to be sustained on an ongoing basis for the benefit of all their students.

Teachers' authority in the language needs to be sustained for the benefit of students