PRE-SERVICE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE AWARENESS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the conceptual perceptions of preservice language teachers regarding the concept of language awareness. For this purpose, preservice Turkish language teachers were asked to write the first four words that came to mind when they heard the term language awareness. The research adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to examine in depth the mental representations formed by the participants concerning language awareness. The findings revealed that the phenomena most frequently associated with the concept were culture, communication, grammar, and speaking. Further analyses showed that participants emphasized different aspects of the concept, highlighting its cultural, cognitive, and structural dimensions.

Keywords: Language awareness, culture, communication, pre-service language teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Literature Review

Language awareness is a complex and multifaceted linguistic concept that focuses on people's ability to understand, use, and process language. This concept refers to awareness of the structural features, meaning, and use of language, and it plays a significant role in language acquisition, language learning, and language processing.

Language awareness has been described as a "dynamic and intuitive" process (Tomlinson, 1994). This process occurs gradually and internally within the learner. Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995) define language awareness as a means of developing a healthy spirit of inquiry. As a form of consciousness-raising (Leow, 1997), language awareness centers on the effort to think about language itself.

Defined as conscious attention to the characteristics of language (Fairclough, 1992), language awareness has generated significant ideas aimed at shaping language education. Hawkins (1984) expressed his views on language awareness as follows: language awareness, in addition to developing students' ability to ask questions about language, encourages them to collect their own work from outside the classroom and helps them build a growing insight into how language functions to convey meaning. Following Hawkins' proposal of the language awareness approach, many researchers have offered different perspectives on the subject by recognizing students' linguistic backgrounds as learning resources.

Findings in the international literature on language awareness are highly significant for understanding the processes of language learning and acquisition. A number of studies have examined the effects of language awareness and its subtypes on the mother tongue. Elbro and Scarborough (2004) found that phonological awareness has a particularly strong effect on reading development. Developing children's language awareness can help them better understand letter–sound relationships, thereby improving their reading skills. Phonological awareness positively affects word recognition, reading speed, and word reading ability. Research also shows
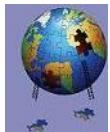
that morphological awareness plays an important role in the development of reading and writing skills (Kuo & Anderson, 2006). In addition, Semel and Rosner (2011) indicated that semantic awareness is important for improving word comprehension skills. Semantic awareness can enhance the ability to understand word meanings deeply and to establish relationships among word meanings. Syntactic awareness refers to the ability to understand the sentence structure of a language. It involves understanding the grammatical rules of a language, analyzing sentences, and recognizing the structural features of language (Bishop & Snowling, 2004).

In this study, it was aimed to determine the perceptions of pre-service Turkish language teachers regarding the concept of "language awareness," based on the Turkish they use as a field-specific skill. One of the focal points of international research on language has been awareness toward language itself. In Turkish language courses, it is aimed that students become autonomous in their language use, develop a positive attitude toward the language they speak, and activate their metacognitive skills to understand its features. For these outcomes to be achieved, the individual's intrinsic motivation and attention toward the language must be high — a condition that is only possible if the individual's language awareness is well developed. The teacher's mental perception of language awareness directly or indirectly shapes Turkish language lessons. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the elements that come to mind when teacher candidates think of the concept of language awareness and to analyze the areas in which these elements are concentrated.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research methods. According to Creswell (1998, p. 9), qualitative research is defined as a process of inquiry and interpretation that explores social life and issues related to human experiences through distinctive approaches. In qualitative research, data are read individually, coded, and categorized; research results are then presented based on these codes, categories, or themes (Merriam, 1998, p. 58). Among qualitative research designs, a phenomenological design was adopted in this study. Phenomenological research seeks to examine phenomena in depth, based on the philosophical assumption that individuals' thoughts are relative and their experiences are conditioned by context (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2018, p. 111).

The purpose of this study was to explore in depth the conceptualizations of language awareness among third-year preservice Turkish language teachers studying at Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir. To this end, participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Write the first word that comes to your mind when you hear the term language awareness and explain why.

2. Write the second word that the concept of language awareness evokes in your mind and explain why.

3. Write the third word that the concept of language awareness evokes in your mind and explain why.

4. If there are any additional words that come to mind in relation to language awareness, please include them along with your reasons.

To analyze the collected data, the thematic analysis technique was employed. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is widely applied in qualitative data collection and analysis processes. This method aims to uncover and interpret key themes and concepts emerging from interviews, focus group discussions, open-ended questionnaires, and observation notes.

The data obtained from participants were coded, and various themes were generated. The codes within these themes were presented using frequency statistics to illustrate the recurrence of specific ideas. This allowed for a clearer observation of both shared and differing perspectives among participants.

The sample of the study consisted of 25 third-year students enrolled in the Turkish Language Teaching Department at Dokuz Eylül University in İzmir. The point of data saturation was taken as the criterion

for determining the representativeness of the sample. Data collection was concluded when participants' responses began to converge and no new or distinct answers were emerging.

The data collection tool was a six-item interview form developed by the researcher. The first two questions focused on demographic information, specifically gender and year of study. The remaining four questions aimed to identify participants' conceptual associations with the notion of language awareness, as outlined above.

To ensure validity and reliability, inter-rater reliability was first examined. In addition to the researcher, an expert in qualitative research independently coded the data, and the level of agreement between coders was assessed. The findings indicated that the researcher and the expert produced highly similar codes, with an inter-rater agreement rate exceeding 80%, confirming the reliability of the coding process. To ensure external validity, detailed explanations regarding the research design, sample, data collection tool, and data analysis procedures were provided in the method section. Furthermore, all digital data records and analyses were securely stored to ensure confirmability and auditability.

FINDINGS

In the findings section of the study, participants' views were presented in relation to their gender, year of study, and perceptions of the concept of language awareness. Each student's responses were examined individually, and relevant views were supported with direct quotations. To ensure the confidentiality of participants' identities, codes such as P1, P2, P3, etc., were used instead of names, corresponding to the order of the interviews.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Gender

Gender	n	%
Female	14	56
Male	11	44
Total	25	100

All 25 students who participated in the study were in their third year of study. Among the participants, 56% were female and 44% were male.

Table 2. Participants' Primary Views on the Concept of Language Awareness

Themes	Codes	f
Cultural / Social Values (f=12)	Culture	3
	Communication	2
	Daily life	1
	Humanity	1
	Bilingualism	1
	Origin	1
	Understanding	1
	Library	1
	Preservation	1
Metalinguistic Awareness (f=10)	Grammar	2
	Linguistic competence	1
	Metalanguage	1
	Metacognition	1
	Style	1
	Word use	1
	Meaning	1
	Order	1
	Comprehensibility	1
Individual Skill / Trait (f=4)	Speaking	2
	Brain	1
	Self-confidence	1
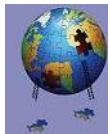
Among the 25 students who participated in the study, 12 associated the concept of language awareness with cultural and social values. Some of their statements are as follows:

"Understanding. Because people who possess awareness are also understanding (P11)."

"Comprehensibility. Justification: Communication between two individuals takes place through language, and being aware of the importance of acquiring a new language is essential for comprehensibility (P17)."

"Culture. The reason why this word first came to my mind is that I believe awareness of differences between languages is achieved through culture (P18)."

"Cultural awareness. Because every language has its own unique culture (P20)."

The association of language awareness with the concepts of culture and understanding indicates that language is perceived not merely as a means of communication but also as a social identity marker and a vehicle of cultural transmission. These interpretations highlight the significance of language use in reflecting societal norms, values, and identities, as well as its crucial role in shaping interpersonal relationships.

Ten participants associated language awareness with the concept of metalinguistic awareness. Some of their statements are as follows:

"The concept of metalinguistic awareness comes to mind because it is related to what lies beyond language (P7)."

"The word 'metacognitive' comes to mind because being aware of what one knows is the first thing I think of when I hear the term language awareness (P8)."

"Being aware of one's own utterances (P21)."

Metalinguistic awareness refers to the conscious recognition of grammatical structures, word choices, and layers of meaning—particularly in language learning processes. The fact that ten students in the study associated language awareness with metalinguistic awareness can be interpreted as an indication that these participants have developed a deliberate understanding of the function, structure, and usage rules of language. This finding is significant as it suggests that the students perceive language not only as a means of communication but also as a system that can be reflected upon and analyzed.

In addition, three students associated the concept of language awareness with individual skills and personal characteristics. One of these students, in particular, explained the concept within the framework of a personal mental schema and interpreted it based on their own perceptual system. The student's statement is as follows:

"Train — The first word that comes to my mind with language awareness is train, because language progresses in our mind and speech in an orderly way, like the sequential arrangement of train cars (P15)."

This metaphor shows that the student perceives language as a linear structure, in which words and thoughts are organized in a particular sequence. It also demonstrates the student's ability to conceptualize the flow of linguistic structures and explain it through a concrete metaphor.

This metaphor demonstrates that the student perceives the linear structure of language—particularly the sequential organization of words and thoughts. Moreover, it reveals the student's ability to observe the flow of linguistic structures and to articulate this understanding through a concrete metaphor. Such original and imaginative interpretations are highly valuable, as they indicate that language awareness is not confined to technical knowledge but is also shaped by individual creativity and cognitive insight.

Additionally, two students associated language awareness with the concepts of expression style and self-confidence. This perspective suggests that language awareness is perceived as being directly related to recognizing, developing, and effectively using one's own linguistic competence. According to these

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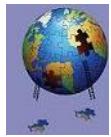
students, language awareness is more closely connected to personal awareness rather than social or structural dimensions. Their views are as follows:

"'Style.' Knowing what to use, where, and how. Speaking with an awareness of the possible interpretations one might create in another person's mind (P9)."

"Self-confidence, because knowing the meanings and origins of words helps me pronounce them more powerfully. Moreover, a rich vocabulary supports a freer way of speaking (P25)."

In conclusion, a significant portion of the participants associated language awareness with culture and social values, emphasizing the social function of language, while another group interpreted it within the context of metalinguistic awareness, highlighting its structural and cognitive dimensions. Three students connected the concept to individual skills and characteristics, focusing on personal language use. Furthermore, the unique "train" metaphor proposed by one student is noteworthy as an attempt to conceptualize the mental flow of language. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that language awareness is a multidimensional construct shaped not only by linguistic knowledge but also by social, cognitive, and individual factors.

Table 3. Secondary Views of Participants Regarding Language Awareness

Themes	Codes	f
Metalinguistic Awareness (f=12)	Meaning	3
	Grammar	2
	Vocabulary	2
	Speaking	2
	Language	1
	Word	1
	Dialect	1
Society and Cultural Change (f=13)	Consciousness	3
	Tree	2
	Degeneration	1
	Evolution	1
	Piggy bank	1
	Existence	1
	Ethnic origin	1
	Society	1
	Development	1
	Turkic states	1

Among the 25 participants in the study, 12 associated the concept of language awareness with metalinguistic awareness, while 13 associated it with society and cultural change. Within the theme of metalinguistic awareness, the most prominent ideas included mutual understanding, correct grammar usage, vocabulary, and speaking. Some of the participants' statements are as follows:

"The second word is 'language,' because it is the most striking concept (P2)."

"Consciousness. I thought of awareness as equivalent to consciousness (P5)."

"Vocabulary. Because I believe that using our language effectively, employing existing idioms and proverbs, and expanding our vocabulary—all of these reflect the level of our language awareness (P6)."

"'Understanding.' It means recognizing the importance of studies aimed at developing language skills (P9)."

"Consciousness. Because I think only conscious people can create awareness (P14)."

Under this theme, the most frequently mentioned words were "understanding," "consciousness," "correct grammar," "vocabulary," and "speaking." These responses reflect participants' perspectives on the structural dimension of language, the cognitive foundations of linguistic awareness, and the
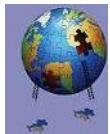
degree to which individuals use language consciously. The "awareness = consciousness" approach suggests that students conceptualize language awareness as a mental process, whereas references to "vocabulary" and "language skill development" indicate that they perceive it as a developable competence. This demonstrates that participants possess a certain level of awareness regarding the recognition, comprehension, and effective use of language, and that they are open to developing higher-order metalinguistic thinking skills in language education processes.

Some students also associated language awareness with social and cultural change, as reflected in the following statements:

"Evolution. Language awareness means being able to use one's language actively and meaningfully, and being aware of what one says and the consequences of speech (P10)."

"Society (P20)."

"Ethnic origin (…) (P18)."

"Degeneration comes to mind. I think we are gradually moving away from awareness by corrupting our language (P7)."

"Turkic states come to mind, because I think about the branches of the Turkish language (P25)."

These views indicate that participants evaluate language awareness not only in terms of grammatical rules, but also in connection with identity, culture, social structure, and historical processes. In this section, it is noteworthy that two participants associated the concept of language awareness with the metaphor of a tree. Their statements are as follows:

"Secondly, it evokes the image of a large tree. Because languages originate from a certain root language, and these languages have branches. I imagine a huge tree (P14)."

"Tree — it reminds me of a tree because language, too, is a structure that branches out from its roots (P15)."

By defining language as a "structure branching out from its roots," these students demonstrated a holistic perspective that encompasses both the historical development and the semantic diversity of language. This thematic approach can be interpreted as an indication that they perceive language not merely as a tool of communication, but as a systematic and living entity that evolves and grows over time.

Another participant made the following remark on the topic:

"Piggy bank — I think, like a piggy bank, the accumulation of knowledge and culture continues through language (P16)."

The student's piggy bank metaphor reflects an understanding of language awareness through the themes of accumulation and transmission. A piggy bank symbolizes how small units accumulate value over time; similarly, the student perceives language as a living entity nourished by cultural and individual knowledge accumulation. This interpretation reveals an awareness of the cumulative and enduring nature of language, encompassing continuity, transmission, and social memory.

The words chosen by students who associated language awareness with society and cultural change—such as consciousness, tree, degeneration, evolution, piggy bank, existence, ethnic origin, society, development, and Turkic states—demonstrate that they view language not merely as an individual skill, but as a historical, cultural, and social carrier. Metaphoric expressions like tree, piggy bank, and evolution highlight language as a structure that develops, accumulates, and remains rooted over time, while words like degeneration and ethnic origin indicate awareness of how language is affected by social transformations. Concepts such as society, Turkic states, and development further illustrate that participants perceive language as a symbol of national identity and cultural continuity.

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In this regard, students evaluated language awareness not solely as a grammatical or cognitive consciousness, but also as an integral part of cultural identity, social structure, and historical heritage— suggesting that they tend to interpret linguistic development in connection with societal transformations.

Table 4. Tertiary Views of Participants Regarding Language Awareness

Themes	Codes	f
Metalinguistic Awareness (*f*=4)	Grammar	1
	Meaning	1
	Affixes	1
	Usage	1
Individual and Existence (*f*=16)	Consciousness	4
	Speaking skill	2
	Sensitivity	2
	Cognitive skill	1
	Eternity	1
	Life	1
	Hearing	1
	Individual	1
	Heart	1
	Development	1
	Difference	1
Culture (*f*=4)	Culture	2
	History of language	1
	Mother tongue	1

In the participants' tertiary views on language awareness, it was observed that some provided multiple responses to a single question, while others did not express a third view. The most frequent associations were related to individual traits, skills, and existence. Within this theme, the concepts of consciousness, speaking skills, and sensitivity were among the most frequently repeated. Additionally, similar to previous responses, the themes of culture and metalinguistic awareness also emerged prominently.

"The third word is being aware, because it highlights an attitude of sensitivity and consciousness (P2)."

"Consciousness. I think individuals with language awareness use language more consciously (P3)."

"The word 'consciousness' comes to mind. As Turkish language teachers, we should raise our students' awareness about our language (P7)."

"Sensitivity also comes to mind, because awareness arises through sensitivity (P8)."

"It evokes consciousness. When we say awareness, I think of being conscious, particularly being conscious about language (P14)."

These statements reveal that language awareness is strongly associated with the notions of consciousness and sensitivity. In particular, the participants' emphasis on the teacher's role in raising awareness suggests that they relate this concept to a sense of professional responsibility. The idea of conscious language use encompasses not only correct and effective communication skills but also an awareness of language's role in identity, culture, and social context.

When analyzed thematically, the participants' views indicate that they conceptualize language awareness in terms of cognitive consciousness, linguistic responsibility, and pedagogical sensitivity. Overall, these perspectives underscore that language awareness is not merely a form of knowledge but also a value-based attitude.

One student who provided multiple answers expressed the following view:

"Culture — there may be differences in language across different regions. Grammar — it expresses the rules of language use. Speaking skills — they affect how we use language in speech (P1)."
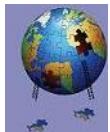
This statement highlights the multidimensional nature of language, emphasizing the geographical and social influences of culture on language, the normative aspect of grammar, and the functional importance of speaking skills in language use.

Table 5. Additional Views of Participants Regarding the Concept of Language Awareness

Themes	Codes	*f*
Metalinguistic Awareness (*f*=3)	Pronunciation	1
	Affixes	1
	Vocabulary	1
Forms of Linguistic Expression (*f*=4)	Dialect and accent	1
	Pronunciation	1
	Expression	1
	Articulation	1
Culture (*f*=4)	Hourglass	1
	Relationship	1
	Self	1
	Respect for other languages	1

In participants' additional views on language awareness, it was observed that some provided multiple responses to a single question, while others did not express any additional opinions. The most frequently mentioned themes were related to forms of linguistic expression and culture, followed by views concerning metalinguistic awareness. It was also found that the frequency of all response types was evenly distributed. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

"Articulation, dialect, accent, pronunciation, vocabulary… (P1)."

"'Selfhood.' Language and the way it is used are related to our sense of self. Being aware of language allows us to recognize the various identities embedded within culture (P9)."

"The more effectively we use the suffixes within a language, the more competent and language-aware individuals we become (P13)."

"Respecting other languages, learning languages (P23)."

"No, I don't have any (P5)."

The diversity of responses indicates that participants' levels of awareness and perspectives on language differ. The fact that some participants provided multiple answers suggests that they were able to think more deeply about the topic or that they grasped the multidimensional nature of language. On the other hand, the lack of additional responses from some participants may be attributed either to limited conceptual preparedness or to the restricted scope of the question.

The predominance of views relating language awareness to forms of expression and culture demonstrates that participants perceive language not merely as a tool for communication, but as a social and cultural construct. The subsequent emergence of views related to metalinguistic awareness (metalinguality) shows that some students possess the ability to reflect on language as an object of thought and to analyze linguistic phenomena consciously.

The finding that all categories appeared with equal frequency suggests that the study achieved a balanced level of representativeness—in other words, participants contributed to the notion of language awareness with comparable intensity but from diverse perspectives. This indicates that language awareness among the participants is multifaceted yet evenly distributed, developing across various social, cultural, and cognitive dimensions.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the participants' views on language awareness primarily centered around two key themes: metalinguistic awareness and cultural awareness. When reflecting on the

concept of language awareness, students most frequently associated it with structural aspects of language (phonological, morphological, semantic, syntactic) as well as with the cultural and communicative dimensions of language. However, a deeper analysis of their responses revealed that participants perceived language awareness as a multidimensional and comprehensive construct, which they evaluated from various perspectives.

In particular, among students who associated language awareness with cultural and social values, some emphasized that bilingualism enhances linguistic consciousness, while others highlighted that preserving linguistic roots strengthens awareness. These findings parallel Baker's (2011) concepts of linguistic awareness and flexibility in the context of bilingualism. Moreover, the participants' emphasis on the preservation of language and the revitalization of ancestral languages supports the views of Crystal (2000) and Nelde (1990), who underscore the role of language in ensuring cultural continuity.

From the perspective of metalinguistic awareness, participants' focus on the structural components of language underlines the significance of conscious understanding of linguistic elements in language teaching. This finding aligns with the views of James (1998) and Schmidt (1990), who regard metalinguistic awareness as a critical factor in language learning processes. Furthermore, instructional practices and activities designed to enhance language awareness—such as metaphorical representations of language as a tree structure—have been shown to deepen learners' linguistic understanding, as also supported in the literature (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Considering the limitations of the present study, it is recommended that future research focus on developing reliable and valid quantitative instruments for measuring language awareness, as well as conducting mixed-method studies involving larger and more diverse sample groups. Additionally, in-depth interviews with students at different grade levels could be employed to explore how perceptions and attitudes toward language awareness vary across educational stages. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental processes underlying language awareness.

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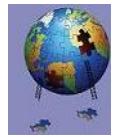
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