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Revisiting the role of metalanguage in L2 teaching and learning

GUANGWEI HU

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

One topic that is sidelined in the professional literature on second language (L2) teaching and learning is the use of metalanguage in the classroom. In the past three decades, explicit and formal instruction in L2 grammar has fallen from its centrality in traditional pedagogical approaches and been relegated to a peripheral position in many classrooms, due to the joint influences of some popular theoretical claims, findings from early empirical studies about the disassociation between learners' explicit knowledge of L2 target structures and their ability to use these structures, and communicative language teaching, which, in its application, sometimes sets great store by the development of communicative competence and fluency rather than grammatical competence. Because of its time-honored association with formal grammar instruction, metalanguage has been downplayed or even rejected as a legitimate component of pedagogical practices in many L2 classrooms. This paper discusses recent empirical research on the relationships between L2 proficiency, metalinguistic awareness, and metalinguistic knowledge. It also considers several potential advantages that understanding and using metalanguage offer to L2 teaching and learning. Based on the discussion, it argues that metalanguage deserves a place in L2 classrooms.

Introduction

The use of metalanguage – namely, technical or semi-technical terminology employed to analyse or describe language (Crystal, 1997; James & Garrett, 1992) – is a pedagogical topic that is rarely discussed today in the professional literature on L2 teaching and learning (Borg, 1999). This general lack of attention has resulted, in large measure, from the unfortunate, entrenched linkage of metalanguage with explicit and formal instruction in L2 grammar usage (Berry, 1997; Eisenstein, 1987; Francis, 1994). Over the decades, instruction in L2 grammar has fallen from its centrality in traditional pedagogical approaches (e.g. the Grammar-Translation Method) and been relegated to a less important or insignificant position in many classrooms (Elder & Manwaring, 2004). Several sources of influence have contributed to this sidelining of formal grammar instruction.

One major source of influence was the widely publicised position championed by some early second language theories (see Krashen, 1981, 1985; Paradis, 1994; Zobl, 1992) that explicit knowledge learned as a result of formal grammar instruction would not contribute to language acquisition or underlie spontaneous language use. Such a position provided a theoretical basis for the rejection of explicit and formal teaching of L2 grammar (Carter, 1995). A second important source of influence consisted in some empirical studies (e.g. Alderson, Clapham, & Steel, 1997; Grigg, 1986; Seliger, 1979; Steel & Alderson, 1994) suggesting that L2 learners' metalinguistic knowledge was not related to their L2 proficiency or actual use of the target language. These studies provided some empirical evidence that lent support to a questioning of the usefulness of explicit, formal grammar instruction. A third major source of influence was the rise and spread of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Hu, 2002a; Savignon, 2005). While there are different versions of CLT, they all set great store on the development of communicative competence (i.e. the ability to use the target language to engage in meaningful and effective communication) rather than just grammatical competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Although not all CLT practitioners (especially those adopting a weak version of CLT) are opposed to explicit and systematic teaching of L2 grammar in lessons (see Batstone, 1994a, 1994b; Scheffler & Cinciała, in press), many CLT-oriented classrooms (in particular those implementing a strong version of CLT) 'downplay the importance of explicit grammar instruction' (Elder & Manwaring, 2004, p. 145; Carter, 2003). Thus, the CLT movement has provided a pedagogical impetus that has contributed to a growing distrust in and an increasing marginalisation of formal grammar instruction in many L2 classrooms.

Because of its long association with explicit and formal grammar instruction, metalanguage in particular has also been marginalised or even rejected as a legitimate component of pedagogical practices in many L2 classrooms (Berry, 2009). Alderson (1997), for example, questions 'the assumption that teachers need to have metalanguage' (p.2) and declares 'I have long suspected that this is why teachers use metalanguage in class, to emphasise their position of knowledge and authority, to reinforce their power' (p.16). Garrett (1986) claims that the use of metalanguage constitutes a major problem with formal grammar instruction because 'it cannot of itself invoke understanding of the processing which leads to the production of a structure' (p.141). In a similar vein, Mohammed (1996) asserts that grammar instruction based on linguistic terms and concepts can hardly achieve the goal of adding to or modifying the rules discovered by learners themselves 'through the natural process of hypotheses formation and testing' because 'such terms and concepts constitute an additional learning burden and remain as a separate body of knowledge that has nothing to do with the way people actually process language' (p.283). 'Another problem in using

[linguistic] terms', Mohammed claims, 'is that the learner may focus on these terms and learn them by heart either because he thinks that these terms are what the teacher or textbook writer wants him to know or because he believes that learning a language is a matter of learning such terms' (p. 287).

Metalanguage, metalinguistic knowledge, and L2 Proficiency

Criticisms of the use of metalanguage in the classroom, such as those mentioned above, are misguided because they fail to recognise the part that metalanguage can play in facilitating the development of metalinguistic knowledge, namely analysed, often verbalisable, knowledge about the L2 (Hu, 2002b). In addition, in contrast to the early empirical studies cited above, several recent studies have found substantial positive correlations between knowledge of metalanguage and L2 proficiency. In a study involving 372 first-year undergraduate students in Hong Kong, Berry (1997) found that the participants differed widely in their knowledge of 50 items of metalanguage and that this knowledge was significantly correlated with their A-level grades for English, suggesting 'a connection between knowledge of [linguistic] terminology and proficiency in English' (p.140) as measured by that instrument. The strong correlation between metalinguistic knowledge and L2 proficiency was replicated in another study by Berry (2009) which involved first-year English majors just starting their university study in Poland, Austria, and Hong Kong. For the Hong Kong sub-sample (i.e. the only group for whom English proficiency scores were available), students who scored higher in their A-level English examination also scored significantly higher on the test of metalinguistic knowledge. Similar results were also obtained by Elder and Manwaring (2004) in their study of the relationship between L2 grammatical knowledge and assessment results in a sample of undergraduate students of Chinese at an Australian university. Consistently strong positive correlations were found between the second-year students' knowledge of grammatical terms and their semester achievement scores for speaking, listening, reading and writing in Chinese

It is true that the number of empirical studies reporting such positive relationships is still quite small. However, there are a reasonably large number of empirical studies that have found strong correlations between learners' metalinguistic knowledge of various L2 structures and their L2 proficiency. In the Elder and Manwaring study, robust and strong correlations were found between various measures of metalinguistic knowledge of Chinese and end-of-semester Chinese achievement scores. Similarly, Han and Ellis (1998) obtained substantial correlations between 48 adult English-L2 learners' scores on a measure of metalinguistic knowledge and their scores for two international English proficiency tests, TOEFL and Secondary Level English Proficiency Test. In a study involving university, advanced-level, French L2 learners, Renou (2001) also found consistently significant correlations between metalanguage

awareness and L2 proficiency in a sub-sample of learners coming from a 'grammar approach to learning French as a second or foreign language' (p.253). Notably, such relationships were missing for the sub-sample coming from a communicative approach to learning the target language. Even stronger correlations between various measures of metalinguistic knowledge and L2 proficiency tests were obtained in Ellis (2006) and Roehr (2007). Such empirical findings suggest that knowledge of metalanguage may have an indirect influence on, in the words of Garrett, 'the processing which leads to the production of a structure' through its relationship with metalinguistic knowledge. Indeed, several recent studies (Elder & Manwaring, 2004; Ellis, 2005; Hu, 1999) have found strong and positive correlations between L2 learners' metalinguistic knowledge and their receptive or productive knowledge of metalanguage. For example, both Hu (1999) and Elder and Manwaring (2004) obtained correlation coefficients in the high range of .70 - .72. Such findings support Ellis's (2004) observation that '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' (p.240).

To the extent that explicit discussion of and deliberate reflection on linguistic patterns and properties are helpful for developing an essential knowledge of the underlying regularities and relationships in the target linguistic system (Renou, 2001; Swain, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Storch, 2008), a judicious use of metalanguage can get the job done in a more efficient manner, because linguistic terms are essentially succinct ways of categorising patterns and relationships found in a language. To understand and learn these terms can be a useful step to understanding and learning the patterns and relationships that they label. As pointed out by Ellis (2004), metalanguage 'may assist learners in developing explicit knowledge that has greater precision and accuracy' (p. 261). A case can be made that a judicious use of metalanguage can benefit L2 learners who are cognitively mature and developmentally ready.

Potential advantages of using metalanguage

Metalanguage offers several advantages that can be exploited in the L2 classroom (for arguments in favor of metalanguage see Berry, 2005; Borg, 1999). The five most important ones will be discussed briefly below. To begin with, as the findings from the research reviewed in the preceding section suggest, knowledge and use of metalanguage have the potential to facilitate the development of an L2 learner's metalinguistic awareness – that is, 'an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language' (Carter, 2003, p.64); which can in turn enhance language development (Berry, 2005; Swain, 2005). By its very nature, metalanguage entails a reflexive focus on language (Berry, 2005). Reflecting upon language is an important means whereby language learners develop their understandings of how

forms and functions are mapped in the target language (Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Storch, 2008) and how language ‘interacts with culture and ideology’ (Carter, 1995, p.1). Furthermore, as argued by Ellis (2004), access to metalanguage can sharpen a learner’s understanding of the structure of the target language and lead to verbalisable, analysed knowledge, which according to Bialystok (1990) and Schmidt (1990) constitutes the highest level of consciousness of language.

Second, in societies where analytical study and metalanguage feature strongly in L1 literacy instruction, the use of metalanguage in the L2 classroom is a useful way to tap the wealth of metalinguistic awareness that learners have developed in the process of acquiring L1 literacy. In mainland China for example, a typical Chinese child is brought into formal contact with metalanguage through mother-tongue instruction at primary school. By the time the child reaches secondary school, an essential knowledge of metalanguage is already in place. Consequently, the secondary school teacher of English is in a good position to exploit the child’s metalinguistic knowledge to assist him or her in making sense of the L2 system. Basic linguistic terms (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, subject, and object) which label concepts and relationships common to Chinese and English can be used to help the child see how strings of sounds or words are organised and patterned in the L2. This point is clearly borne out by Elder and Manwaring’s (2004) study, which found that on an L2 metalanguage assessment task learners of Chinese performed best on grammatical features which also existed in their L1.

A third advantage of using metalanguage in grammar instruction can be appreciated only in view of the disadvantages and difficulties that arise in classrooms where teachers and learners refrain from using such terms. An example suffices to illustrate this point. Even in a CLT-oriented classroom, it is sometimes desirable to have an explicit discussion of the structural and functional features of complex structures (Carter, 1995; Rutherford, 1987). Such a discussion can be used either to raise learners’ consciousness about the target structures or to provide an opportunity for them to confirm or modify the rules they have internalised as a result of their own hypothesis formation and testing. However, it is difficult to see how an explicit discussion of complex structures, such as unreal conditionals and relative clauses, can be conducted without recourse to metalanguage. As Ellis (2006) notes, unreal conditionals ‘cannot be easily explained without reference to ... terms like ‘main clause,’ ‘subordinate clause,’ ‘past perfect,’ ‘modal verb,’ ‘past participle’” (p.457). That is, a concise and economic vocabulary about language (i.e. metalanguage) is often needed to talk about language explicitly or, in the words of Crystal (1985, p.22), ‘to take the pieces of language apart and put them back together again’.

Still another potential advantage of using metalanguage in teaching grammar concerns

the explanatory precision with which linguistic generalisation can be made and the efficient delimitation of the contexts to which the generalisation applies. Metalanguage that is appropriately used can preempt both under- and over-generalisation of the rules in question. Take, for example, the use of the simple present in temporal and conditional clauses for future reference. If a teacher wishes to draw the learners' attention to this particular use of the simple present but refrains from using any metalanguage, he or she will have to provide them, in one way or another, with a whole range of exemplars covering clauses introduced by subordinators such as *after*, *as*, *before*, *once*, *till*, *until*, *when(ever)*, *as soon as*, *if*, *unless*, *as long as*, etc. to prevent potential under-generalisation of the regularity. Even if the teacher succeeds in making the learners know that the simple present can be used in these clauses, there is no easy way for him or her to preempt over-generalisation. It is probable that some learners may be induced to believe that the use can be generalised to other types of adverbial clause. That is, there is always a danger that a wrong generalisation is inferred from a set of examples which illustrate where a rule applies but not where it does not apply. These problems can be greatly alleviated by appealing to linguistic terms such as *temporal clause* and *conditional clause*, provided that the learners know what these terms refer to.

Finally, metalanguage can be used profitably by teachers to help their learners link up newly encountered structures with knowledge of the target system that has already been acquired. In other words, metalanguage and concepts of L2 structural properties already learned can be exploited as points of reference or anchoring sites for the assimilation of new knowledge. This is most obvious when teachers compare and/or contrast new grammatical features (e.g. *given*, *assuming*, and *presuming*) with previously learned features (e.g. *if* and *unless*), and make clear the connections between them through linguistic terms (e.g. *subordinating conjunctions* and *conditional clauses*) that learners have learned and can understand. One may argue that some ingenuity can enable a teacher to get the job done without reference to metalanguage. Such ingenuity surely could be enlisted for more worthwhile pedagogical practices in the L2 classroom than merely to circumvent the use of metalanguage.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above points to a need to reconsider the role of metalanguage in L2 teaching and learning in the light of current research on the inter-relationships between metalinguistic knowledge, metalinguistic awareness, and L2 proficiency. The empirically identified positive correlations among the three, as well as the many potential advantages that use of metalanguage can offer, lead to the conclusion that metalanguage deserves a place in L2 teaching. A case can be made that, unless it is

taught purely for its own sake, metalanguage can be a valuable means of facilitating L2 learning rather than 'an additional learning burden' that 'remain[s] a separate body of knowledge' (Mohammed, 1996, p.283). This reappraisal of the role of metalanguage, however, does not resolve all pedagogical issues concerning the use of metalanguage. While a return to the boring and sterile pedagogical practices of the traditional approaches is out of the question, many issues (e.g. when and how to use metalanguage) remain to be explored. In particular, there is a need for empirical research, along the direction taken by such studies as Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2002) and Storch (2008), that seeks to explore how metalinguistic awareness and metalanguage can be most fruitfully integrated into a meaning-focused, communication-oriented L2 pedagogy.

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Guangwei Hu is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, where he teaches graduate courses in language assessment, psycholinguistics, and research methodology in applied linguistics. He has published extensively on language education, language policy, metalinguistic knowledge, and teaching of L2 writing.

guangwei.hu@nie.edu.sg