Research Article

Revisiting the Role of Language Teachers' Metalinguistic Knowledge in Classroom

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ABSTRACT

One area that has not gotten much attention in the professional literature on teaching second languages is the function of teacher metalinguistic knowledge in the classroom. Because it has historically been associated with formal grammar teaching, metalinguistic knowledge has been disregarded or even abandoned as an essential part of pedagogical practice in many L2 classrooms. Nonetheless, new studies have shown how important it is to give form and meaning equal weight when teaching languages. This essay reviews studies on the value of teachers' metalinguistic knowledge and how it relates to learners' improvement of language comprehension and proficiency. It also takes into account a number of potential benefits of possessing and using metalinguistic knowledge in L2 teaching especially teaching grammar in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. It is concluded on the basis of this discussion that teachers' metalinguistic knowledge deserves a place in L2 classrooms. The study offers some implications for teachers and teacher educators, too.

Keywords: Teacher language awareness, Metalinguistic knowledge, Explicit knowledge, EFL teacher development

1. Introduction

Research on teachers' knowledge base has continually been crucial to the study of second language instruction and acquisition. Consequently, the contrast between explicit and implicit knowledge and their respective contributions to successful learning is a frequently addressed topic in this realm. In literature, the binary pairings of conscious/unconscious, procedural/declarative, and verbalizable/nonverbal are linked to this differentiation (Myhill, 2015). Roehr (2008) considers implicit knowledge to be unconscious and inexpressible. She, on the other hand, believes that explicit knowledge is actual or declarative knowledge that "is potentially available for the verbal report" and may be employed in oral narratives (Roehr, 2008, p. 179). It is important to highlight that students who get explicit, form-focused teaching, particularly as part of their second language acquisition, attain a greater degree of knowledge, despite ongoing discussions over the interface between implicit and explicit knowledge (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Doughty,1991; Ellis, 1994; 2002; 2003; Long, 1991). In this context, the term "metalinguistic knowledge" refers to explicit grammatical information that may be verbalized and brought into conscious awareness (Lines, Myhill, 2019). Numerous studies in the literature recognize the value of instructors' metalinguistic knowledge in facilitating student learning in the classroom (Andrews, 2001; Ellis, 2016; Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012; Sanchez, 2014; Simard, French, & Fortie, 2007). The definition of metalinguistic knowledge is associated with knowledge that is declarative and can be consciously expressed by grammatical terminology (Myhill, 2015). The teachers' metalinguistic knowledge refers specifically to "the content knowledge which encompasses their explicit understanding of morphology and syntax in grammar" (Myhill et al., 2013, p. 249). The present study, drawing upon previous literature, tries to shed more light on how EFL teachers' metalinguistic knowledge can help them in classroom.

## 2. Metalinguistic Knowledge: The Components

Metalinguistic knowledge (MLK hereafter) can be associated with pedagogical grammar which is focused on providing learners with specific descriptions in written or verbal-linguistic systematicity as a source of information about the second language. Consequently, exposure to pedagogical grammar through textbooks and rule-based or other targeted instruction may produce metalinguistic understanding (Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2005).

According to Andrews (2003, 2005), in order to properly support their students, experienced EFL teachers should have declarative and procedural metalinguistic awareness in addition to sufficient language proficiency. Declarative metalinguistic knowledge, according to Andrews (1999a), is the

knowledge that a teacher has and can formulate. On the other hand, procedural metalinguistic awareness describes knowledge in action, or how a teacher applies and draws on knowledge in the context of teaching and learning a language, as well as how well they are able to do so. Andrews (1999a) recommended using the term Metalinguistic Knowledge for what he calls the declarative dimension of metalinguistic awareness. He contends that in order to better inform their instruction and assist their pupils, teachers must possess an additional cognitive layer to their language expertise and understanding (Andrews, 1999b, p. 163).

Figure 1 below lists the components of MLK. The figure shows that explicit knowledge of grammar terms and rules is one of the two key components of instructors' MLK. Understanding the meanings underlying the term is another aspect of grammatical term knowledge. Ellis (2004) and Andrews (1999c; 2007) also claim that grammatical rules and terminology can be in receptive and productive mode.
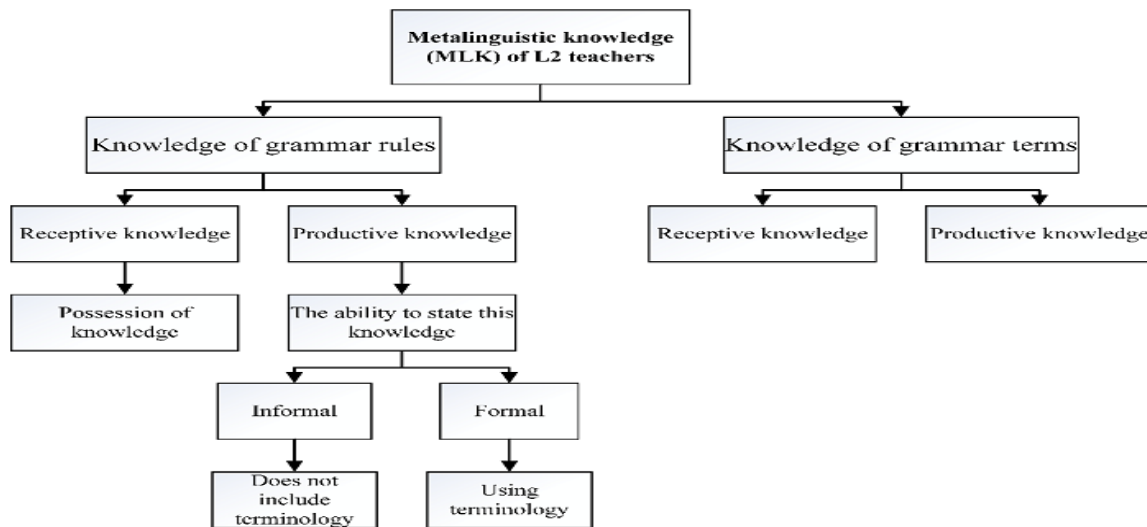
The literature is divided on the question of whether terminology is a required part of teachers' MLK. While Alderson et al. (1997) view terminology as a crucial element of MLK, Ellis (2004), Berry (2009), and Andrews (1997; 2007) contend that the verbal manifestation of a grammatical rule can occur with or without it. It appears that "whatever explicit knowledge consists of, it must include metalanguage, and this metalanguage must include terms for grammatical categories and functions" (Alderson et al., 1997, p. 97). Essentially, verbalizing what is known plays a vital role in verifying consciousness. Henry Bergson (1911) believed that because words are the only way to convey impressions to the mind, nothing is clear until it is put into words. Piaget's theory, in the same way as Bergson's theory, suggests that a person can gain a higher level of knowledge by trying to verbalize a concept.

Thus, L2 teachers must be able to form grammatical rules using terminology. Tsang (2011) suggests that teachers should use formal grammatical terms when explaining and responding to students, as this approach will allow students to become more familiar with these terms. According to Borg (1999), terminology helps students and teachers communicate with one another concerning language. Additionally, it can serve as a succinct means of referring to grammatical aspects (Halliwell, 1993) and as an efficient and accurate means of discussing certain functions (Cater, 1990, quoted in Berry, 1997). Likewise, Ellis (2004) contends that grammatical terminology may help people comprehend, talk about, and write about grammar.

3. Form-Focused Instruction and MLK

In Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) literature reviews, Long (1983) examined 11 studies that investigated whether learners who received formal instruction attained better levels of competence than those who did not, taking into account the naturalistic and trained L2 learners. The majority of research results supported formal education. According to the conclusion drawn by Long (1983), "there is considerable evidence to indicate that second language instruction does make a difference" (p. 374).

Studies by Savignon (1972) and Spada (1986) also showed the importance of instruction, showing that learners who have access to formal education and are exposed to English have the highest levels of proficiency achieved. As Spada (1986) observed, "attention to both form and meaning is best" for L2 learners (p. 133).

Regarding this, a meta-analysis of 49 of the most rigorously empirical studies was reported by Norris and Ortega (2001), which showed that L2 instruction was effective for a long time and that specifically targeted instruction had significant benefits. Additionally, explicit forms of instruction were found to be more effective than implicit forms.

Furthermore, as Ellis (2008) argues, form-focused education should be supported since many students, especially those above a certain age, need grammar to be included in the curriculum. It may be stated that from an educational standpoint a task- or theme-based curriculum would not be able to provide systematic coverage of language grammar the way a structural program can.

The relevance of form-focused instruction in second language acquisition and the theoretical and empirical basis for a balanced attention to form and meaning are well-established, as was previously noted. Informed by the interventionist perspectives, this study considers the function of form and form-focused instruction in teaching and learning second languages. According to the interventionist viewpoint, knowledge can be learned and expressed either explicitly or implicitly. They also hold that teacher-designed instructional interventions can be either explicitly or implicitly expressed, or even both, and that the

selection of instructional tasks and techniques is ultimately based on a variety of factors.

4. MLK and Teaching L2 Grammar

Shulman (1999), among others such as Edge (1988) and Andrews (2008), argued that L2 teachers' instruction should be based on in-depth subject-matter knowledge. Knowledge of grammar is one of the critical domains required by L2 teachers.

Johnston and Goettsch (2000) pose the following query in their paper: "Do L2 instructors need to be knowledgeable with metalanguage? They said that "awareness of grammatical structures is as much a part of a teacher's knowledge base as the ability to use them in practice" (p. 446). In the context of language learning, teachers' MLK is crucial in improving students' language understanding (McNamara, 1991) and boosting teachers' ability in lesson planning and student-centered language instruction (Myhill et al., 2013). According to McNamara (1991), in order to accomplish their teaching objectives—namely, improving students' language and comprehension skills—teachers need to possess strong subject knowledge. He asserts that:

> Teachers' subject-matter knowledge influences how they teach, and teachers who know more about a subject will be more exciting and adventurous in teaching and more effective. Teachers with limited knowledge of a subject may avoid teaching different or complex aspects and teach in a didactic manner, which avoids pupil participation and questioning and fails to draw upon children's experiences. (McNamara, 1991, p. 115)

Furthermore, Myhill (2000) argued that by reliable subject knowledge not only the number of misunderstandings students bring with them will decrease, but it will also help teachers guide and support students who misunderstand.

> Currently, many teachers do not themselves have sufficient grammatical knowledge to articulate distinctions between participles acting as nouns or adjectives or as verbs, nor to elaborate upon functional shift. As a consequence, they are unable to help learners precisely at the point where learning becomes difficult. Like spelling, grammar is easier to correct than teach, because correction relies on implicit knowledge, whilst teaching demands explicit knowledge. (Myhill, 2000, p.162)

Moreover, the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and grammatical accuracy of EFL students was investigated by Sanosi in 2022. A descriptive qualitative research design has been chosen by the researcher, in which two tests were carried out on undergraduates. The most significant finding in the study was that students' MLK and their grammatical accuracy had a significant positive correlation. These results are consistent with the belief that to develop their grammatical accuracy, students would benefit from explicit language instruction and a clear explanation of terms. Various justifications have been put out by academics in this regard, including the provision of more efficient language learning methods (Schleppegrell, 2013), learner autonomy (Ellis, 2016), and assistance for students' cognitive growth (Harun et al., 2017).

Teachers in many countries still instruct their students in explicit grammar (Borg, 2003a; 2003b). In their analysis of language teachers from eighteen countries, Borg and Burns (2008) discovered that teachers frequently integrated grammar and skill training. Grammar was therefore taught in context, enabling teachers to call students' attention to various grammatical elements connected to errors they had made or to a text pertinent to teaching skills (Svalberg, 2012). As Svalberg (2012) points out, the need for contextualization and the responsive nature of this method place high demands on teachers' grammatical awareness.

5. MLK and Teachers' Behavior and Practices in the Classroom

In recent years, several attempts have been made to describe how language awareness influences teacher behavior. Even though teacher language awareness (TLA) is a much broader term than metalinguistic knowledge employed in this study, as a part of TLA, they share some of the same benefits for language teachers. For instance, Wright and Bolitho (1993) identified several pedagogical tasks where the TLA might make a significant contribution in helping teachers prepare lesson plans, analyze, revise, or write learning material, and understand, interpret, and develop curricula for assessment purposes. As to Wright and Bolitho (1993.), the most common way that a lack of awareness manifests itself is in the classroom, where it may be seen in instances where a teacher fails to recognize and correct errors in a course book or gets caught off guard by a student's question about the language.

In addition, Thornbury (1997) lists additional potential consequences of MLK weaknesses including "a general failure to earn the confidence of the learners due to a lack of basic terminology and ability to present new language clearly and efficiently" (Thornbury, 1997, p. xii). Or the teacher's inability to anticipate learners' learning problems to plan lessons that are pitched at the right level. Andrews (2001) asserts that TLA is important because of its effect on learners' access to input. He compares the language awareness of

a teacher to a filter that might influence the input that a learner in an L2 classroom receives from each of the three main sources: the instructor, other students, and instructional materials.

Second language learning is dependent on inputs: the learner learns a target language, either consciously or unconsciously, from exposed sample languages to that language in different contexts such as class and immersion. Teachers can make these contributions with the specific purpose of promoting learning, such as presenting a new language item, or, less intentionally, through any communicative use the teacher makes of the language in class, such as for classroom management. Teachers can also "shape" input from other primary sources. For example, by using a textbook, a teacher can modify (even slightly) how the textbook is presented or how a grammar point is practiced or draw the learner's attention to the form and the meaning of a particular grammatical structure in a reading text. When faced with language produced by learners, either orally or in writing, teachers have many options for dealing with this input. However, teacher feedback often provides additional input for learning (for the whole class or individual learners) as the teacher modifies the initial student output.

Furthermore, language teachers also need MLK to respond to learners by providing feedback and explanations on identified errors. It is worth mentioning that some of the best research bodies have examined corrective feedback and provided accumulating evidence to support that explicit feedback, like a metalinguistic explanation, is more effective than an implicit type such as recasting (see Ellis, 2008, pp. 886-888, for a review of the studies). The results showed an advantage of explicit corrective feedback over implicit feedback. Evidence suggests that more detailed linguistic feedback works better (Rosa & Leow, 2004). Furthermore, the results of the study by Khatib and Vaezi (2017) indicated that EFL teachers and learners preferred direct corrective feedback including explicit correction and metalinguistic clues more than indirect corrective feedback including recast and repetition.

Teachers with well-developed MLK can assist students in building explicit knowledge by providing correct and pertinent information regarding language form (Andrews & McNeill, 2005). According to Schultz (2001), teachers frequently choose a form-focused approach as it's crucial to retain grammatical information. They may use MLK to aid students with their inquiries on grammatical terms or rules. According to Borg (1999), students expect to be able to get knowledge about the language they are learning from their teachers because they are experts in the field. It is expected that a student may ask about a rule, word, or illustration of that term from the book. This requires language teachers to have MLK and understand it thoroughly.

Additionally, according to Myhill et al. (2013), a lack of grammar expertise might make it difficult for instructors to deal with certain grammatical questions from students and prevent them from correctly

detecting language growth. Myhill et al. (2013) showed that grammatical explanation was vital for teachers with limited MLK. For instance, they discovered that semantic definitions—such as designating a noun as "naming" or something that can be touched and designating a verb as "doing"—tend to be used to describe word classes instead of functional ones. Students can be confused or misunderstood as a result of this. Thus, as argued by Edge (1988) and Andrews (2008), instructors' understanding of the language they teach and their capacity for analysis may greatly enhance their efficacy as teachers.

Beyond grammar classes, other domains also consider L2 teachers' MLK position in learners' achievement. According to Andrews (2005), a teacher who possesses an extensive understanding of grammatical structures will provide greater assistance in helping young writers improvement. Based on empirical research of a number of teachers from New Zealand, Gorden (2005) came to the conclusion that teachers with little understanding of grammar "would not be able to see language development in the writing and speaking of their pupils" (p. 61). According to Myhill et al. (2020), writers' ability to manage metatalk about metalinguistic choices in writing is crucial for fostering students' ability to think metalinguistically about their writing and act as independent decision-makers (p. 1). Closely related to this, Lines et al. (2019) presented findings from a three-year longitudinal study on metalinguistic understanding and its relation to the development of writing skills and the influence of teaching in two primary schools and two secondary schools in South West England. Qualitative data were collected from observation of the writing lessons in each class, written samples, and conversations with target students. The study offered vital new insight into the link between declarative and procedural knowledge, as well as evidence that suitable metalinguistic pedagogical interventions are critical to students' development of a metalinguistic understanding of writing. Furthermore, it was thought that teachers' linguistic knowledge was crucial to their students' comprehension of metalanguage. Essentially, they demonstrated to the learners how to articulate metalinguistic choices in writing more effectively, integrating grammatical explicitness with an explanation of rhetorical effect.

From another perspective, MLK also plays a vital role in forming teachers' professional capacity in lesson planning. For example, teachers must have MLK to assess a text's potential difficulty and appropriateness for the whole class. According to Andrews (1999b), MLK can even be crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of a teacher's meaning-focused approach, reacting to the task's implicit language requirements, and giving feedback on students' work. Thus, as several studies have claimed (Andrews, 1999b; Elder et al., 2007), MLK is necessary for language instructors to be able to implement context-appropriate teaching techniques in order to make sure that their students get constructive input and feedback on their learning. According to McNamara (1991), this knowledge is required for teaching, analyzing the effectiveness of instructional resources and learning aids like textbooks, and monitoring students' progress in their studies.

6. Conclusion

Andrews (2001) and Borg (1999) contend that a strong MLK seldom results in successful language teaching. They assert that, in addition to MLK, teachers must have the right pedagogical abilities in order to apply their knowledge to enhance learning. Thus, pedagogy and subject matter knowledge are integrated into language instruction (Borg, 2003a; Bartels, 2005). But as reviewed by the present study, MLK is still important in the context of language teaching. The discussion above indicates that L2 teachers need to be able to access comprehensive MLK combined with relevant teaching abilities in order to perform as effective language teachers and improve student learning. According to the review, there are compelling reasons to enhance teacher training, including an understanding of metalinguistic knowledge and how it would help teachers facilitate the second language development in the classroom. Teachers who do not have the necessary knowledge about language to help learners develop their language skills should not be in the classroom (Folse, 2016). Schoonmaker & Purmensky (2019) demonstrated that, after only a short period of grammar study, it is possible to increase teachers' knowledge of grammar. That's good news for any teacher training program that deals with MLK as part of their curriculum. However, in particular, in some educational systems the reorientation of instructional practices requires lengthy top-down procedures making direct negotiation between decision makers and practicing teachers difficult. This may result in reform deferral (Seifoori, 2024).

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