

Metalinguistic Knowledge, Language Awareness and Language Proficiency

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Studies investigating the influence exerted by metalinguistic knowledge on language proficiency are far from establishing a univocal link between the two dimensions. Instead, some scholars reached the conclusion that there is basically no reason to focus on language in itself as a way to increase students' linguistic performances. The purpose of this paper is to put forward a theoretical frame which on one hand accounts for these opinions, but on the other also suggests when and how metalinguistic ability can positively affect learners' linguistic output. First of all, the paper concentrates on the most important study to date on the topic, allowing the reader to get an idea of the importance of metalinguistic skills at a university level. Secondly, a conceptual analysis of the term "metalinguistic knowledge" is offered, and a redefinition of this term in the broader sense of "language awareness" is proposed. Adopting this broader perspective, the study explores the elements of proficiency that can be improved by an enhancement of metalinguistic skills, paying particular attention to the KAL (Knowledge about Language) movement and projects.

Keywords: metalinguistic knowledge, language awareness, language proficiency, knowledge about language

Introduction

The issue whether metalinguistic awareness brings any benefits in language learning and language use and how these benefits relate to performance is highly controversial. Even if James and Garrett (1992) may be right when they argue that "the study of language is patently self-justifying", and "language awareness needs no justification in terms of improvement in skill, just as biology does not have to prove that it has led to improved crop or stock production" (as they said during the Bangor Language Awareness Seminar), modern languages teachers obviously need and want to know exactly if and under which circumstances an explicit knowledge about language has an echo in language competence.

This paper arises precisely from the curiosity to figure out the extent to which teachers of first, second or foreign language should promote the development of metalinguistic skills at school or at university. In particular, the conclusions drawn by Alderson, Clapman, and Steel (1997), that is to say that there is basically no connection between knowledge about language and language proficiency, will be analyzed and brought into question.

The first part of this work is devoted to the summary of the main arguments presented by Alderson et al. (1997) and to the discussion of results obtained in their study. The description of a typical test measuring

metalinguistic skills provides an overview of what scholars concretely refer to as “metalinguistic knowledge”. In the second part, a conceptual clarification of the term “metalinguistic knowledge” is offered. In particular, the distinction is traced between an explicit, verbalized knowledge about language and a deeper, interiorized, but not necessarily expressible awareness of language (the so-called “epilinguistics”). Finally, the third section illustrates the debate between scholars who support the natural approach as the only method promoting competence in the second and foreign language, and scholars who stress the possibility to focus on form to achieve the same goal. In the light of some considerations on the need to differentiate the teaching methodology and to reconsider the concept of “proficiency” in a language, the study finally advocates a connection between language awareness and language proficiency.

Metalinguistic Knowledge, Language Aptitude and Language Proficiency

Starting point of Alderson et al. (1997) is the plain observation that first year university students show an increasing ignorance of language as a system and of the terms used to talk about it. In fact, recent trends in foreign language teaching have stressed the importance of the communicative ability rather than the acquisition of a formal knowledge of language. It is probably for this reason that teachers tend to fail to develop their students’ metalinguistic competence or to make them understand language in itself in favor of proficiency and fluency in the use of language. Nevertheless, lecturers at university seem to take for granted a certain familiarity of students with basic linguistic terminology and concepts. This, as Bloor (1986) pointed out, could represent a problem in the teaching of foreign languages at a university level.

In a way, a reason for the “spectacular absence on research” on this topic, as James and Garrett (1992) call it, could be traced back to the conceptual confusion which seems to surround the term “metalinguistic knowledge”. As a matter of fact, in dealing with these themes scholars have used this term in at least two senses: In the first sense, it stands for “a person sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life” (Donmall, 1985, p. 7); whereas in the second, more technical connotation, it refers to the ability to state linguistic and grammatical rules and the mastering of the specific terminology used to describe grammatical concepts and functions. On the other hand, other scholars point out that what people commonly refer to as “metalinguistic knowledge” could rather be a combination of “grammatical sensitivity” and “inductive language learning ability”, two variables which, together with “associative memory” and “language coding”, build the so-called “language aptitude”. These aspects are postulated by Skehan (1986) to be relevant not only for the task of foreign language learning, but also in the process of the mother tongue acquisition.

The aim of the study reported in Alderson et al. (1997) was precisely that of investigating the interconnectedness between language aptitude and language awareness, and to measure their influence on language proficiency. Funded by the ESRC (UK Economic and Social Research Council) and inspired to a study held at Lancaster University in 1992,¹ it lasted 15 months and involved first-year students of French in seven British universities; second- and fourth-year students at Lancaster and first-year students of Linguistics and English Language. A battery of tests including the Metalinguistic Assessment test, the Gap-filling test (Camus), the Grammar test (SUCE), the Language Proficiency test (C-Test), a reading comprehension, a listening test, a

¹ See Steel and Anderson (1994).

writing test, the Words in Sentence test (part 4 of MLAT), the Inductive Language Learning test (Swahili), and a Biodata cover sheet was administered to the 509 overall students in different combinations and in different times. In order to complete the tests students had to carry out a series of quite complex tasks, as, for example, identifying parts of speech in a sentence, recognizing mistakes, correcting them and stating the grammatical rule being broken (metalinguistic assessment test), comparing two sentences and finding out which words function in the same way (MLAT), translating from Swahili on the basis of some translated sentences already given, filling in the gaps in a text, multiple choice texts and so on. The majority of students, that is to say first-year students of French, took the test at the beginning of the academic year 1994/95 and then at the end of the first year; Lancaster's students at the start of their second year of French; fourth year students at the end of their final year. The purpose of the choice of distributing the test battery over space and time was that of ascertaining students' level of metalinguistic knowledge on a general scale and to measure its change during their stay at university.

The hypothesis that researchers formulated was that since a certain level of metalinguistic knowledge is needed to profitably attend university courses, students should display a consistent enhancement of proficiency in the foreign language as long as they developed language awareness. Interestingly enough, researchers' expectations were not met. Without going too deep into the figures resulting from the study, its main findings can be summed up as follows.

The general impression drawn from the Pilot Study in 1992, that is to say that students vary considerably in their metalinguistic knowledge, was confirmed. In fact, even if the great majority of students was able to identify simple grammatical structures like "noun" or "verb", some of them showed some difficulties when it came after other simple parts of speech like "pronoun", "auxiliary verb", or "preposition". Similarly, students generally had no difficulty in detecting and correcting errors in sentences but varied considerably in their ability to state the rule being transgressed. Remarkably, they felt they lacked the adequate metalanguage to report the rule properly. Consequently, the suspicions of some university lecturers, who asserted that undergraduates did not have a sufficient knowledge of metalanguage to be able to understand them in class, were confirmed.

The expectation that as long as students' mastery of metalanguage got better also their command of the language would have increased was not met. On the contrary, the interconnectedness between language awareness and language proficiency seemed to be rather elusive and weak. As a matter of fact, when the two factors were at the highest level, the correlation between the two dropped: Students who reached the highest language awareness were not the ones who exhibited the greatest improvement in language proficiency, nor were the best performers in the foreign language the ones who got the highest scores in the metalinguistic tests initially.

All things considered, the safest conclusion the study could reach was that there is no relationship between metalinguistic ability and language proficiency. Since metalinguistic ability and language proficiency appeared to be two distinct factors of linguistic ability, no evidence could be gathered from this study to justify the teaching of metalinguistic knowledge as a means to improve students' linguistic proficiency. The role played by aptitude was not clear, since it failed to be linked both with metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency. Inductive language learning ability test (Swahili) did not present any correlation neither with the tests investigating language awareness nor with the ones assessing language proficiency.

Finally, the authors of the paper draw attention on all the aspects worth of further research and analysis. It is suggested that a closer inspection into students' ability to state grammatical rules could provide teachers with a

more detailed overview of students' grammatical misconceptions and misuse of metalanguage. It is also argued that explicit metalinguistic knowledge could be relevant, and thus useful, in some cases (a specific grammatical rule) whereas in others not. For this reason light should be also shed on the doubt of whether metalinguistic knowledge can be of help in situations in which reflection is possible, for instance in reading and writing. Lastly, the authors of the paper lay emphasis on another field of research: The conditions under which an explicit knowledge of the language may somehow become implicit, thus increasing language proficiency. The desire to further develop this last point has given rise to the present work.

Metalinguistic Knowledge: A Definition

In step with the methodology adopted by analytical philosophers, before presenting a personal analysis of the point at issue, it could be helpful to briefly outline the several meanings with which the term "metalinguistic knowledge" has been used, together with the terms that have been used by scholars as its synonyms.

The term "metalinguistics" appeared between 1950 and 1960 to designate the whole field of research that has to do with "metalanguage", that is to say the language that is used when we refer to the language itself, based primarily on linguistic terminology (e.g., syntax, morpheme, subject and verb). This implies that in this particular kind of activities the signifiers of language become signified; in other words, the very "subject" of communication becomes its "object". This shift of function of the most basic tool of internal and external communication requires a consistent level of abstraction. Indeed, as Benveniste (1974) pointed out, metalinguistic ability refers primarily to "the possibility of raising ourselves above language, of abstracting ourselves from it, of contemplating it, whilst making use of it in our reasoning and observations" (as cited in Gombert, 1992, p. 2).

The possibility of metalinguistic reflection is, according to Gaetano Berruto (2002) one of the 15 peculiar characteristics of human verbal language:² It seems impossible to identify another communication code that allows the formulation of messages on itself. Also Roman Jakobson (1963) indicated the "metalinguistic" or "reflective" function as one of the seven functions of language, assuming this is the need fulfilled by language when it is used to focus on the code itself. What is more, the self-referential approach appears to be something deeply inherent in language, as the French linguist Antoine Culioli (1968) points out:

Language is an activity which itself supposes a perpetual epilinguistic³ activity (defined as "unconscious metalinguistic activity"), as well as a relationship between a model (*competence*, that is to say, the appropriation and acquired mastery of a system of rules operating on unites) and its realization (*performance*) which provides us with phonic or graphic records, or texts. (p. 108)

The breadth of definition and also the partial imprecision inherent in the expression "metalinguistic knowledge" can be grasped just by considering the fact that all the theories and positions developed by scholars on this subject diverge in at least three points.

In the first place, scholars' theories differ according to whether they interpret this particular way of dealing

² The others are: bipolarity, arbitrariness, double articulation, transposability, distancing and stimulus-freedom, cultural transmissibility, linearity, discretion, semantic omnipotence, multifunctionality, productivity, syntactical complexity and equivocalness.

³ For a definition of this term, see below.

with language in a declarative or in a procedural way. In the former interpretation, to have a metalinguistic knowledge means to consciously and explicitly master not only the phonemic, semantic, syntactic, morphemic, and pragmatic levels of a language but also to perfectly realize the extent to which language influences reality and its perception.

The latter interpretation of “metalinguistic knowledge” covers a broader scope of meaning, since it contemplates also the unconscious, implicit, tacit knowledge of the phenomenon of language which every native speaker of that language patently has. In other words, even a very simple and spontaneous, automatic manipulation of language as for example, stopping to look for a word, or a child’s adjustment of what he has just said could be regarded as a symptom of metalinguistic awareness. This would be the case, as Beverly Otto points out in *Language Development in early Childhood* (2005) of young children being able to answer questions about words or other linguistic concepts such as sounds or letters. Children’s wordplay in rhyming games or their spontaneous comments about language (“*My name starts with a T: Tommy*”) are, according to Otto, an evidence of their early metaphonetic knowledge as well.

It will appear needless to say at this point that the “procedural metalinguistic knowledge” does not necessarily imply a “declarative knowledge”: As it was previously mentioned, young children—but also non-schooled native speakers—are perfectly capable to shift their attention from the contents to the properties of language, but not therefore to state the grammar rules they follow. In the same way, and this is unfortunately a common phenomenon among students of a foreign language, the declarative metalinguistic knowledge does not automatically convert into procedural competence: Someone may be able to state a rule, but not succeed in applying it correctly when speaking or writing.

This distinction goes back to Krashen and Chomsky’s dichotomy between a rational, formal knowledge of the language system—“learning” in Krashen’s words, “cognising” in Chomsky’s ones—and an intuitive, tacit competence defined “acquisition” by the former and “knowing” by the latter. When transferred into “metalanguage”, the juxtaposition becomes blurred and the two phenomena may appear identical on the surface, as Gilliéron (1984) highlighted: “All awareness is necessarily ‘meta’ from the point of view of the observer” (p. 232, the author’s translation).

Nonetheless, according to J. E. Gombert (1992), the frequent lack of a clear terminological distinction is responsible for much fruitless argument. That is why he suggests to embrace under the label of “metalinguistic skill”, the spontaneous, unconscious episodes of language monitoring and to designate the intentional, reflective attitude towards language with the term “metalinguistic ability”. By the same token, he advocates the use of the concept of “epilinguistics” (which was first introduced, as stated above, by the French linguist Antoine Culioli) to refer to the situations in which the unconscious metalinguistic character is established, and to keep the term “metalinguistics” exclusively as far as an intentional, explicit reflection on language is concerned.

Secondly, the basic conceptual distinction traced so far seems to be at the core of another fundamental difference in the way in which specialists in different disciplines look at and assess metalinguistic activity, namely the different meanings psycholinguists and linguists give to the term “metalinguistics”. In the linguistic remit, metalinguistics covers everything that has to do with self-referential verbal production. Linguists are interested in the situations in which language refers to itself: In short, it is the mark of self-reference in the utterance which provides them with an object of study for their discipline. Psychologists, in contrast, go beyond

the mere utterance in search for behavioral elements (verbal and otherwise) which reveal that the subject is consciously monitoring the processes and the outputs of his speech. In other words, psychologists focus on the cognitive activity a speaker has when she/he takes distance from what he/she is saying and concentrates on how he/she is saying it, whereas linguists stick to his/her linguistic output. For example, the ability to tailor the speech to the audience is metalinguistic for the psycholinguist, but not for the linguist, if not accompanied by explicit utterances. Likewise, a child's remark on his own language would certainly fall into the domain of metalanguage for the linguist but not necessarily for the psychologist, if the cognitive activity is not to be established.

Closely linked with the second terminological distinction drawn so far is the third ambiguous point it should be important to clarify. As a matter of fact, some authors have wondered which criterion should be regarded as distinctive of "metalinguistic knowledge" in two children asserting both that "cat" and "mat" rhyme, but only one being able to explain *why*. Although they have still not given a completely satisfactory answer, they have agreed on one point: Verbalization of what is known plays an essential role in ascertaining consciousness, and not only because of the plain reason that you cannot talk about something which you do not know. In Henry Bergson's (1911) words, indeed:

Nothing is clear until we have put it into words, for words are the only means of translating impression to the intellect. Hence the immense help expression gives to vision, in clarifying it. The growth of the power of language is not merely a technical development; it implies a growth of vision. (as cited in James & Garrett, 1992, p. 15)

In line with Bergson, the Piagetian theory advocates that simply trying to verbalize a concept may allow the subject to access to a higher level of knowledge.

Hence, the necessity to discern between the terms "metalinguistic activity" and "metalinguistic ability/language awareness" emerges. The former, as mentioned earlier, is contemplated by the procedural approach and stands for the totality of activities that presuppose a reflection on language, according to the eight elements Hymes (1974) indicated as constituting the "communicative event" (settings, participants, ends, speech acts, psychological keys, instruments, norms, gender). The latter, which according to the declarative (note "declarative", from the Latin "*declarare*": to express clearly one's own thought) perspective is the only key factor of metalinguistics, is a much broader concept which ranges from being conscious of the peculiar characteristics of language as distinctive of the "articulate mammal", to being able to grasp patterns in different languages, to knowing the metalanguage, i.e., the common vocabulary to talk about language, to having a sound knowledge of structure of language, which turns into high levels of Expectancy Grammar and finally to being able to verbalize it. This is the viewpoint which has been adopted in the third chapter, in which the discussion will go so far as to try to answer to the still open question: "Does metalinguistic knowledge ever turn into language proficiency?"

Language Awareness and Language Proficiency

In accordance with the so-called "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis", Downing (1979) has likened language to a glass through which people look at the world. If it is true that in order to actually see the world one should focus on what there is beyond the glass, the moment comes in which he/she should take stock of his/her means of perception, first and foremost to relativize the object of that perception. Nonetheless, scholars cast doubts on the assumption that treating language as an object of thought could not only make people aware of their epistemic

tools, but also facilitate and improve their linguistic competence *per se*.

In the first place, Krashen (1981) asserted that explicit grammar knowledge not only does not turn into an improvement in language performance, but even interferes with language acquisition. According to Krashen, in fact, every kind of self-referential activity does not facilitate the process of developing language proficiency: For both children and adults (i.e., both in the acquisition process of the mother tongue and the second or foreign language), the only language material that sticks in mind and is stored is the one “acquired” unconsciously, i.e., when the attention is diverted from the form to the meaning. Therefore, the consciously learned system is not used to initiate sentences but only to “monitor”, that is to control what has been produced by the acquired system. In Krashen’s opinion, explicit knowledge never turns into implicit knowledge, on the contrary, when the “monitor device” is too strong, it can negatively affect production.

Similarly, Wilkinson (1971) defined the process of raising formal knowledge about grammar “nearly all completely without foundation, as has been demonstrated by massive research over seventy years” (p. 32). These theories had an enormous impact on language education curricula and personal choices of foreign language teachers, who increasingly adopted the so-called “communicative approach”, a way of dealing with language training which undoubtedly fulfils students basic linguistic needs but runs short in raising their awareness of the way in which the system works. This may translate in the long run into inaccuracy and imprecision in the foreign language, or even into difficulty in the passage from secondary school to university studies in the mother tongue.

This position has more and more being criticized on a theoretical ground. As a matter of fact, many other scholars stress the importance to focus on form, not only to “programme” the mind of pupils to facilitate their listening, reading and writing skills, but also in the firm belief that “the development of awareness in the pupil will have a positive effect on his competence” (Donmall, 1985, p. 38).

To begin with, Barry Mc Laughlin (1987) maintains that the two basic assumptions of Krashen, i.e., that children are superior to adults for their ability to learn a language more easily and better, and that speaking is a result of acquisition and emerges on its own after having being exposed to a sufficient amount of comprehensible input, are judged unproven and thus fully unreliable. Furthermore, he supports Gregg’s idea, according to which it is rather difficult to establish whether the concept of LAD (Language Acquisition Device) and thus the acquisition theory works always, in particular if it can be applied to an adult. In this regard, Chomsky (1975) states that the ability to use LAD declines with age and that adult second or foreign language learners must rely on other mental faculties. By the same token, Mc Laughlin contradicts the belief according to which learning can never become acquisition and provides the example of 12-13 year-old pupils who, after an intensive French program, performed the same than children who had studied French starting from kindergarten. According to Mc Laughlin, it is sensible to believe that what they consciously learned became the basis for unconscious and automatic processes.

Secondly, Mc Laughlin stresses the need to reconsider the breadth of the concept of “proficiency”. In fact Krashen, by arguing that production is based on what has been acquired through communication and that the only function of the monitor is to alter the linguistic output in order to increase accuracy, seems to consider proficiency only in terms of productive skills, completely ignoring the receptive ones. On the contrary, proficiency in a language covers a broad scope of skills which range from the quality of the oral and written production to the auditory and written reception, to the capacity to use language in order to do things with words. Mc Laughlin

finally argues that the monitor function does not interfere with oral production, conversely, the fact of knowing and applying the rules underlying language structure helps pupils to perform better, even if they are slowed down and even if this improvement may not show up immediately.

Another objection to Krashen's theory foreign language teachers may easily raise is that not all pupils seem to have a sufficient sensitivity to spot the grammar rule underlying a sentence and interiorize it. Some of them may keep on using a wrong structure even if they have heard it correct thousands of times. Actually, students' success with teachers who opt for a natural approach may differ according to their kind of intelligence and their cognitive and learning style. For instance, their ability to recognize patterns in language strongly depends on their being field dependent or independent: Only the field-independent individual is able to easily pinpoint a component part from a whole, whereas the field-dependent person experience a lot of difficulty in identifying the shape embedded.

Consequently, if the trigger element of learning is attention, the easiest way to make acquisition possible is to enhance pupils' ability to deduce rules about language from language data. This is precisely the main profit that metalinguistic analysis offers according to the LA (Language Awareness) movement,⁴ and the main reason why its exponents answer a resolute "yes" to the question "Will deepening pupils' awareness increase their competence?" The reason is easily explained.

Research in foreign language learning has shown that one of the most important factors in determining success in the reception of written and oral messages (something which inevitably affects competence) is the quickness in processing messages. This ability is completely dependent on the readiness with which patterns are recognized—and thus the meaning decoded—while the message is still retained in the Short Term Memory (STM). The more quickly the hearer is able to impose patterns on the incoming message, the more the STM capacity is increased and the better the learner handles information. Nonetheless, this is a skill that has to be learnt, as Olson (1973) points out: "The performance deficits we find in younger children's remembering are due to failure to organise, plan, monitor, and integrate their information processing" (p. 151). The same procedure seems to be at work for the processing of reading materials, on which the greater part of school instruction still relies. The most talented reader is the one who is able to identify the set of patterns which the words belong to and continually guesses the following item, in a steady dialogue between the so-called "Encyclopaedia", and the new information. For the above mentioned reasons LA programs, by enhancing what Oller has defined "Grammar of expectancy" (1973), are considered to provide a vital preparation for the difficult course of study of the secondary school, not only as far as the work in the L1 or FL (Foreign Language) is concerned, but also for the whole range of subjects present in the curriculum.

Nevertheless, LA is not in any sense to be meant as a return to the arid, decontextualized grammar: Metalanguage and explicit grammar are not presented to students as a set of prescriptive rules but rather as an intriguing mystery to unfold. Most of all, reflection upon grammar is always connected with a model of language

⁴ The KAL, also known as LA (Language Awareness) movement is a body of belief which has developed in Britain since the mid-1980s; initially applied in teaching of modern languages but latterly in English as a Foreign Language and linguistics as well. In those years the role of language in the curriculum had steadily grown concern, especially after the Bullock Report (1972) and other national enquiries were published, in which it was made clear that schools were still unable to provide pupils with the tools required to profit from the received education, unless they had already received them from the family.

in use,⁵ taking into account only the language work that arises out of people's personal expressive needs. They are encouraged to trust what they listen to (particular attention is devoted to learn how to listen in a real "education of the ear") and to find out for themselves the rules underlying natural and spontaneous use of language. As soon as they feel the need to give a name to a concept that they have already grasped, for instance a part of speech, they are asked to devise a personal "metalanguage", and only in a second step the common "metalanguage" of the scientific community is presented.

Finally, besides the ones which have already been illustrated—namely the mastery of a common vocabulary to discuss about language, making implicit language knowledge explicit and enhancing language and communication skills—LA programs set a lot of other ambitious goals that deserve to be mentioned: (1) helping pupils in the difficult transition from primary to secondary school (with the start of foreign language studies and the exposure to specialist concepts and vocabulary), (2) bridging the gap between the children who have not received the tools for verbal learning from their families (for example having been deprived of "adult time"), (3) challenging linguistic prejudice and parochialism by offering a chance to discuss language diversity and at the same time the mystery that unites them, (4) fostering better relations between ethnic groups, and (5) learning to listen as a prerequisite for foreign language studies and refining the receptive skills in general.

Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, it could be concluded that metalinguistic knowledge underpins linguistic competence when it is interpreted as LA, in other words, when it draws students' attention on the phenomenon of universal language, on its characteristics and its patterns, its functions and its effects, thus strengthening their Expectancy Grammar and their confidence in its use for pragmatic reasons. Exclusively in this sense is Metalinguistic Knowledge not to be understood as in contrast with Krashen's Acquisition Theory, but rather as its possible, perhaps unavoidable prerequisite: Only if the someone's ear has been trained to listen for certain features in language he/she will be able to acquire a language just being exposed to a comprehensible input. At the same time, only the tools to "handle" linguistic data that LA programs provide will allow the student to autonomously progress in his/her linguistic proficiency and consciousness for all the course of his/her life, as expected and promoted by the European Union in the Lifelong Learning Program.

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⁵ Language in Use is also the title of the Schools Council Programme developed by the team of Doughty, Pearce and Thornton under the chairmanship of Professor Halliday of University College London in 1971, whose aim is to "develop in pupils and students awareness of what language is and how it is used and, at the same time, to extend their competence in using it".

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