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Unravelling upper-secondary school teachers’ beliefs about language awareness: from conflicts to challenges in the EFL context

Ellen W. R. van den Broek a, Helma W. Oolbekkink-Marchand a,b, Sharon Unsworth c, Ans M. C. van Kemenade c and Paulien C. Meijer a

aRadboud Teachers Academy, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands; bHAN University of Applied Sciences, Nijmegen, the Netherlands; cCentre for Language Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT
This study presents an in-depth inquiry into teachers’ beliefs about a language awareness approach to secondary school foreign language education. The study aims to deepen our insight into (the differences in) teachers’ beliefs about language awareness and facilitate the discussion about including language awareness in foreign language curricula. Ten EFL teachers were interviewed about their beliefs about language awareness. Analysis of the interviews revealed that teachers do not have a shared understanding of the concept of language awareness as related to the five domains of language awareness set out. Furthermore, several beliefs could be characterised as conflicting. These conflicts were found in the context of student learning, teacher collaboration, the curriculum, and the link with other languages. The results suggest a number of challenges that need to be addressed when including language awareness in foreign language education. These challenges could serve as a point of departure for a dialogue with and between teachers. Furthermore, they could support teachers to find out how language awareness fits best within the existing EFL curricula.

Introduction
The current demand for more challenging, creative, and future-oriented language education calls for a more holistic view on language teaching and learning. A holistic view on language education should take into account linguistic, sociocultural and personal aspects (Bell, 2003) and pay attention to ‘real-life language using situations where listening, speaking, reading and writing interact and intertwine’ (Harjanne & Tella, 2008, p. 59).

Language awareness (LA), defined as ‘explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use’ (Association for Language Awareness, n.d.), fits within this holistic view on language teaching.
and learning. LA aims to complement language learning by learning about language (Hawkins, 1984), it promotes linguistic reflection (Denham & Lobeck, 2014) and it stimulates the use of higher-order and creative thinking skills (Waters, 2006).

In learners, according to Bolitho et al. (2003), LA develops ‘through paying motivated attention to language in use, and […] enables language learners to gradually gain insight into how languages work’ (p. 251). In teachers, LA is ‘the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively’ (Thornbury, 1997, p. x). It includes language proficiency as well as knowledge about language. LA, then, forms the bridge between language proficiency and knowledge about language. The foreign language teacher needs to be able to reflect on both aspects and to mediate subject matter knowledge through the foreign language (Andrews, 2007). In other words, teachers need to be able to shift from (academic) knowledge about language to the everyday classroom discourse, which can still be considered a challenge (Wright, 2002).

Research into LA has addressed a wide range of topics, ranging from language skills to collaborative learning to teacher strategies (Svalberg, 2015). This variety of topics mirrors the multi-faceted and versatile nature of LA and is also reflected in its definition. While this versatility may open up many possibilities for including LA in foreign language education, concrete ideas about what to do in teaching practices are not always available.

In their book *Language Awareness in the Classroom*, James and Garrett (2013) distinguish five domains of LA: (1) the cognitive domain, focusing on language as a system, (2) the performance domain, focusing on language command, (3) the affective domain, focusing on personal relevance, (4) the social domain, focusing on social harmonisation and (5) the power domain, focusing on the influence of language. While these domains outline the scope of LA, the extent to which teachers share similar beliefs when thinking about LA, how teachers’ beliefs about LA fit in with these domains, and how LA can be included within (existing) language curricula remains unclear. The goal of the present study is therefore to explore these issues in order to gain a better understanding of the (potential) place of LA in the foreign language classroom.

**Language awareness in the curriculum**

LA has already made its way into the national language curricula in some countries. In Australia, for example, the new Australian Curriculum for (foreign) languages (ACARA, 2016) has afforded knowledge about language and language awareness a central place in the curriculum. The key elements in the L2 curriculum include reflection on and analysis of the language to be learnt and the language(s) already known, building understanding of the way languages work and ‘noticing, questioning and developing awareness of how languages and cultures shape experiences and identity’ (ACARA, 2016, para. 1).

The Finnish national core curriculum for upper-secondary school (FNBE, 2015) has included LA, with a primary focus on multilingualism, culture and identity, as key elements in L1 and L2 education. These examples show that there are multiple ways to embed LA in (foreign) language curricula.

In the Netherlands, curriculum reforms in language education, as well as in a larger educational perspective, have attracted renewed attention (Platform Onderwijs2032, 2016). The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recently initiated a debate about the
development of a future-oriented curriculum. The current curriculum, which has been in place since 2006, is too comprehensive and provides little guidance for student learning (Rijksoverheid, 2016). Additionally, the current communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) devotes much attention to the development of the four language skills, but considerably less to students’ language learning process, and the analytical and (cross-)linguistic aspects of languages. Along with the curriculum reform debate, the role of LA has recently also attracted considerable interest (Tammenga-Helmantel & Le Bruyn, 2016), especially in the context of secondary education. In order to support the inclusion of an LA approach, however, it is essential to involve teachers, to find out their beliefs about LA, and to identify what they need in order to successfully include LA in their daily teaching practices and the wider curriculum.

**Teachers’ beliefs**

The success of curriculum innovations largely depends on teachers’ beliefs about a particular topic. LA appears to be a broad field ‘allow[ing] for considerable flexibility’ (James & Garrett, 2013, p. 4) and covering a wide range of topics (Svalberg, 2015). This is why it is not only important to explore what teachers know and believe in relation to the topic of LA, but also find out how their beliefs might affect the inclusion of LA in foreign language education. To our knowledge, only a few studies have addressed teachers’ beliefs in relation to LA, but these studies examined beliefs with a narrower focus, such as grammar (Watson, 2015) and intercultural competence (Young & Sachdev, 2011), rather than beliefs about LA as an approach. In a broader perspective, studies on teachers’ beliefs have also reflected on educational values (Lewis & McCook, 2002) and difficulties with CLT as a curriculum innovation (Li, 1998). An in-depth analysis of teachers’ beliefs about LA as a concept, however, has not yet been carried out.

Research has shown that the construct of teachers’ beliefs is broad (Pajares, 1992) and that definitions of beliefs vary considerably (Basturkmen, 2012). In the context of language education, teachers’ beliefs are often described as a proposition held by a teacher which is true for that particular teacher, while s/he also recognises that alternative beliefs may be held by other teachers (Borg, 2001). In this study, we will follow Skott (2014), who describes beliefs as (1) referring to ideas which are considered to be subjectively true for a particular individual, (2) having cognitive and affective dimensions, (3) being stable and only likely to change because of relevant experiences, and (4) influencing teachers’ engagement with practice.

Another reason why it is particularly important to identify teachers’ beliefs in relation to the topic of LA is that teachers’ beliefs might be difficult to change (Pajares, 1992; Tsui, 2003). Recognising those beliefs that require extra attention might help to successfully include this approach in foreign language education. With different teachers possibly holding different beliefs, it is useful to understand if and if so, how these beliefs differ. Teachers’ beliefs are therefore central to this study to help indicate the possible challenges related to the inclusion of LA in teaching practices.

**Research questions and aims**

Our first research question is as follows:

(1) How can teachers’ beliefs about LA be characterised?
To answer the first question, we will use the five domains of LA (James & Garrett, 2013) as a starting point. Our second research question concerns differences in teachers’ beliefs:

(2) What differences can be observed in teachers’ beliefs about LA and how can these differences be characterised?

Recent LA-related research has mainly been carried out in university contexts (Svalberg, 2015), and most research has been conducted outside the Netherlands. This paper aims a) to gain a better understanding of teachers’ beliefs about LA in the context of Dutch upper-secondary EFL education and b) to identify differences in teachers’ beliefs about LA and formulate a number of challenges related to these different beliefs. Building on these challenges, this article also aims to facilitate the discussion about including LA in foreign language curricula.

**Methodology**

A qualitative, exploratory, multiple-case study approach was adopted, on the one hand, to collect multiple perspectives on the topic under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and, on the other, to capture the complexity of teachers’ beliefs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Post-lesson observation interviews were used for data collection. A coding scheme was developed to analyse the interviews. Finally, the various cases were compared in order to explore differences and similarities in teachers’ beliefs (Miles et al., 2013).

**School context**

This study was conducted in the context of pre-university secondary education in the Netherlands. Pre-university secondary education is a six-year course: the first three years comprise lower-secondary and the final three years upper-secondary education. This study focused on upper-secondary education with students 16–18 years of age. Students in the upper-secondary years are prepared for their future studies at university. Teachers in the upper-secondary years must possess a master’s degree in secondary education.

**Participants**

Following Merriam and Tisdell (2015), we purposely selected teachers interested in LA in order to identify as many factors as possible associated with the concept. Additionally, we used the following criteria: participants (1) were in-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), (2) possessed a master’s degree in EFL teaching and (3) had a minimum of three years of teaching experience. Participants were selected through the network of the teacher training institute and the first author’s personal network. An informative e-mail was sent to numerous schools and teachers. Out of 18 teachers who had declared their interest and consented to participate, ten teachers from ten different schools were selected, taking into account gender, age and teaching experience. The teachers selected were between 29 and 64 years old and had between 7 and 40 years of teaching experience. For a detailed overview of teacher characteristics, see Appendix A.
**Instruments and procedures**

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview that built on class observation. Each teacher was observed teaching one EFL class in order to gain a better understanding of their teaching and to create a point of reference during the interview. Notes on LA-related occurrences or opportunities taking place in the classroom were reported during each observation and, if applicable, were referred to during the interview, for example to encourage teachers to elaborate more on what they find important or to stimulate teachers to further explain a particular coursebook exercise. The interview followed directly or shortly after the class. All interviews lasted approximately one hour. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Five open-ended questions and a number of follow-up indicators formed the main body of the interview protocol. The protocol was designed based on previous literature on LA and the gaps identified in that literature. For example, the way teachers think about LA in relation to their classroom practice and what they consider as possibilities or challenges when it comes to including LA in their daily teaching practices were not sufficiently addressed in earlier work. The protocol was piloted with seven secondary school foreign language teachers and two teacher trainers and adjusted where necessary, for example by changing the order of the questions. Teachers were asked to reflect on the concept of LA in relation to their teaching practices. The five main questions were as follows: (1) Could you give an example of what language awareness means to you in the context of upper-secondary EFL education? (2) How do you visualise language awareness in your own teaching practices? (3) Which examples of language awareness do you recognise in your own teaching practices? (4) If you were to include language awareness in your teaching practices, which difficulties would you expect? And (5) In what ways could language awareness contribute to innovation in EFL? See Appendix B for the full interview protocol.

**Data analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti (version 7.5.16). In order to analyse the interview data, the five domains of LA (James & Garrett, 2013) as well as existing frameworks on teacher beliefs were used as the point of departure.

In the first phase of analysis, a coding scheme was developed integrating the five domains of LA with categorisations found in three qualitative language education studies: a schematic conceptualisation of language teacher cognition (Borg, 2003), an overview of key influences on teacher language awareness (Andrews, 2007) and a categorisation of teachers’ practical knowledge (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 1999).

In the second phase, the process of coding scheme development as well as the meaning of the codes were thoroughly discussed with the second author in order to reach a shared conception. Furthermore, the coding scheme was used to code two contrastive interviews. Any coding ambiguities were clarified through discussion and, where necessary, codes were removed, merged or new codes were added. After all ambiguities were resolved, a refined coding scheme with five main categories and 15 codes was developed. A summarised coding scheme can be found in Table 1 (see Appendix C for the full coding scheme).

In the third phase, the coding scheme was used by the first and second author to code approximately 10% of the transcripts individually. For this purpose, one transcript was randomly selected. Given that the semi-structured interviews often yielded complex responses, meaning
Table 1. Coding scheme consisting of five main categories with accompanying subcodes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Accompanying subcodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Subject matter</td>
<td>1.1 LA description, subdivided into five domains of LA:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher's description of language awareness (LA) or LA-related skills and possible link between LA and other language competencies (= knowledge, skills, attitude)</td>
<td>Cognitive domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Link with other EFL domains</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Curricular programme</td>
<td>2.1 Course materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about and interpretation of the EFL curriculum, including course materials and team agreements</td>
<td>2.2 Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.4 Link with other language subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Student learning</td>
<td>3.1 Student competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about students and student learning in the EFL context</td>
<td>3.2 Individual differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.3 Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Instructional technique</td>
<td>4.1 Instructional strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about chosen strategy, preparation and structure of lessons or class activities with a focus on LA(-aspects)</td>
<td>4.2 Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Educational context</td>
<td>5.1 School support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about influential factors at classroom, teacher, school level</td>
<td>5.2 Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3 Teacher collaboration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

units rather than individual phrases were used as the units of analysis (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). Meaning units were demarcated as such by the first author and subsequently coded by both the first and the second author using the coding scheme.

In the fourth phase, codings from both researchers were compared in order to calculate the interrater reliability. Cohen’s (1960) kappa is one of the most commonly used methods to assess interrater reliability. Cohen’s kappa was calculated as $\kappa = .89$, which is considered a strong agreement (McHugh, 2012). Any coding discrepancies were reconciled through discussion in which both researchers shared their views on the code assignment. Then, the remaining set of transcripts was coded by the first author.

In the final phase, a data matrix was created in order to organise teachers’ beliefs per code and perform a cross-case analysis (Miles et al., 2013). In order to answer the first research question, we focused on the code ‘LA description’, which is subdivided according to the five domains of LA (James & Garrett, 2013). All teacher utterances labelled with this code were extracted from the coding scheme and compared and analysed in order to characterise teachers’ beliefs about LA. In order to answer the second research question, the full list of categories and codes was analysed to uncover similarities and differences in teachers’ beliefs. Analysis of the codes yielded insight into the variety of beliefs present across teachers. Furthermore, some of these codes yielded potentially conflicting beliefs across teachers. In order to better understand the differences, we selected four codes (‘link with other languages’, ‘teacher collaboration’, ‘curriculum’ and ‘student competencies’) for further analysis. Comparison of these codes yielded potentially conflicting beliefs, as opposed to the remaining codes, which, by and large, yielded fewer disagreements. Interestingly, some beliefs could be characterised as possibilities for LA, whereas others could be characterised as difficulties. We primarily looked at the differences in beliefs between teachers when analysing the data; however, in some cases we also found differences in beliefs within teachers for the same code (e.g. link with other languages).
Results

Teachers’ beliefs about LA

Teachers hold a wide range of beliefs about LA. In the following section we will use interview quotes\(^2\) to describe the beliefs held by teachers about LA in relation to their everyday teaching practices. Some domains, for example the cognitive domain, were referred to repeatedly and by all teachers, whereas other domains, for example the power domain, were only referred to once and only by a few teachers. The majority of teachers’ beliefs about LA could be characterised as falling within the cognitive domain, and all individual teachers made reference to the cognitive domain when elaborating on their beliefs about LA. References to grammatical aspects, gaining insight into language as a system, and understanding the structure of the language to be learnt were evaluated as beliefs fitting within the cognitive domain. The following quote by TEA8 is an example of a belief characterised as fitting within the cognitive domain:

\[
\text{TEA8: Yes, the consciousness we talked about before, [students’] realisation that language is a system, a structure with rules and building blocks that you use in a certain way. Like the way you use bricks to build a house. And so, ehm, that a verb is not the same as a noun or an adjective.}
\]

In addition to cognitive reflection, many beliefs were related to the performance domain. Reading and writing were frequently mentioned skills in relation to LA, with writing being part of TEA5’s belief about LA:

\[
\text{INT: What does LA mean to you?}
\]

\[
\text{TEA5: Being able to use language, real-life situations. […] Knowing how to be comprehensible, produce a decent piece of text, but then on a slightly higher level than the typical ‘Dunglish’}^3\text{.}
\]

Teachers’ LA beliefs fitting in with the social, affective or power domain were less prominent. It appeared from the results that sociocultural matters were less often associated with language awareness. Beliefs fitting the social domain were brought up once or twice by half of the teachers and highlighted multilingualism, multiculturalism and immigration. TEA5 explained: ‘The language you speak influences your thinking and influences your behaviour, so then the whole cultural aspect follows as well’. Descriptions of LA fitting within the affective domain were brought up by five teachers and referred mostly to students’ everyday life, curiosity and motivation. TEA6 ties in the social with the affective domain by relating LA to students’ lifeworld and in doing so, aiming to motivate them:

\[
\text{TEA6: [LA is] curiosity. And I think they [students] should realise that language is very broad, that is what they should realise. Actually, the fact that language plays a role in all school subjects and in all aspects in life. And for me it would be really nice if they develop a certain curiosity towards languages.}
\]

The power domain was only referred to by two teachers. Both teachers included the aspect of critical thinking when they illustrated their beliefs and both teachers linked it to other aspects of EFL teaching. TEA7 explained how critical thinking about language goes hand in hand with the use of literature and the transfer to daily life:
TEA7: Look at 1984 by George Orwell, it is all about the power of language and the way language works, and hey it is a weapon of power, right. In some dictatorships, words or even languages are forbidden, the words that you can use or cannot use, it is a political game. How does that work? I try to make students aware of that, but it takes a lot of practice before they notice […] How can I make them think about language, well, I try to let them think critically, that they do not just swallow it, believe anything […] And how is it different nowadays? Big brother is watching you.

Besides elaborating on their beliefs about LA, two teachers also expressed their doubts about the suitability of this approach in the EFL classroom. Two teachers, who both viewed LA as inherently cognitive, explained that they do not find it necessary to make the implicit explicit if students subconsciously apply the rules correctly. However, the acquisition of other aspects, as explained by TEA1, might benefit from such an approach:

TEA1: In general our students are linguistically very competent, so when it comes to LA, I would say it is more about the function of language, and also stylistic, the way you use language, the impression you leave in written and spoken words. […] But whether I use this in my teaching depends. Many of the students [subconsciously] know it [the rules] already and then I am not sure whether you should also explicitly address this.

Overall, then, teachers’ interpretations of LA resulted in a wide variety of beliefs about LA. The examples revealed that teachers pay attention to students’ thinking about language and that they do so in a diverse and varied manner. The cognitive and performance domains of LA were most prominently reflected in teachers’ beliefs. The affective, social and power domain were referred to less often. In the next section we will discuss differences observed in teachers’ beliefs about LA.

**Conflicting beliefs about LA**

The four codes ‘link with other languages’, ‘teacher collaboration’, ‘curriculum’ and ‘student competencies’ revealed different teacher beliefs. Moreover, the differences observed within these codes could be considered as conflicting beliefs between teachers. In the following section, we will illustrate these differences by using teachers’ own quotes.

1. **Beliefs about the link with other languages: Help vs. hinder**

The link between English (L2), Dutch (L1) and/or other (foreign) languages (Lx) was raised multiple times. A distinction could be made between L1 and L2, and L2 and Lx and the results indicated that teachers seemed to struggle whether or not to bring up the link between L1 and L2 and/or L2 and Lx. Teachers who referred to the link between L1 and L2 most often did so in the context of reading, vocabulary and grammar. Some teachers chose to explicitly address the similarities and differences between these languages. TEA9 explained how he discussed the similarities and differences in order to stimulate students’ awareness of grammar:

TEA9: [I emphasise] the links as well as the non-links. Students very much lean on their knowledge of Dutch. And the transfer they make, the incorrect transfer from Dutch to English, that is what I see a lot. And then I will show them how, for
example, here is a Dutch word order instead of an English word order, why is that incorrect, what do you think?

Not all teachers were convinced of the possible cross-linguistic benefits. TEA2 explicitly pointed out that she eliminated the L1 as much as possible from her lessons. She explained the following when she discussed students’ difficulties with the passive voice in English:

**TEA2:** That [basic grammar knowledge] belongs to Dutch of course and if they [students] do not learn it properly there, then I can invest a lot of time in it, but I do not teach Dutch, I teach English. And I have the feeling that I have to deal with Dutch often, very often, while I actually think it should not be an issue in the English class. They should not translate, but think in English.

Interestingly though, TEA2 regularly compared the L2 with other foreign languages. Especially in the context of reading and vocabulary, she often paused at or pointed out those words that she thought could benefit students’ learning process:

**TEA2:** For example the word ‘xenophobia’. Then I ask them ‘who is taking lessons in Greek?’ Many students raise their hands and then I ask them, okay, tell me. And then first they give me a glazed look. So I say ‘xenos, what does that mean?’, [and they say] ‘yeah, stranger’. So you can derive it […] But they do not establish that link themselves, I always point it out.

In sum, the interview examples revealed that teachers do not always agree about the role of prior language knowledge in their classroom, whether it is about the L1 or other foreign languages taught in school. Some teachers tried to make use of prior language knowledge wherever possible, whereas other teachers completely ignored it or preferred to only use other foreign languages and disregard the first language. Conflicting beliefs were mostly found between teachers, but some teachers themselves held conflicting beliefs about the role of the L1 as opposed to the role of foreign languages in the EFL classroom as well.

2. **Beliefs about teacher collaboration: Success vs. failure**

Teacher collaboration was often seen as relevant in the context of LA, yet was perceived as a difficulty by many teachers. Some teachers described examples of how they had started some form of teacher collaboration with other language teachers in their school. They did so, because they intended to ‘bring the languages together’ (TEA7) and believed it would stimulate students’ language learning when the (foreign) language curricula were better aligned. Unfortunately, none of the attempts described by these teachers had lasted long-term. TEA8 explained that she ‘had tried to collaborate [with other foreign language colleagues], but it never really got off the ground’. They had not succeeded in establishing a durable subject-matter dialogue with other foreign language teachers in her school because it transpired that they all had different goals. She added that now the L2 teachers sometimes discuss grammatical aspects with L1 teachers in order to align L1 and L2 grammar, for example when analysing sentence structures, so that ‘their [L1] programme connects with our [L2] programme’. However, she also commented that ‘in practice it actually never works out’.

Other teachers emphasised how they particularly valued collaboration with colleagues. TEA6 said that she did not have many opportunities to work together with other EFL teachers.
However, she gave examples of collaboration with the L1 teacher as well as other foreign language teachers. She said: ‘I work together with other languages a lot, not necessarily in terms of subject-matter content, but we do exchange ideas. Writing an application letter is the same in like German, so we use the same formats’. And about her collaboration with an L1 teacher she said:

**TEA6:** We have discussed things over coffee break, we have some tricks, some things we do. For example, in Dutch we now say ‘het huis is gebouwd’ [the house is built]. We used to say ‘het huis is gebouwd geworden’ [the house is built been]. That comparison is easier to make if you want to relate it to the English ‘the house has been built’.

In sum, many teachers have participated or still participate in some sort of teacher collaboration within their schools. However, the way they experience this collaboration differs greatly. The answers revealed a conflict in teacher collaboration between, on the one hand, the connection with daily practice and, on the other, the extent to which content is discussed in any detail. Teachers who experienced failure in collaboration often did so in situations where they tried to align the programmes of different language subjects. In-depth focus on and alignment of the content resulted in a reduced connection with daily teaching practice, as the various languages did not seamlessly fit in with each other and still evoked their own language-specific questions and issues. Teacher collaboration was experienced as successful when mutual alignment occurred on a more superficial level, for example when discussing less complicated aspects of language on an occasional basis or when discussing the use of cross-curricular formats.

3. **Beliefs about the curriculum: Boundary vs creativity**

Another aspect that yielded conflicting beliefs across teachers was the EFL curriculum. The boundary between curriculum agreements and curricular creativity was perceived as complex by many teachers. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science decides on the national examination programme and corresponding criteria. Within the boundaries of these criteria, schools are free to formulate their own curriculum and examination agreements for upper-secondary education. Although schools are allowed to decide about and fill in the agreements themselves, teachers often said they felt burdened by and forced to rely on these agreements. TEA1 elaborated on the tasks he planned to do in his next lesson: ‘We will do that [exercise] tomorrow, because the book says so. Never heard of it, but anyway, I will do what they ask’. When asked if he could skip the exercise if he did not consider it very useful, he answered: ‘No, I cannot skip it, because we have a common exam and every class gets the exact same exam based on the same two chapters. So I am supposed to prepare students for this’.

At the same time, teachers expressed their wish to have ‘space for more creativity’ (TEA10) in their teaching and to not feel the pressure to act on the agreements. TEA3 criticised the type of exercises in students’ coursebooks and explained that in order to stimulate students’ LA, exercises need to be adapted and allow for more creativity. She explained how she has developed many creative lessons, but finds it difficult to fit them into the programme. As the format of the coursebook exercises is influenced by the format of the examination programme (SLO, 2009) she felt compelled to practice those types of exercises in order to prepare students for their exams.
TEA3: I understand that students should learn and know these words and that they can derive different word classes, such as verb, noun and adjective, but I also think that these [fill-in-the-gap] are dumb types of exercises, especially when the word or the affix is filled in already. Then it is a terribly dry scheme, so yeah. If it is in the coursebook I do use these kinds of exercises, but they [students] forget it again, I think. Unless, you know, you let them play with it and let them create a short story with at least ten of those words, for example. If they really have to apply the words, that is when it becomes useful, but these columns and schemes, nah, they really forget it again.

TEA5 acknowledged the role of reading in the curriculum. However, she also thought that the typical multiple-choice reading exercises were too passive and did not stimulate students to really think about the language and the message in the text. Consequently, she favoured more creativity in dealing with reading exercises and also put this into practice on a regular basis, for example by ‘letting students work in smaller groups, this jigsaw classroom, and then they have to discuss the text, for example connections between paragraphs’. She also allowed students to summarise the text their own way, ‘so they can use the text in a creative way: one group creates a world map with different pieces of paper on it, others create a book, those kind of examples, students really dive into the text then’.

To sum up, several teachers perceived LA as something extra on top of the existing curriculum. Although they believed LA would be useful and could add more depth to the subject matter, they expressed the opinion that they currently did not have sufficient time and space for it because of the curricular agreements. Other teachers saw more possibilities for LA and considered it a concept that could be intertwined with the existing curriculum. Those teachers tried to adapt certain exercises in a creative manner with the intention of stimulating student engagement and increasing students’ awareness of the language skills they practised.

4. Beliefs about student competencies: Classroom vs. real-life

Teachers mostly referred to student competencies in terms of the four language skills. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that CLT revolves to a large extent around the development of these skills. Most teachers linked LA to one particular language skill they perceived as the most important for students to be competent in, for example in order to prepare them for their final exam or their future studies at university. In most cases this meant a focus on reading skills. TEA4 explained why he thinks students’ awareness of language needs to be improved and why he thinks reading is the most important skill in that case: ‘That students are better able to read, so they can read articles better, read their coursebooks better, but that they also develop a better insight in their own language, Dutch, or German or French’.

Other teachers expressed how they wanted students’ competencies to be more connected. In school settings the skills are often taught and dealt with separately, whereas in daily life these skills are inseparable. According to some teachers, LA could support students to understand the connection between these skills. TEA9, thus, envisaged LA as a more holistic approach that could build students’ awareness of the link between the skills. He wanted students to see the bigger picture and did not want to ‘give them the idea that they are only practicing exam texts’. However, he added that ‘students actually really like that, it gives them something to hold on to’, because after all that is the way they will be examined.
TEA9: [Important for me is] that students start connecting the various language components. That they are not only connecting the different languages, but that they are also able to connect the various skills, that they are able to put these skills together. I realise that is difficult for them. Even how they can connect these skills within one language, so for instance connect their reading skills with their writing skills.

Taking the different beliefs into account, teachers seem to be torn between LA as a means to directly improve the language skills as taught and examined in school, and LA as a means to emphasise the connection between these skills and the use of skills in daily life. Reading skills, which make up (sometimes more than) 50% of the final secondary school grade for English, were referred to most as the key competence for students to improve. However, reading exercises were often evaluated by teachers as a teaching to the test procedure rather than exercises that led to a deeper understanding of the text. As a result, the transfer from coursebook to daily usage appeared to be a difficulty for students, yet it remained unclear for many teachers how to best support this transfer and make language relevant to students. Teachers who viewed LA as a holistic approach aimed at improving not just one particular skill, but rather students’ competencies as a whole. They regularly focused on the connection between competencies learned in school and competencies necessary outside school.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to deepen our understanding of LA in the context of upper-secondary EFL education, to achieve a better insight into teachers’ beliefs about LA and the differences within these beliefs, and to facilitate the discussion about the implementation of LA in (foreign) language curricula. One finding is that LA is not perceived as a uniform concept with a shared understanding among teachers, a concern that was also raised by James and Garrett (2013). Another finding is that the cognitive and performance domain were most prominently reflected in teachers’ beliefs. The recurring references to these domains can probably be explained by taking into consideration the CLT approach and the EFL curriculum, in which grammar and the development of the four language skills receive much attention. Furthermore, EFL education in the upper-secondary years in the Netherlands is predominantly organised around the development of these skills. This way, students are prepared for their periodic assessments and final secondary school exam (Fasoglio, de Jong, Pennewaard, Trimbos, & Tuin, 2015).

The dominant focus on skills may have lowered the number of references to the social, affective and power domains. Even though a trend analysis of language education in the Netherlands recently underscored the societal impact of language and the importance of reflection on language and language as a crucial element in citizenship education (Fasoglio et al., 2015), teachers in this study felt an increasing pressure to prepare students for their exams by focusing on skills development. Social, affective and power domain-related aspects of language learning were consequently not prioritised and were less often associated with LA. It should be noted, however, that the scale of this study did not allow us to report on any generalisable, quantitative insights into teachers’ beliefs. Further research involving larger groups of teachers could possibly elaborate further on the occurrence of the five domains in relation to teachers’ beliefs.
In addition to analysing teachers’ beliefs in relation to the five domains of LA, we analysed the differences in teachers’ beliefs about LA. Some of these differences could be characterised as conflicting beliefs and were found when teachers discussed the link with other languages, teacher collaboration, curriculum and student competencies. Conflicting beliefs may be understood better by setting them side by side and by evaluating the nature of the conflicts (Richardson, 1996). For that reason, we evaluated the conflicting beliefs and formulated four challenges stemming from these conflicting beliefs that are relevant and important for the inclusion of LA in educational practices. When discussing the role of LA in the EFL curriculum, these challenges could serve as a point of departure when initiating a dialogue with, for example, teachers, schools and teacher trainers. Such a dialogue could support teachers in developing a better understanding of their own and other teachers’ beliefs about LA, help teachers and schools find out how LA fits best within the existing EFL curricula, and support teacher educators in drawing attention to these areas that require extra attention in pre- and in-teacher training.

**Conflicting belief 1: Links with other languages**

Our study shows that some teachers use the link between languages in order to stimulate students’ learning process, whereas others refuse to emphasise the similarities and differences between languages because they think it will confuse students. Furthermore, the results indicate that underlining the cross-linguistic connection between linguistic forms seems to occur sporadically, rather than structurally. This suggests that it was seen as more relevant by teachers to explain the connection for the progress of the task at hand, rather than as the start of an in-depth discussion or better understanding (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002). However, emphasising the common form features could improve performance in both languages (Cummins, 2005).

**Challenge 1:** How can teachers be made aware of the possibilities of cross-linguistic reflection, what tools do they need to stimulate this reflection and how can they support students to discover these similarities and differences themselves?

**Conflicting belief 2: Teacher collaboration**

The results indicate that teacher collaboration yields positive associations for some teachers, whereas other teachers mostly experience failure in collaborating with colleagues. Establishing cross-curricular collaboration was perceived as difficult when teachers aimed at equating the content of their subject with other language subjects. Few studies have described cross-linguistic teacher collaboration. Gunning, White, and Busque (2016) found similar difficulties in teacher collaboration, although at a grade 6-level in a Canadian context, and found that difficulties occurred because teachers were unfamiliar with each other’s curriculum or the terminology used in another subject. In our study, many examples of collaboration provided by teachers fitted within the cognitive domain of LA. As teachers experienced difficulties within this domain, the question arises whether collaboration could possibly be more successful within another domain of LA, for example the social domain.

**Challenge 2:** How can teachers be supported to discover common ground and find suitable and feasible topics to collaboratively work on in the context of LA development?
Conflicting belief 3: Curriculum

This study reveals that teachers struggle with various aspects of the curriculum; they are either following curriculum requirements and carrying out the associated tasks as agreed upon with colleagues, or using the curricular freedom to add more creativity to their teaching. The results suggest that teachers experience a conflict in the space allowed by the curriculum and how to fill in that space. The perceived discrepancy between the intended and the implemented curriculum (Van den Akker, 2003) seems to account for this conflict and the possible role attributed to LA in the curriculum.

Challenge 3: How can teachers include LA in (existing) language curricula without losing focus on the development of the language skills and at the same time generate more space for students’ own creativity in language learning?

Conflicting belief 4: Student competencies

The results show that conflicting beliefs about student competencies are based, on the one hand, on a sole focus on the development of students’ language skills and, on the other hand, on finding connections between the skills acquired and used in school and the use of language in daily life outside the school context. Students’ competencies are often framed in terms of their skills in school. However, many teachers also said that students were capable of doing much more if they had the opportunity to look further than the exercises in the coursebook, for example by completing assignments outside school that involve talking to people. Although the common objectives of CLT are to prepare learners for real-life communication, with skills often being intertwined (Richards, 2006), teachers did not mention this when discussing students’ competencies.

Challenge 4: How can LA maintain the balance between language skills acquired and used in the classroom and language skills necessary and relevant in daily life, and what do we want students to be able to do, know or learn in the EFL classroom?

Conclusion

Overall, this study shows that LA is a complex and multi-faceted concept. Teachers have described the concept extensively, yet no shared understanding of its meaning exists among the Dutch secondary school teachers in our study. Nonetheless, discussing the topic during the interview led to new insights for many teachers, which seems a first step in raising teachers’ awareness of the possibilities of LA in the EFL classroom.

Furthermore, this study indicates that LA is not a one-size-fits-all approach. We would argue that in order to make LA workable in EFL education, the approach requires closer inspection by and with teachers. It is important to realise that teachers may hold a wide variety of beliefs about LA, based on their own experiences and classroom practices. Hence, mapping teachers’ beliefs about LA is essential to facilitate the practical implementation of such an approach.

This study has shown that when it comes to including LA in EFL education, the following aspects require extra attention: the link with other languages, teacher collaboration,
curriculum and student competencies. Further studies are necessary to discover how this can best be accomplished. Nevertheless, explicating (the differences in) teachers' beliefs provides teachers with a common language to discuss LA and will facilitate the exchange of ideas. By collaboratively focusing on the topic, teachers will gain a better insight into their beliefs and the role LA could play in their teaching practices.

Notes

1. Helma Oolbekkink was not involved in this study at the time of data analysis, but is now part of the research team.
2. All interview abstracts in this paper were translated from Dutch to English by the first author.
3. Dunglish (a portmanteau of Dutch and English) is a term used for typical mistakes native speakers of Dutch make when speaking English.
4. Part A of the interview protocol was meant as a) an introduction to the main interview to make the teacher feel at ease being interviewed and b) an opportunity for the teacher to mention what s/he thought was worth discussing.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Ellen van den Broek is PhD candidate at the Radboud Teachers Academy and the Department of English Language and Culture at Radboud University. Her research focuses on teachers' beliefs and practices related to language awareness in secondary school foreign language education.

Helma Oolbekkink-Marchand is assistant professor at the Radboud Teachers Academy at Radboud University and professor at HAN University of Applied Sciences. Her research interests include the professional development of teachers, teacher leadership and teacher agency.

Sharon Unsworth is associate professor at the Centre for Language Studies at Radboud University. Her research interests include the linguistic development of bilingual children and factors affecting bilingual and second language acquisition.

Ans van Kemenade is professor of English language and linguistics at the Centre for Language Studies at Radboud University. Her main research areas are language contact, language variation and language change.

Paulien Meijer is professor of teacher learning and development at the Radboud Teachers Academy at Radboud University. Her research focuses on teacher education and the development of teachers' professional identity.

ORCID

Ellen W. R. van den Broek http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4156-3980
Helma W. Oolbekkink-Marchand http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6315-7652
Ans M. C. van Kemenade http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3209-8316
References


Appendix A

Overview of teacher characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Teaching experience (in years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>33</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B

Interview protocol

Part A: Introduction to the interview and evaluation of classroom observation

(1) How do you look back on this lesson? What caught your attention?
   – Did you prepare the lesson? And if so, how?
   – Did you have a particular goal in mind? Did you reach this?
   – What went well? What disappointed? Why?
   – What went different than expected? Why?
   – What would you have done differently? Why?

(2) Was this lesson a good example of how a typical lesson progresses or was it different because I was present?

(3) Referring to classroom example: Do you do these type of exercises on a regular basis? Why (not)?

Part B: Reflecting on LA in EFL education

(4) Could you give an example of what language awareness means to you in the context of upper-secondary EFL education?
   – For example, when you think about the language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) or other aspects in education where language awareness could play a role?

Part C: Reflecting on LA example or opportunity in the classroom

(5) How do you visualise language awareness in your own teaching practices? Which examples of language awareness do you recognise in your own teaching practices?
   – For example, when you think about: your class, your students, yourself as an EFL teacher, your school, your colleagues, the curriculum.

Part D. Including LA in EFL teaching practices

(6) If you were to include language awareness in your teaching practices, which difficulties/possibilities would you expect?
   – For example, when you think about: your class, your students, yourself as an EFL teacher, your school, your colleagues, the curriculum.
   – What would you need if you were to include such an approach in your teaching practices?
Part E. LA as innovative aspect in EFL education

(7) In what ways could language awareness contribute to innovation in EFL?
- For example, when you think about: your class, your students, yourself as an EFL teacher, your school, your colleagues, the curriculum, the transition from secondary school to university.
- Do you think LA could be of added value for EFL education? Why (not)?

Part F. End of the interview

- Now we have discussed all the questions, is there anything you would like to add? For example discuss something we have not discussed yet or elaborate more on a certain question?
- What did you think of the interview? Did it set you thinking?
### Appendix C

This coding scheme is built around five main categories which are numbered 1–5 in the first column; a brief description of the main categories is also provided. The second column lists the subcodes that accompany each category. In the third column, a description of each subcode is provided. In the fourth column, an example of an interview quote is provided for each of the subcodes.

**Overview of the coding scheme consisting of five main categories, accompanying subcodes, descriptions, and interview examples.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Accompanying subcodes</th>
<th>Subcode description</th>
<th>Example of interview quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Subject matter</td>
<td>1.1 LA description, subdivided into:</td>
<td>Teacher’s description, characterisation or explanation of LA(-related aspects), subdivided according to the five domains of LA (James &amp; Garrett, 2013)</td>
<td>’[LA is] curiosity. And I think they [students] should realise that language is very broad, that is what they should realise. Actually, the fact that language plays a role in all school subjects and in all aspects in life. And for me it would be really nice if they develop a certain curiosity towards languages’ (This interview example was coded as affective as well as social).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s description of language awareness (LA) or LA-related skills and possible link between LA and other language competencies (= knowledge, skills, attitude)</td>
<td>1.2 Link with other EFL domains</td>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about the connection between LA and other domains within the EFL curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Curricular programme</td>
<td>2.1 Course materials</td>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about course materials used in the EFL classroom in order to accomplish curricular goals, including teacher’s opinion about the materials in relation to LA, suggestions for possible LA-related course materials and responsibility for the (re)development of course materials</td>
<td>’Yes, that [reflection] is very important. And the ‘Of Course’ method is not that good, but I like it. The only downside is, students are afraid to let go of the method. Every unit is the exact same, five lessons, so and so many words and recurring grammar.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*References*

James & Garrett, 2013
2.2 Curriculum

"[Diverting from the programme is impossible. As the system demands it, we now have a common exam and every class gets the exact same exam based on the same two chapters. So am supposed to prepare students for this."

2.3 Team

"I work here for about seven years now and in the pre-university track I am the only EFL teacher, so that complicated things a bit complicated then. Also because I realise that trying out new things, innovative activities, that often depends on the younger colleagues, and they are not there at the moment."

2.4 Link with other language subjects

"The difference between Dutch and English and then especially that you can point out where things go wrong. For example a sentence as 'Ik heb die film gisteren gezien' [I have seen that movie yesterday]. If you let them translate then they will translate it word for word. Logical that as speakers of Dutch we translate it that way and that students translate it word for word."

3. Student competencies

"Well, what I think, many students who obtain bad grades in English think 'I failed again, I am just bad at this,' but what I realise when they have been on holidays or in contact with family members who do not speak Dutch, then they realise that their English for every-day situations is actually quite good, also because they dare to speak, they have to."

3.2 Individual differences

"I realise that some of my students, some weaker students, but also students with a migrant background, particularly struggle with the structure of a text. It is not just vocabulary, but really structure and how you deal with the language of a text."

Continued
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Accompanying subcodes</th>
<th>Subcode description</th>
<th>Example of interview quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Motivation</td>
<td>Teacher’s beliefs about aspects that motivate, interest and engage students within the subject of EFL, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, general motivation and interest, and motivation and interest for learning</td>
<td>‘What I would find it really cool, and I would like to do this much more, is to make it more relevant, make it a necessity for students to use English. In the classroom for example by means of an “Escape Room” in which they have to use English to solve a puzzle or something, so that it is relevant and not just “it is a school subject and I just want to do the bare minimum to pass”’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Instructional technique</td>
<td>Instructional strategy, format or teaching activity deliberately chosen by the teacher prior to or during classroom practice with the aim of making students aware of certain aspects of language (learning), including examples of student involvement and LA-raising activities from teacher’s own practices</td>
<td>‘I understand that students should learn and know these words and that they can derive different word classes, such as verb, noun and adjective, but I also think that these [fill in the gap] are dumb type of exercises, especially when the word or the affix is filled in already […] Then it is a terribly dry scheme, so yeah. If it is in the coursebook I do use them, these kind of exercises, but they [students] forget it again, I think. Unless, you know, you let them play with it and let them create a short story with those words, for example. If they really have to apply the words, that is when it becomes useful, but these columns and schemes, nah, they really forget it again’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Feedback</td>
<td>Type of feedback (e.g. individual/group, peer/teacher) chosen by the teacher during classroom practice with the aim of stimulating students’ thinking about language and their own language learning</td>
<td>‘With some assignments I will give them [students] feedback and then I will tell them “okay, you have received feedback now, go through this feedback and incorporate it in a new version, so that you can improve your final grade”. This way they are extra motivated to look at the feedback and really do something with it instead of just receiving their grade and throw the feedback into the trash bin’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Assessment</td>
<td>Types of assessment (e.g. formative/summative, individual/group/peer) described by the teacher relevant to assessing LA-related learning activities, including teacher’s opinion on the quality and suitability of certain types of assessment</td>
<td>‘If you do these type of [LA] exercises, then it is necessary to, the question is how do you assure the quality? Now you can assure quality because the standards for every exam are the same and also because the final exam is standardised and the same for everyone’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Educational context

5.1 School support

School support (e.g., staff, department, principal) and approval experienced by teachers, including practical, financial, technical support

‘Yeah, the science department in our school has an advantage over the language department. Look at our dictionaries for example, that is just sad. But we need budget and we do not have the money to buy new ones, but anyway, you know, eventually we will get there.’

5.2 Time

The influence of time on (the quality of) teaching practices as experienced by teachers, including classes per week, time per class, class preparation time

‘I do not have the time to do that, the number of hours is just not enough. I only have two hours a week for the senior years and in those two hours I have to work on the exam programme, so practice listening, speaking, writing skills. And practice the final exam, of course.’

5.3 Teacher collaboration

Teacher’s beliefs about collaboration with other (foreign) language teachers, within or outside his or her own school, including collaboration and alignment that could expose, to students, the link (e.g., similarities and differences) between the language subjects and support students’ language learning process

‘I work a lot together with other languages, not necessarily in terms of subject matter content, but we do exchange ideas. Writing an application letter is the same in like German, so we use the same formats.’