

Metalanguage as a Component of the Communicative Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author reviews research on the use of metalanguage in language education to suggest that metalanguage has productive uses in communicative language teaching (CLT). First, there is an exploration of definitions which begins by borrowing Berry's (2005) notion of metalanguage as an imprecise concept, indistinct from the target language. Then, the relevant aspects of SLA theory including metalinguistic knowledge, meaning-focus and focus on form, implicit and explicit knowledge, and languaging are explored to frame the potential utility of metalanguage. Finally, a summary of research on metalanguage is provided, followed by a discussion of conclusions. The findings indicate that metalanguage can be used productively in CLT if proper consideration is taken for students' varied metalinguistic backgrounds and target language proficiency. Furthermore, written tasks with a goal of passive metalinguistic knowledge seemed to be better suited for metalinguistic instruction. In addition to its use during class time, metalanguage may be considered a learning strategy which leads to increased learner autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

It is your first day on the job as a plumber. You know very little about the skills required for the profession, but you are enthusiastic to begin learning. After suiting up for your first job, your trainer calls you over to explain what they are doing. They tell you that the long round hollow cylinders with the liquid running through them need to be tightened. Then, they point to the red box full of strangely shaped metal objects and asks you to hand them one that looks like an opened crab's claw with a long handle. No, the smaller one. Not the smallest one, the second smallest. Yes that is it. They place the claw-like part around an octagonally-shaped disk which is penetrated by another, much smaller cylinder which coils at one end, as if wrapped by a thin metal thread. Using the claw tool, they twists the disk around this thread several times, as you begin your long and arduous journey towards plumbing fluency.

It is difficult to imagine teaching a trade such as plumbing without using the corresponding jargon. In most disciplines, language which describes the target of instruction is tacitly understood to be necessary. There are no chemistry classes which do not name the elements of the periodic table, or archery classes which avoid explicit mention of the bow or arrow. Language instruction, however, is unique in that the use of metalanguage to describe target language features is quite controversial. Opponents of metalanguage use in language instruction argue that it is an unnecessary burden on language learners that inhibits communication, making it incompatible with meaning-focused and communicative language

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teaching (CLT) approaches (Garret, 1986; Mohammed, 1996). Others counter that the human brain naturally tries to understand patterns, and that metalanguage is not only a useful tool to achieve this in language learning, but "axiomatic to our function" as language teachers (Benjamin et al., 2010 p. 20). These teachers encourage the use of metalanguage in language classrooms for raising metalinguistic awareness and labeling topics more precisely (Hu, 2011).

One unique feature of CLT is the overlap between the means and object of instruction. Unlike other disciplines in which learners are expected to have high levels of proficiency in the language of instruction, language learners' target language proficiencies are, by definition, limited and incomplete. This is both disadvantageous and advantageous to the goals of language instruction and second language acquisition (SLA) in general. One clear disadvantage is that language teachers must take great care to appropriately scaffold language and tasks in class so as to meet their students' needs. By doing so, it is possible for language learners to meaningfully practice the target language simply by participating in class. In other words, the overlap of the medium and object of instruction allows language learners to develop fluency in previously acquired language forms while learning completely new topics. When the new topic is a feature of the target language itself, language learners have the opportunity to discuss the target language *in* the target language.

Taking the perspective that metalanguage can be used effectively as a tool to promote second language acquisition, this paper aims to determine the specific place for metalanguage in a communicative classroom by first defining the term metalanguage, and then reviewing recent research in SLA related to metalanguage and the use of metalanguage in language instruction. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings and suggestions for application to practice.

DEFINING METALANGUAGE

Before addressing the disagreements regarding its usefulness in language learning, it is important to remember that metalanguage is an imprecise term. Simply put, metalanguage is any language used to talk about language. Broadly speaking, it may refer to basic grammar expressions such as *word*, *sentence*, *subject/predicate*, *noun* or *verb*, specialized linguistic terminology such as *phonotactics*, *x-bar structure* or *Gricean maxims*, and also non-technical words that describe general language use such as *mean*, *say* or *correct*. Widdowson (2003) argues that even dictionary definitions which explain the denotation of words are one category of metalanguage. Researchers disagree on whether to adopt a broad or narrow definition, making the boundaries of what exactly constitutes metalanguage vague.

Fortune (2005) identifies three distinct types of metalanguage in order to describe the kinds of metalinguistic interactions between students in a collaborative, form-focused task. In his study, *Metalanguage A* refers to technical terms such as *past*, *word*, *present* and *plural*, *Metalanguage B* to non-technical terms used for generalizations about language rules such as *mean*, *general*, *sense* and *specific*, and *Metalanguage C* to non-technical terms used in interactions about language such as *say*, *write*, *right* and *change*. Fortune's distinctions are useful in both narrowing the scope of metalanguage and classifying its different functions. Fortune's distinctions of metalanguage are adopted for use in this paper, though the differences between the categories are largely ignored as they have not been consistently regarded by the larger SLA research community.

In addition to the scope of its meaning, the form and use of the term *metalanguage* is varied across SLA research. Berry (2005) provides a summary of this variation in an effort to promote more consistency. He makes a distinction between the count noun *a metalanguage*

and the non-count noun *metalanguage*. The count noun, he says, is precise and distinct from the object, or target language. The non-count noun, however, is neither precise nor distinct from the target language. He argues the latter definition is most useful for applied linguistics because it recognizes the reality of the vague and redundant nature of metalanguage, while helping to explain the reflexive relationship between metalanguage and the object language. This reflexivity is what makes it possible for students and teachers to discuss the target language in the target language. In order to explore this communicative function of metalanguage, this paper will follow Berry's definition of metalanguage as a non-count noun.

To consider the value of metalanguage for language learning and instruction, it is necessary to examine some topics related closely to metalanguage to see where metalanguage fits in greater SLA research and theory. In particular, this paper describes the relationship of metalanguage and metalinguistic knowledge, the distinction between meaning and form-focus instructional approaches, the distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge and the concept of languaging.

METALANGUAGE AND SLA THEORY

Metalinguistic Knowledge

It will be useful for the purposes of this paper to distinguish between metalanguage and metalinguistic knowledge or awareness. While metalanguage refers to concrete terms used to describe language, metalinguistic knowledge denotes the general understanding of language itself, including its metalanguage. More broadly, metalinguistic knowledge may refer to an individual language learner's ability to reflect on language. This knowledge is a unique characteristic of human language (Berry, 2005). No other species is capable of reflecting on the way they communicate, yet all humans develop metalinguistic knowledge during mid-childhood (Ellis, 2004). Simard (2004) found that French speaking students of English as young as ten years old are capable of metalinguistic reflection.

Though metalinguistic knowledge often co-occurs with other factors that tend to predict language learning success such as high language aptitude or high motivation, the exact benefits of metalinguistic knowledge for language learners are disputed. While Alderson, Clapham and Steel (1997) found a weak correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency, more recently others (Elder & Manwaring, 2004; Golonka, 2006; Roehr, 2008) have found it to be one of the strongest predictors of learners who reach advanced L2 levels. Given these conflicting findings, it seems that knowledge about language alone is not sufficient to guarantee language learning success. Any effective use of metalanguage in class to increase learners' metalinguistic awareness must also utilize other techniques. Here, it is useful to consider the relationship of meaning-focused instruction and focus on form to metalanguage and metalinguistic knowledge.

Meaning-Focus and Focus on Form

Meaning-focus and focus on form represent two different approaches to language instruction. The former emphasizes content and meaning while the latter emphasizes morphosyntactic forms. These different approaches represent one of the more divisive topics among language teachers today.

Meaning-focused classrooms found popularity with instructional approaches such as the direct, or natural method and communicative language teaching. These teaching methods

emphasize meaningful interaction and natural communication in the target language over explicit grammatical instruction (Krashen, 1985). Focus on form, in contrast, prefers explicit attention to language form through, for example, instruction of grammar rules (whether inductive or deductive), error feedback and the use of metalanguage.

Though students have been found to consider such focus on form helpful, many teachers are reluctant to use it in class (Schulz, 1996). This may be due teachers' lack of explicit understanding of the target language's structure, or alternatively to the popularity of communicative language teaching which favors a meaning focused approach. Because of this trend in language instruction, focusing on form, especially with metalanguage, has become stigmatized in many teaching contexts. This is unfortunate as research has shown that some complex forms cannot be acquired with comprehensible input and opportunities for communication alone (White, 1987). In their extensive review of 49 studies on this topic, Norris and Ortega (2000) found that instruction containing some focus on L2 forms, whether the approach is deductive or inductive, is *more* effective than simple, meaning driven communication.

One useful guideline for how to balance focus on form and meaning-focused goals is Nation's (2007) four strands of language learning. He suggests that focus on form, or the language focus strand, should take up 25 percent of instruction, while meaning-focus should take up 50 percent, 25 percent input and 25 percent output. According to this model, the final 25 percent should be dedicated to the development of fluency. Nation advises teachers to be flexible in their given teaching context. For example, in an EFL context, greater attention should be dedicated to fluency as students have fewer opportunities to practice the target language outside of class.

Whatever model is adopted, it is crucial to re-evaluate the dichotomy of focus on form and meaning-focused instruction and accept that the two pedagogical approaches can complement each other. As early as 1991, Fotos and Ellis demonstrated that grammar tasks can be used for communication in an experiment with learners of English at Japanese universities. They concluded that, "it is possible to integrate the teaching of grammar with the provision of opportunities for communication involving an exchange of information" (p. 606). Other research indicates that meaning-focused activities help improve fluency, while focus on form improves accuracy (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2002). By combining these pursuits, teachers can help their students become more well-rounded language learners. Moreover, there is reason to believe that metalanguage as a component of focus on form instruction can help to further improve language learners' accuracy. Evidence for this comes from the frameworks of implicit and explicit knowledge, which are explored in the following section.

Implicit and Explicit Knowledge

The distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge is essential to evaluating metalanguage's place in language learning. Implicit, or tacit knowledge, is knowledge that is automatic and not easily verbalized. This describes for example, the knowledge young speakers have about their native language. Though they can speak it fluently, they have difficulty putting their knowledge of grammar into words. Likewise, such speakers make confident judgments on grammaticality, but are less likely to be able to provide reasons for these judgments. Such a conscious and declarative type of understanding defines explicit knowledge.

Ellis (2004) summarizes the research on L2 explicit knowledge in order to make the term clearer and offer guidelines for how to measure it. He argues that L2 implicit and explicit knowledge are dichotomous, and interact only at the level of performance. Implicit

knowledge is immediately accessible and relied on for simpler tasks, while explicit knowledge is accessible only through controlled processes and is generally used for more challenging tasks. The exact relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge is not yet known. Rather, it is unclear if at some point, explicit knowledge *becomes* implicit knowledge. It may be that explicit knowledge never becomes implicit, but rather it becomes so quickly accessible so that it resembles implicit knowledge. This is supported by Ellis' finding that, unlike implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge is learnable at any age, and grows on two planes, both in breadth (i.e. the accumulation of more facts about L2), and depth (i.e. the refinement of existing knowledge).

Embedded in this notion of broadening and deepening is that explicit knowledge can be imprecise or inaccurate. Consequently, metalanguage may be a tool to both expand and refine explicit knowledge. Indeed, tests of metalanguage have been used to measure L2 explicit knowledge in the past. Ellis finds that:

Although metalanguage is not an essential component of explicit knowledge, it would seem to be closely related. It is possible that an increase in the depth of explicit knowledge will occur hand in hand with the acquisition of more metalanguage, if only because access to linguistic labels may help sharpen understanding of linguistic constructs (240).

Thus, there is reason to believe that metalanguage encourages the growth of L2 explicit knowledge, while simultaneously improving precision and accuracy. This is relevant to SLA research since L2 explicit knowledge is believed to support overall language acquisition. Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) found that adult learners of Dutch with explicit knowledge of Dutch word-order rules made fewer errors in a speaking task than learners who lacked this explicit knowledge. In summary, these studies suggest that metalanguage facilitates L2 explicit knowledge which in turn facilitates language acquisition

Languaging

Of 20th century psychologist Lev Vygotsky's major contributions to psychology and the relationship between language and thought is the notion of language as a mediator of the mind (1987). He argued that language, both mental (inner speech) and spoken (social interaction), is a powerful tool that humans use to internalize and add sophistication or clarity to otherwise fuzzy concepts. He believed that this function of language to organize thought supports human learning and development.

More recently, applied linguist Merrill Swain has investigated the relationship of language and thought specifically in SLA contexts. She coined the term *languaging* as the "process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 89). In other words, language learners produce language, usually spoken, to verbalize concepts of the target language and internalize them through this process. There are two main categories of languaging, including concept-bound languaging such as paraphrasing or making inferences, and non-concept bound languaging such as self assessing or rereading (Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009). Languaging is relevant to the use of metalanguage in instruction as most languaging units can be expected to contain metalanguage. Indeed, without the necessary metalanguage it would be very difficult if not impossible to verbalize knowledge of the target language at all.

In a study of university French learners in Canada, Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki and Brooks found that learners exhibited a large variability of frequency and quality of language, and that more frequent and engaged languaging led to higher scores on post-tests and a deeper understanding of the target language concept, in this case grammatical voice (2009). They suggest that in order to maximize these positive effects, teachers should first

provide students with coherent knowledge about the use of the target language and appropriate tools to mediate these concepts such as explanatory texts and diagrams. Then, students need opportunities to engage in languaging and put their internalized knowledge to actual use, ideally through social interaction.

There are two more important features of languaging pertinent to the discussion of metalanguage. The first is how languaging allows learners to shape knowledge through private or internal speech to themselves. Knouzi, Swain, Lapkin and Brooks (2010) call this self-scaffolding, as distinct from expert scaffolding which describes scaffolding provided by the expert, or teacher. As self-scaffolding does not require a teacher, it helps learners sort out challenging input on their own. In other words, self-scaffolding makes learners more autonomous.

The second feature is written languaging. In addition to spoken and internal languaging, written languaging may be beneficial for language learners because it allows learners the benefits of languaging without constraints of oral communication, such as lack of fluency or willingness to communicate. Negueruela (2003) gave students a written verbalization task for homework which he found aided their internalization of the target language features. Though these written tasks lack the social aspect of spoken languaging, they allowed students to produce output at their own pace in a comfortable environment. Furthermore, teachers can expand on such written homework tasks through interactive pair or group work in class. These two features of autonomy promotion and written languaging will be revisited in the subsequent discussion of the utility of metalanguage in language instruction.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH ON THE UTILITY OF METALANGUAGE AND THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

With an understanding of some topics related to metalanguage, it is now possible to assess how best to use metalanguage in language instruction. It should first be noted, however, that there will likely be no single straightforward answer regarding the best time, place and method to use metalanguage in a communicative classroom. Teachers need to consider the research and following discussion in a manner which determines the best application to their given teaching context. This discussion will focus on the variable utility of metalanguage from three different perspectives, that of the learner, the task-type and design, and the language learning purpose or goal.

Metalanguage and the Language Learner

In addition to teaching context, research suggests that teachers should consider the use of metalanguage not only for a class as a whole, but within classes separately for each individual learner. Berry (2009) found great variation in the types and extent of metalinguistic knowledge among learners with different backgrounds. Polish students of English on average received more metalanguage than students from Hong Kong, who in turn learned more than students from Austria. However, there was also very high variation of knowledge of metalanguage within each of these groups. These findings suggest that when introducing metalanguage in class, it is necessary for teachers to use concrete measures in order to prepare learners who have less knowledge.

This complication may discourage some teachers from using metalanguage in class at all, but Fotos and Ellis (1991) found that metalanguage was one productive way to help structure and scaffold difficult tasks. For this study, they devised a task in which learners

used cards with examples of dative verbs to exchange information, negotiate rules and then report their findings to the class. Students were more successful at this communicative grammar task when it was scaffolded appropriately through task training such as the provision of the relevant metalanguage. This study suggests that when tasks are designed carefully, metalanguage is a helpful support that encourages communication among learners with variable metalinguistic knowledge.

In addition to a learner's background and level of task training, their overall target language proficiency must be another consideration for the teacher. Similar to Fotos and Ellis' communicative grammar task, Fortune (2005) designed a dictogloss task for English language learners of various L1 backgrounds and L2 proficiencies to complete in groups. He recorded the groups as they negotiated the meaning and rewrote scripts for listening passages, and then analyzed their language-related episodes for frequency and category of metalanguage use. He found that advanced learners were 50 percent more likely to use metalanguage than intermediate learners. The most common purpose of metalanguage use was to explain the meaning or provide a synonym or antonym for an item. He concluded that metalanguage was helpful to the students in sustaining their attention to form and in consolidating existing knowledge, or co-constructing knowledge of language.

Fortune's observation that advanced learners use metalanguage more frequently than intermediate learners might suggest that teachers should only introduce metalanguage to more proficient students or classes. However, there are two potential counterarguments to this notion. The first, based on Storch and Wigglesworth's (2003) study, suggests that the structured use of L1 can be helpful for grammar explanations. They found that by putting students with common L1 backgrounds into pairs, they often used L1 metalanguage effectively to discuss L2 grammar. Storch and Wigglesworth argue that this suggests that there is a place for structured use of L1 in class. Perhaps it can be one tool to scaffold communicative tasks involving metalanguage for beginning learners. By modeling these metalinguistic exchanges, teachers may be able to encourage more productive use of L2 metalanguage by intermediate learners as well.

The second finding against waiting until the advanced level to introduce metalanguage comes from Elder and Manwaring's (2004) study of Australian university beginner and intermediate students of Chinese. By administering a test of Chinese metalinguistic awareness, they discovered not only a positive correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and Chinese proficiency, but also that active command of metalanguage as based on the test takers' ability to actively produce grammar rules was not the best predictor of general Chinese performance. Error correction, involving passive metalinguistic knowledge, was found to be a better predictor of Chinese proficiency, suggesting that though it may be unreasonable to expect beginner language learners to actively produce metalanguage, they can make receptive use of it much earlier. This echoes Ellis' (2004) sentiments that receptive understanding of L2 metalanguage is a better measure of explicit knowledge than productive use. Perhaps the only people who can be realistically expected to provide grammar rules are the language teachers themselves. Instead of demanding concise and comprehensive descriptions of target language grammatical features, it might be more practical to ask students to internalize these rules.

To summarize, language teachers need to be aware of learners' variable metalinguistic awarenesses and use metalanguage as a tool to highlight the important grammatical concepts for those students with less metalinguistic knowledge. Furthermore, teachers should not avoid introducing metalanguage to less proficient learners, but rather find ways to scaffold it appropriately, which do not demand active production of grammar rules.

Metalanguage and Task-Type and Design

In addition to the individual learners' needs, teachers must consider what types of task are best suited to the use of metalanguage by teachers and students. Fortune's (2005) finding that metalanguage helped students attend to form in the communicative dictogloss task is consistent with Erlam (2003), which concludes that the use of metalanguage in class is more effective in deductive than inductive approaches. Erlam organized a study in three different French classes in New Zealand in which each class received a different type of instruction. The deductive instruction class received an explicit explanation of French direct object pronouns, the inductive instruction class learned from examples, and the control group class studied something completely different. Erlam found that students in the deductive instruction class performed best on the two post-tests. This group also had the highest variability of performance, echoing the findings in the previous section that utility of metalanguage is largely learner dependent.

Also of interest from Elder and Manwaring's (2004) study was a stronger correlation between knowledge of metalanguage and performance for reading and writing than for speaking and listening. This seems to suggest that the use of metalanguage is more useful in tasks dealing with written language. Furthermore, by asking students in an ESL course at an Australian university to reconstruct the grammatical features of a text containing only content words, Storch (2008) found that elaborate and sustained metalinguistic discussion in such written tasks better facilitates language learning. Perhaps written language might be a platform to encourage more engaging metalinguistic discussion.

In another study, Simard (2004) used diaries as a way to promote metalinguistic reflection and higher L2 proficiency among elementary school students of English in Quebec. She concluded that keeping a diary made students more sensitive to new input, and found a high correlation between high test scores and metalinguistic reflection as evident from the diaries. These findings are reminiscent of Negueruela's (2003) findings on the positive effects of written verbalization tasks discussed in the previous section on languaging. Additionally, Camhi and Ebsworth (2008) successfully employed metalanguage in academic process writing for ESL students at an American university. Over multiple drafts, students discussed their writing in English while using metalanguage, adding a conversational component to the task. Camhi found that these students who learned writing with this approach performed significantly better than students in a control group, and that they came out of the class feeling more autonomous since they could work at their own pace, specifically on issues they needed to address. In these ways, current research suggest that the use of metalanguage in instruction is better suited for deductive tasks than inductive, and written tasks rather than spoken.

Metalanguage and Language Learning Purpose

Many of the studies discussed above indicate that metalanguage can be used to positive effect in language instruction, but the specific target language domain it facilitates is not always clear. Camhi and Ebsworth's (2008) finding that metalanguage can make students more autonomous suggests that metalanguage's utility may not be limited to the domain of the classroom. Rather, it might be considered a metacognitive learning strategy which learners can employ on their own. This finding is consistent with the earlier discussion on languaging and self-scaffolding as a tool to help learners become more autonomous, and is further supported by the important role language awareness is given in many models of learner autonomy (Cotterall 2000; Kumaravadivelu 1994; Thanasoulas 2000). Kumaravadivelu (1994) in particular argues that increased language awareness can "speed up the rate of language learning, while [its] absence can contribute to fossilization" (p. 37).

Widdowson (2003) proposes further that metalanguage can be considered a tool to help students communicate in situations beyond the classroom. He borrows the term *valency* from chemistry, defining it in a language teaching context as "a measure of investment value ... [that] has to do with language which is useful for learning more language" (p. 139). Thus, metalanguage has high valency as it can support future language acquisition when learners seek and receive explanations about language features. If metalanguage can be accepted in this way as a tool to expand and add precision or accuracy to a learner's metalinguistic awareness, then perhaps language teachers will benefit from thinking of metalanguage as an investment in their students' long-term success.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To summarize the discussions in the previous section on the pedagogical implications of research on metalanguage, it was suggested that:

1) Students have different metalinguistic backgrounds, so when using metalanguage, teachers should be conscious of this and try to standardize its use for a given class.

2) Metalanguage is most readily useful for advanced learners, but its use can be scaffolded appropriately for intermediate and beginner learners.

3) Passive knowledge of metalanguage should be an important intermediate goal, before expecting learners to be able to use metalinguistic terminology actively.

4) The use of metalanguage in instruction may be best suited for reading and writing tasks. These tasks may of course include expansions which include oral communication.

5) In addition to its value in the classroom, metalanguage may be considered an effective learning strategy that contributes to a learner's autonomy.

Much research remains to be conducted on the pedagogical applications of metalanguage. In particular, it may be fruitful to examine the use of metalanguage pertaining to other linguistic domains besides grammar, such as the sound system, lexicon or pragmatics. Additionally, though research wholly supports the use of metalanguage for grammar-based writing tasks, the communicative exchanges containing metalanguage must be examined in much greater detail in order to make the most of their language learning benefits. Therefore, the field could benefit from more qualitative studies like Fortune's (2005) and Storch's (2008) which analyze the actual nature of metalanguage use between students. Though much regarding the use of metalanguage in language instruction is still uncertain, based on the current research summarized in this paper, it can at least be said that metalanguage is *not* incompatible with meaning-focused syllabi, and that there *is* a place for it in communicative language teaching.

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