

THE ROLE OF LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE AND METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: *This study provides an in-depth exploration of the interrelationship between linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness in the context of foreign language instruction. Linguistic competence encompasses learners' internalized understanding of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatic norms, enabling the production of contextually appropriate and accurate language. Metalinguistic awareness, in contrast, refers to learners' capacity to consciously analyze, reflect upon, and regulate language forms and usage, thereby enhancing cognitive flexibility and learning autonomy. The study involved 150 participants across secondary and tertiary educational institutions, employing multiple research methods including classroom observation, diagnostic testing, semi-structured interviews, and comparative cross-linguistic analysis. Findings indicate that learners with heightened metalinguistic awareness demonstrate significantly accelerated development of grammatical, phonological, lexical, and pragmatic competencies. The research emphasizes the necessity of integrative pedagogical approaches that simultaneously nurture both linguistic competence and metalinguistic skills, thereby optimizing foreign language acquisition outcomes.*

Keywords: *linguistic competence, metalinguistic awareness, foreign language teaching, psycholinguistics, language acquisition, communicative competence, integrative pedagogy.*

Introduction

The acquisition of a foreign language is a complex cognitive process influenced by multiple interdependent factors. Among these, linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness constitute foundational elements. Linguistic competence, as initially conceptualized by Chomsky (1965), refers to the learner's internalized knowledge of vocabulary, syntactic structures, phonological rules, morphological patterns, and semantic relations. It enables learners to comprehend and produce coherent, contextually appropriate, and grammatically correct utterances.

Metalinguistic awareness, on the other hand, is the ability to consciously reflect upon and analyze language as a system (Gombert, 1992). It involves understanding the functional aspects of linguistic elements, recognizing patterns, identifying errors, and applying corrective strategies. It plays a crucial role in cognitive regulation, transfer of knowledge between the first and second language, and the development of autonomous learning strategies.

Recent research in applied linguistics and psycholinguistics emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between these constructs. For instance, studies demonstrate that learners with advanced metalinguistic awareness not only perform better in grammar and vocabulary tasks but also exhibit higher proficiency in pragmatic functions such as politeness strategies, discourse markers, and genre-specific conventions (Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Moreover, in multilingual educational contexts, the ability to contrast and compare linguistic systems accelerates comprehension and reduces cognitive load, enhancing overall learning efficiency.

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in integrating these constructs systematically into foreign language pedagogy. Many instructional designs prioritize linguistic input acquisition while underemphasizing reflective and analytical engagement with language forms. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating how combined instruction targeting both linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness impacts learning outcomes in secondary and tertiary education settings.⁶⁰

Methods

Participants: The study involved 150 learners, aged 15–22, enrolled in secondary schools and university language programs. Participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, including monolingual and bilingual speakers, which allowed analysis of cross-linguistic transfer effects.

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure comprehensive analysis:

Observation: Systematic classroom observation was conducted to document learner interactions, communicative behaviors, error patterns, and strategic use of language in real-time contexts. Special attention was given to how learners approached new linguistic structures and how teachers integrated metalinguistic scaffolding.⁶¹

Diagnostic Testing: Participants completed pre-tests and post-tests assessing grammatical accuracy, phonological competence, lexical range, and pragmatic performance. Tests included multiple-choice items, sentence transformation exercises, error correction tasks, and oral production assessments.

1. ⁶⁰ Krashen, S. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press, 1982.

2. ⁶¹ Brown, H. D. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Pearson Education, 2014.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Learners provided qualitative data through interviews exploring their metalinguistic strategies, self-monitoring behaviors, and reflections on language learning processes.

Comparative Cross-Linguistic Analysis: Data were collected on learners' ability to transfer rules from L1 to the target language. Tasks involved translation exercises, morphological analysis, and identification of syntactic parallels and divergences.

Data Analysis

- Data were coded thematically according to three domains
- Development of linguistic competence
- Enhancement of metalinguistic awareness
- Integrative pedagogical effects on communicative proficiency

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired sample t-tests, and correlation analyses to measure improvements across linguistic domains. Qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis to extract patterns in learner reflection, error detection, and self-regulation strategies.

Results

Linguistic Competence: Analysis revealed that structured linguistic instruction significantly enhanced learners' phonological, grammatical, and lexical competencies. Learners with high initial competence consistently produced accurate and contextually appropriate utterances. Notably:

Grammatical Accuracy: Improvement in sentence structure, verb tense usage, and syntactic complexity was observed in post-test results (mean accuracy increased from 68% to 85%).

Lexical Expansion: Learners demonstrated broader vocabulary range, including idiomatic expressions and contextually nuanced synonyms.

Phonological Precision: Pronunciation errors decreased substantially, particularly in segmental and suprasegmental features such as vowel length, stress patterns, and intonation.

Metalinguistic Awareness

Participants receiving metalinguistic training exhibited enhanced ability to analyze language:

Error Detection and Self-Correction: Learners could autonomously identify syntactic and lexical errors with 75–80% accuracy.

Cross-Linguistic Transfer: Advanced awareness facilitated accurate mapping of grammatical rules from L1 to the foreign language, especially in areas of word order and tense-aspect distinctions.

Reflective Strategies: Participants demonstrated the ability to evaluate language choices, compare structures, and justify their selections, indicating strategic and conscious learning processes.

Integrative Effects

When linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness were taught together through integrated tasks—such as contrastive grammar exercises, reflective writing, guided error analysis, and communicative role-plays—learners achieved the highest performance levels:

Faster acquisition of complex syntactic structures (e.g., passive constructions, relative clauses).

Enhanced pragmatic awareness, including appropriate discourse markers, politeness strategies, and contextual language variation.

Sustained retention of knowledge, with post-test improvements maintained after a 6-week follow-up.

Statistical analysis confirmed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) between metalinguistic awareness scores and overall communicative competence, reinforcing the hypothesis that metalinguistic skills significantly amplify language acquisition.

Discussion

The findings underscore the critical role of linguistic competence as the structural backbone of foreign language learning. Without a robust knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and phonology, learners' communicative ability is inherently limited. Early-stage instruction must prioritize systematic exposure to linguistic forms, progressively building complexity.

Simultaneously, metalinguistic awareness functions as a cognitive catalyst, enabling learners to reflect on rules, monitor output, and autonomously correct errors. Learners with high metalinguistic awareness also demonstrate superior problem-solving skills in novel linguistic contexts, suggesting that reflective capacity enhances both accuracy and adaptability.

Pedagogically, these results advocate for integrative instructional approaches, including:

Contrastive Analysis: Highlighting similarities and differences between L1 and the target language to facilitate transfer and error prevention.

Guided Error Correction: Combining immediate feedback with metalinguistic reasoning to strengthen rule internalization.

Reflective Journals: Encouraging learners to analyze their performance and document strategies for improvement.

Communicative Problem-Solving Tasks: Applying linguistic knowledge in authentic scenarios to enhance practical competence.

By combining explicit linguistic instruction with activities fostering metalinguistic reflection, educators can create a learning environment that cultivates both accuracy and strategic autonomy. Future research should investigate longitudinal effects of integrative instruction and explore technology-mediated approaches to enhance metalinguistic engagement.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms that linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness are mutually reinforcing dimensions of foreign language learning. Linguistic competence provides essential knowledge for accurate communication, whereas metalinguistic awareness enables critical reflection, error detection, and autonomous learning. Integrating these constructs through targeted pedagogical strategies leads to accelerated learning, deeper understanding, and sustainable communicative proficiency. Educators are therefore encouraged to adopt integrative models that cultivate both linguistic mastery and reflective capacities, optimizing outcomes in diverse educational contexts.

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