

# **Primary Language Education and Applied Linguistics: Exploring Primary School Pupils Metalinguistic Awareness**

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This paper presents the results of long duration ethnographic research work with P6 and P7 pupils in a Scottish school. The research aimed to explore the manifestations of metalinguistic awareness in primary school pupils who were learning French under the auspices of what was then the recently promulgated Scottish language policy, the “1+2 Language Approach” (Scottish Government, 2012). In this paper, some description of the nature of metalinguistic awareness is offered, the aims and objectives of the study and its research methodology and methods, are described, and, finally, its findings, and some recommendations, are presented.

## **What is metalinguistic awareness?**

According to Jessner (2018:257), ‘metalinguistic awareness has been identified as one or even the key factor of multilingual learning’. Metalinguistic awareness (MA) is the ability of language learners to base their knowledge of a second, or further additional, language on their prior language knowledge, and on learning experience gained from their contact with more or less sophisticated language learning input (Herdina and Jessner, 2002). Gombert (1990) shows that pupils from about the age of 7 and onwards demonstrate an ability to judge grammaticality, and explain their judgements, in their L1. According to Gombert (ibid), the ability to reflect about language seems to be a natural process, complete around the age of 11 or 12 and associated with the development of literacy.

## **Aims and objectives of the study**

Little research had been done prior to this project to explore the metalinguistic awareness of primary school pupils themselves and to examine how they approach and experience the development of their metalinguistic awareness (Tellier and Roehr-Brackin, 2013 and 2017; Fortier and Simard, 2008; Bouffard and Sarkar, 2008). In the majority of the studies, quantitative methods are employed. Simard and Gutiérrez (2018) make a call for more qualitative studies to explore metalinguistic awareness especially those which could also be constituted as complements to quantitative studies.

This study focused on insights into the following phenomena amongst primary school pupils: manifestations or indications of metalinguistic awareness amongst pupils towards the end of their primary school experience and pupil perceptions of language analysis.

These phenomena were explored, addressing the following research questions:

1. In what way do P6-7 pupils manifest metalinguistic awareness (MA)?
2. What are pupil perceptions of language analysis?

53 participants who were monolingual primary school pupils (P6 and P7 in three classes) and who were learning French under the Scottish language policy, the “1+2 Language Approach” (Scottish Government, 2012) formed the pupil cohort of respondents in this study.

### **Research methodology and methods**

An ethnographic approach with qualitative methods was followed. Pupils had to fill in diaries after each French input from October to May of the academic year, and they each completed linguistic questionnaires about MA before and after the period with diaries. After the completion of diaries, some pupils also participated in focus group interviews.

For every entry in the diaries, pupils had to answer the same two questions: ‘What have you learnt in the French lesson today?’ and ‘Are there differences or similarities between your own language and the French you learned today?’.

The two linguistic questionnaires and the entries in the diaries were qualitatively analysed and reflections were categorized into linguistic categories. The code categories were not pre-established; categories were, rather, data dependent. However, some elements of analysis suggested by the data were found to dovetail with previous research.

Focus group interviews were also analysed qualitatively using a similar thematic analysis. Code categories, here again, followed themes from the rest of data ie both diaries and linguistic questionnaires.

### **Findings**

The research indicated that pupils consciously expressed detailed reflections on language analysis, and/or their own learning strategies. An ability to compare French with English, which clearly demonstrated multilingual behaviour, was present as a feature of most responses.

Findings from the linguistic questionnaires indicated that pupils were able to identify gender and singular and plural forms with nouns and adjectives, and reflect on similar linguistic traits, without using grammatical jargon. The learning strategies mentioned were cognate words, visual aids (pictures) and prior knowledge of French. Pupils did not deal well with personal pronouns and verbs even in the present tense. Common verbs such as ‘être’ and ‘avoir’ seemed to create confusion.

In their diaries, pupils showed metalinguistic reflections on similar traits as they did in the linguistic questionnaires. They focused on pronunciation, however, but never wrote the French words, relying on transliteration eg ‘guinea pig is pig from India’ or ‘pig sounds like cushion’. They still focused on cognate words and only on similarities between French and English, not differences. Cultural elements were rare even in reflections about inputs concerning Christmas. Pupils mainly focused on vocabulary without mentioning any lessons’ learning objectives, any grammatical terms or any communicative objectives.

Focus group interviews indicated that main learning strategies for pupils were: the cross linguistic comparisons of forms and sounds, the use of prior knowledge acquired in language inputs or other subjects, visual aids and active participation with games, songs and activities

that clearly fell within some pupils' favoured styles or strategies of learning. Difficulties considered by pupils were almost all personal and 'psychological' and centred around their own imagined inadequacy; a lack of ability either in reading, writing, comprehension or memorisation.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study encourage us to promote specific, pedagogical, language approaches. Fostering pupils' language analytic ability and reflection on language are important because pupils seem to reflect consciously on language analysis and their learning strategies (Tellier and Roehr-Brackin, 2013; Conteh and Meier, 2014). Promotion of cross linguistic comparisons is also recommended to enhance language analytic ability since pupils are sensitive to similarities and differences between languages (Muñoz, 2017). Activation of pupil prior knowledge and building on it as MA gets enhanced are also strongly encouraged (Escamilla et al., 2013; Cummins, 2014).

Discussion and further research are identified as necessities around oracy versus text based work, and explicit versus implicit teaching pedagogy as well as a more general broadening of primary language teaching through the presence and employment of applied linguistics.

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