Enhancing Learners' Metalinguistic Awareness of Language Form: The Use of eTutor Resources

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Abstract

Today, teachers of English as a second/foreign language in Hong Kong are generally aware of the need for teaching the language for communicative purposes, and that the focus of teaching should not be confined to language form. Yet, they are often worried by their students' inadequate mastery of language form in written and spoken output, as this would undermine their communicative effectiveness. One common response is to provide students with further explanations of grammar rules and additional controlled, form-focussed, exercises. While such activities will help to a certain extent, this paper will point out that one of the long-term solutions is to increase students' metalinguistic awareness through awareness-raising activities. These activities are not new to English language teaching methodology, but have been greatly facilitated in recent years by advances in technology, corpora and concordancers. This paper will illustrate such activities with examples that make use of eTutor, an online platform that provides learning resources which are highly suited for awareness-raising activities for local school students.

Introduction

With the advent of communicative language teaching since the early seventies (Littlewood, 1981; Savignon, 1987), and later the call for naturalistic acquisition as opposed to instructed learning (Krashen, 1982), second language

teaching methodology had, for a while, shifted its emphasis from mastery of grammar structures to communicative fluency (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). A focus on form in second language teaching, especially as it was realized in traditional grammar instruction, was found to be of little use in developing L2 learners' ability to communicate in the target language.

However, since the nineties, there have been realisations that for second language (L2) learners and users to communicate effectively, they also need to be aware of the interplay between language form and language function (Long & Robinson, 1998; Nunan, Berry, & Berry, 1995). Carter (2003) defines this language awareness as "an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (p. 64). At the same time, there has been a renewed interest in the place of language form in L2 teaching and learning (Doughty & Williams, 1998). On top of that, developments in functional grammar in the last few decades have underscored how meaning, emphasis, communicative intent, etc., in communication events are the results of choices language users make from the language forms available to them (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2004).

Overall, current thinking in second language teaching does not totally dismiss activities that draw learners' attention to language form, but emphasizes that this attention should be embedded in purposeful communication. CDC (2004) aptly summarises this view: "Ample opportunities should be given to learners to... become familiar with the language form and to use it in a purposeful and meaningful way, so that links between form, meaning and use can be forged' (p. 160). In fact, in second language teaching and learning where learners have had the experience of learning their first language, it is beneficial for learners to engage in activities that draw their attention to how the choice of language form can facilitate or undermine communication. Based on Hawkins (1987)'s notion of 'language apprenticeship' which emphasizes the value of acquiring one language as a basis for acquiring another language, the acquisition of metalinguistic awareness is crucial for bilingual learners to succeed (Clyne, 2003).

With the premise that attention to language form for communicative effectiveness is beneficial to learners, this paper will illustrate how to enhance learners' metalinguistic awareness activities with awareness-raising activities (Ellis, 1997) that draw their attention to language form. Metalinguistic awareness activities invite learners to work on language samples with a view to deducing the underlying language patterns or discovering specific instances of language use (e.g. Bolitho & Tomlinson, 1995). Such activities require appropriate language samples. The collection and study of language samples for second language teaching and learning has been greatly facilitated in recent years by technology, in particular in the form of concordancing and language corpora (Granger, Hung, & Petch-Tyson, 2002). The examples of metalinguistic awareness activities provided in this paper make use of eTutor, an online platform which provides collections of home-grown language data and resources to facilitate a discovery-based approach to the acquisition of accurate and fluent English. (For a detailed description of the workings of eTutor and the accompanying eLab, see McMinn & Leung, 2013.)

What is Metalinguistic Awareness?

In the earlier literature, the term language awareness was often used. Writing in the context of English in the UK school curriculum, Hawkins (1987) started with the term *awareness of language*. The term *language awareness* began to be used widely in the nineties. Carter (1995, p. 5) has suggested the following components of language awareness:

(a) awareness of some of the properties of language; creativity and playfulness; its double meanings;

(b) awareness of embedding of language within culture. Learning to read the language is learning about the cultural properties of the language;

(c) a greater self-consciousness about the forms of the language we use;

(d) awareness of the close relationships between language and ideology.

Carter's second and fourth points were manifested in a related development often referred to as critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992).

Later, the term metalinguistic awareness began to gain popularity. Roth, Speece, Cooper, & de la Paz (1996) defined metalinguistic awareness as "the ability to objectify language and dissect it as an arbitrary linguistic code independent of meaning" (p. 258). Roberts (2011) referred to metalinguistic awareness as "the ability to reflect on language as a symbolic system in its own right" (p. 45).

It might be concluded that so far two dimensions of metalinguistic awareness have been proposed by writers: a broader one which is about the general use and role of language in society and in communication; and a more concrete one which is about the interplay between language form and language function.

It should be pointed out that metalinguistic awareness is not to be equated with metalinguistic knowledge. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) gave the example of young children's oral production of *bat* and *pat*. Some children may simply reproduce the sounds as if they are two different words in English. Metalinguistically aware children will be aware of the difference – that the two words sound similar but differ with respect to the initial consonant. However, even the latter group of children may not know, and perhaps need not know, the underlying phonological construction of, and difference between, the 2 syllables.

In the rest of this paper, the term *metalinguistic awareness* will be used. Readers should note that while the focus of this paper is on language form with reference to morpho-syntactic grammar, metalinguistic awareness is also related to other aspects of language, such as phonology, semantics, and discourse.

Why Metalinguistic Awareness for Language Form and Communicative Sensitivity

Limitations of direct explanation by the teacher

Traditionally, in English language classroom, the teaching of forms and functions often relied on direct explanation by the teacher, who would usually present a language item as a rule or some kind of generalization. The following are some examples of teacher explanation we have collected from our work:

"*Must* means it is something good, something we can do. *Mustn't* means it's something bad, something we can't do."

"A preposition gives us more information about the noun phrase."

"We use the Simple Past tense for a short action. We use the Past Continuous tense for a long action. So, short action – Simple Past; long action – Past Continuous."

"The first time we mention something, we use *a* or *an*. The second time we mention it, we use *the*."

The teacher who relies on verbal direct explanation in presenting grammar items is often caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to provide an accurate explanation. On the other hand, they want to be concise enough so that students can follow. This trade-off between accuracy and conciseness often results in an over-simplified summary of the language pattern in question. The fact that the teacher has to use classroom language that students can follow may further compound the issue, as can be seen in the above examples of teacher explanation.

Language forms beyond the elementary level

While with elementary-level learners, it may be possible to explain language forms as simple structures, as they progress, they will be encountering more and more complex grammar items which cannot be easily distilled into

straightforward rules. The difference between Simple Past tense and Past Continuous tense, for example, cannot be attributed purely as a difference in duration. Similarly, there are many instances where the definite article *the* is used the first time we refer to something or someone. The difference between *He must do it, He can do it,* and *He should do it*, cannot be verbalized in a few words.

To fully grasp the form, meaning, function, and the context of use of a language item, learners, as they progress in learning the target language, need to be exposed to sufficient meaningful examples. CDC (2004) points out that "grammar learning depends on meeting the same form again and again in different contexts, so that an ever-fuller understanding of when and how a form is used develops" (p. 164).

Learner characteristics and learning effectiveness

Even if the teacher is able to prepare a highly accurate and concise explanation before a lesson, and use it for presenting the (new) language item concerned in class, it may not always be the best choice of teaching strategy. Grammar explanations are in essence abstract generalisations. They can be difficult to follow, and hence may not be able to engage or arouse the interest of students, especially with young and adolescent learners.

Metalinguistic awareness activities provide learners with language samples to compare, analyse, categorise, judge, etc., and to arrive at some sort of generalization themselves. They appeal to learners with their cognitive and constructivist challenges (Spada & Lightbown, 2013). Learners become actively engaged in reflective learning of the relationships between the form and function of a language feature.

Towards a better understanding of language forms

In a study of university students' explicit knowledge of English grammar, Berry (2014) found that many of them hold certain 'myths' about the grammar of the English language, and that there is a big discrepancy between their

explicit knowledge of grammar and what might be called the grammatical 'reality' (p. 2). He identifies 11 causes of such misconceptions, one of which is pedagogical over-simplification. One solution he suggests is adopting a more inductive approach which guides students to discover the rules themselves, thus helping them to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the target language forms. This more learner-centred approach also converges one of the overall aims of the English Language curriculum, which is to nurture students as autonomous learners: "Learning is most effective when learners take an active role in the learning process, making choices independently and directing their own learning" (CDC & HKEAA, 2007; p. 93).

Attempts to Incorporate Metalinguistic Awareness into Language Teaching

Somewhat surprisingly, while there have been calls to incorporate language awareness in teacher training programmes for L2 teachers (e.g., Andrews, 2007; Carter, 2003), and despite the resource books that have been written for teacher language awareness training (e.g., Ardnt, Harvey, & Nuttall, 2000; Thornbury, 1997) metalinguistic awareness activities have not been widely adopted in L2 programmes. Nevertheless, a number of studies have provided evidence of the effectiveness of metalinguistic awareness for the teaching and learning of grammar.

Liamkina and Ryshina-Pankova (2012) used the examples of the German dative case and past tense and illustrated how to use an entire text and then create a metalinguistic awareness task that enables learners to make contextually appropriate linguistic choices consistent with those of native speaker.

Radwan (2005) investigated the effectiveness of explicit attention to form in language learning. One of the research questions he asked was whether the level of awareness developed by learners during the treatment sessions would correlate positively with their subsequent learning of the target feature. A total of 42 low-intermediate ESL learners took part in the study. The target language

feature was the English dative alternation, as exemplified by the following examples:

Tom bought a book for Jane.
Tom bought Jane a book.

John purchased a book for Jane.
*John purchased Jane a book.

The research participants were placed in 3 groups, one of which received treatment in awareness to form. Results showed that for this group, awareness at the level of understanding (as opposed to simply noticing) correlated positively with progress in performance on all test tasks. Radwan concluded that *awareness + understanding* is most conducive to acquisition.

Radwan's study is a reminder that sometimes, errors are caused by learners' over-generalisng from a previously learnt feature. For instance, from the following sentences:

Tom worried about his brother's bad habits.
Susan cared about his sister's future.

learners may produce the problem sentence *Her father concerned about her safety*, which is indeed a common error in Hong Kong. Using an awareness-raising approach, the teacher may provide students with a list of sentences involving 'concerned' and ask students to judge the acceptability of each sentence. After they respond to each sentence, they are told whether the sentence is indeed acceptable or not. Students will work through a list of such sentences and be able to arrive at a conclusion as to how to use 'concerned' in sentences.

Liu (2011) explored the use of corpus research in raising his students' language awareness, and obtained highly promising results. He provided his college English students with language issues to investigate through looking

them up in different corpora. A sample question he used is "to what extent the prescriptive rule that the structure 'none of' with a plural noun phrase (e.g., *none of the students*) must be used with a singular verb form (e.g., *was*) holds". His case study led to his observation that "corpus use may have the potential of enhancing students' awareness of the dynamic nature of lexicogrammatical and broader language use. For the same reason, corpus use may be able to help students increase their appreciation for the context/register-appropriate use of lexicogrammar" (p. 373).

In sum, despite the small literature on metalinguistic awareness activities that draw learners' attention to language form, the attempts that have been made so far have produced promising results. Such activities are likely to be even more effective if conducted through corpus studies.

Example Metalinguistic Awareness Activities Using eTutor

As pointed out by Liu (2011), corpus study is a useful activity for raising learners' metalinguistic awareness in grammar as well as other aspects of language. The rest of this paper will now provide some example metalinguistic awareness activities that make use of eTutor, part of an ePlatform developed by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology as commissioned by the Education Bureau for use by upper primary and lower secondary students in Hong Kong. (For a detailed description of the ePlatform, see McMinn & Leung, 2013.)

eTutor provides students with 4 major resources:

- Common errors by writing topic
- Common errors by error category
- Common errors explained in cartoons
- Links to useful tools to use when writing

The content of the first 3 resources has been derived from a corpus of language errors made by lower secondary students in Hong Kong. They are

authentic errors that are commonly made by Hong Kong students. The fourth section, 'Links to useful tools to use when writing', is linked to other concordancers.

A total of 4 example activities that make use of eTutor resources will be provided below. It must be emphasized that these activities should follow some kind of meaning-focussed work, as pointed out by writers who advocate focus-on-form activities within a communicative language teaching framework (e.g., Long, 1991; Doughty & Varela, 1998). These activities may be conducted:

- for initial presentation of a new language feature;
- as remedial grammar learning tasks, when students have shown an insufficient understanding or mastery of a language feature previously learnt;
- for revisiting or recycling previously learnt items that need to be clarified or contrasted (e.g., participial (*-ing* vs *-ed*) adjectives);
- for proofreading practice in general;
- for proofreading practice that relates to a particular writing task.

If conducted as part of a writing task that follows a process writing model, the purpose of the metalinguistic awareness tasks will then be for the students to investigate and look for the most appropriate language form that will either clarify unclear sentences in the text they have met, or ways to improve the text with different choices of language form. Such tasks, for example, may be used when students have written a first draft on a corresponding topic, or when students have studied a first draft on a topic written by a peer and shown to them by the teacher.

Example 1: Making use of the video clips

Learning objective: Students will be able to correct some problem sentences themselves after viewing video commentaries on those language issues.

Student Worksheet

Step 1: The following problem sentences are taken from recent compositions written by your classmates. Study them. What is the problem with each sentence? How can it be corrected?
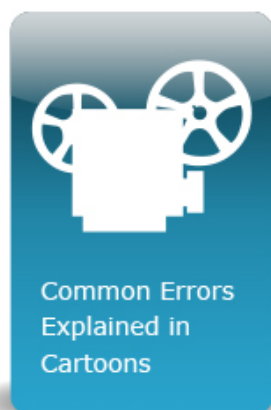
Sentence A: The speaker spoke very slowly, and I was very boring.
Sentence B: Totally, 35 students took part in the class picnic.
Sentence C: During the race, I fell on the ground and I felt very painful.

Step 2: Now go to the following link, and view the 3 videos (*boring; totally, painful*). When you have finished, go back to Step 1, and correct the 3 sentences again, if necessary.

http://writingelab.edb.hkedcity.net/eLab/eTutor/index.htm>

Common Errors
Explained in
Cartoons

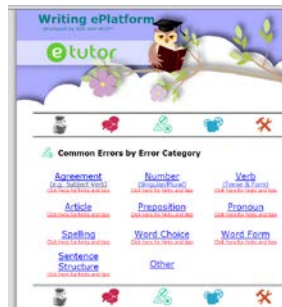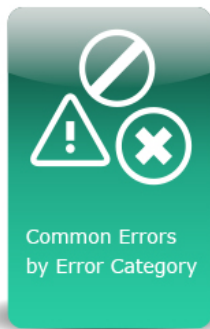*Example 2: Making use of the hints in various Error Categories*

Learning objective: Students will identify the types of errors in the problem sentences shown to them, look up the corresponding metalinguistic explanations in eTutor, and correct the errors in the problem sentences themselves.

Student Worksheet

Your teacher has underlined the following errors in your composition draft. She wants you to look up the problems and correct the errors yourself.

- *I went to the library and found some <u>informations</u> for the project.*
- *Next Friday is a holiday. <u>Let's us</u> go to Cheung Chau.*
- *The test easy, so I finished it in <u>a hour</u>.*
- *The weather was good and we <u>were enjoyed</u> the trip very much.*
- *Some dogs were killed in the countryside; the <u>police is</u> now investigating the case.*
- *He watched a horror movie before going to bed, and <u>got a bad dream</u> later.*

Go to http://writingelab.edb.hkedcity.net/eLab/eTutor/index.htm>

Step 1: For each problem sentence, browse the headings on the page, and choose one which you think might be related to the problem sentence.

Step 2: Then click on "Click here for hints and tips". Read the sub-pages (there are usually 3) and try the self-check task.

Step 3: When you have finished, go back to your problem sentence and correct it.

Step 4: Repeat the above procedure for the other problem sentences.

Example 3: Making use of the example sentences

Learning objective: Students will compare some problem sentences and their corresponding correct forms and make use of the metalinguistic hints provided in order to deduce the underlying rules for the correct forms.

<u>Student Worksheet</u>

Your teacher has collected the following errors often made by your classmates. They happen to be your errors, too. However, you are not sure why they are wrong.

- *I stayed at home because it was hot outside.*

  ('Preposition' > 'Because of')

- ***There was a dog and two boys in the lift.*

  ('Agreement' > 'Were X and X')

- *Some students concern more their marks than meaningful learning.*

  ('Sentence structure Errors' > 'concern more about')

- Go to http://writingelab.edb.hkedcity.net/eLab/eTutor/index.htm, and click on "Common Errors by Category".

- For each problem sentence, click on the section and sub-section stated in brackets. Then read the examples and try to deduce the rule for the correct form.

- Now, following the examples on the page, write one more example to show your understanding of the correct usage.

Example 4: Making use of Word Neighbors

Learning objective: Students will make use of the concordance in eTutor to deduce the rule for the correct form of a sentence structure.
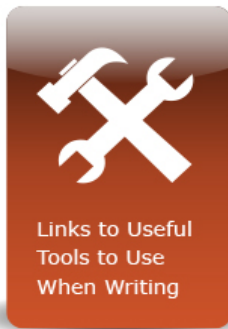

Student Worksheet

How should 'Beware of …' be used?
Decide which of the following is/are acceptable:

- *Beware of falling objects.*
- *Hot food – Beware of your fingers.*
- *Beware of your head.*
- *Beware of drunk drivers.*
- *Beware of drinking too much water before you go to bed.*
- *Beware of the slippery floor.*
- *Beware of people selling cheap medicine to you in the street.*

Now go to "Word Neighbors"

Type in 'Beware of'
Study the example sentences. Pay attention to what comes after 'Beware of …'. Can you deduce some sort of rule for using 'Beware of …'?

Now, go back to the 7 'Beware of …' sentences again. Which ones would you accept?

Conclusion

This paper has provided rationales for incorporating metalinguistic awareness activities that draw students' attention to correct language forms. Indeed, a study by Harley (1998) with French immersion children on the grammatical gender in French has provided evidence that an instructional focus on form can have a lasting impact on the second language proficiency of learners as young as 7 or 8 years of age. While the theoretical underpinnings for such activities are strong, there is scant supporting pedagogical literature and published resource. The eTutor resources, which are built on a corpus of common language errors made by Hong Kong students, provide useful language data and sample tasks for such metalinguistic awareness activities.

Nevertheless, teachers who are keen to incorporate these activities into their teaching of grammar will still need to be innovative and flexible. A number of related issues have been put forward by researchers. Williams and Evans (1998), for example, have been concerned about what forms to focus on, and whether focus-on-form activities will benefit all learners at different stages of development. Despite the fact that their research findings show that focus on form is indeed useful and should be integrated into communicative curricula, they also suggest that "each individual student has a point of readiness for focus on form and that every form may be ideally suited to different degrees and kinds of focus on form. This suggests the need for a greater awareness on the part of the teacher regarding emergence of forms in their students' interlanguage and for the development of alternative instructional strategies, particularly insofar as the level of explicitness of focus on form is concerned" (p. 155).

Lightbown (1998) suggests the need for further research with respect to 2 questions. First, is focus on form more effective when it is timed to match learners' developmental stage in second language acquisition, or is it more efficient when it targets features that characterize more "advanced" stages? Second, should focus on form be integrated into communicative activities, or is it better to have a separate component for focus-on-form activities in the language programme?

In conclusion, the evidence available so far supports the contribution of focus on form in classroom second language acquisition, with regard to both accuracy of grammar and communicative effectiveness. Focus of form should not replicate the traditional method of direct explanation by the teacher, but should be operationalized as metalinguistic awareness activities. As metalinguistic awareness involves analyzing language samples, the use of a corpus will greatly facilitate such activities, by providing learners with authentic language data and interactive language investigation tasks.

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