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USE OF TERMINOLOGY AND (META)LINGUISTIC AWARENESS IN GRADE 4 – EXPERIENCE FROM A PILOT STUDY

Abstract

To understand the texts we read, we need language use and linguistic knowledge, as well as metalinguistic awareness related to the text. We examined linguistic and metalinguistic awareness in two areas: at the level of compound words and in relation to words with suffixes. We operated with the following assumptions in our action research:

H1: The participants achieve better results in tasks related to affixed words.

H2: Those who can justify their answers and reflect on their question answering process using grammatical terms will achieve better results in completing the worksheet.

The 15-task test measures metalinguistic knowledge related to compound and suffixed words. The solutions require either implicit or explicit elaboration. Out of the 36 utterances in the "interpretative" text, grammatical metalanguage-related expressions were used by the informants in 13 cases. Through the use of quantitative content analysis, the study could contribute to the development of native language methodology and grammar teaching in lower primary education.

Introduction

In first language education in lower grades, the development of linguistic awareness became a priority in the 2020 National Core Curriculum. If we adhere to the principle of inductive grammar teaching, we can also accept that linguistic awareness, especially metalinguistic awareness, should be built gradually with respect to the level of students' knowledge. It follows that the transmission of metalinguistic knowledge is possible only after they have acquired enough linguistic knowledge. (Zipke, 2021)

The most important task for lower graders is to gain, analyse and interpret linguistic experience. The concepts and structures related to the development of linguistic awareness in textbooks in lower grades and grammar teaching require further refinement. The question is whether, based on international literature, Hungarian textbooks and first language education will integrate the language pedagogical aspects of these assumptions into the lower grades in the future (Juhász, 2021).

Metalinguistic Awareness

Metalinguistic awareness develops gradually. It is fundamentally instinctive, but during the teaching-learning process, it becomes a conscious activity, evolving in parallel with cognitive and linguistic development (Adamikné, 2006a: 149–150). Generally, around the age of six, at the beginning of school age, children are able to recognize the differences

between linguistic elements and intuitively apply these during communication (Bialystok et al., 2014). Metalinguistic skills can be related to different levels of the linguistic system. Thus, we can talk about the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic components of metalinguistic awareness (Csépe, 2014).

In order to understand written texts, linguistic knowledge, knowledge related to language use as well as text-related metalinguistic awareness are necessary (Adamikné, 2006b; Csépe, 2014).

We can say that metalinguistic awareness is a skill that develops with age: one must first understand linguistic units in order to be able to talk about them. According to Gombert (1992), context-independent knowledge about language can be regarded as metalinguistic knowledge.

If we want to distinguish linguistic awareness from metalinguistic awareness, we can say that linguistic knowledge involves a kind of categorization skills, the recognition of linguistic elements, and the manipulation of these elements, while metalinguistic knowledge involves the assessment of linguistic elements from formal and semantic perspectives, matching these elements, and the ability to make statements about their appropriate formation (Juhász, 2023).

Different levels of linguistic awareness can be distinguished. One part pertains to decoding reading: phonological and orthographic. The other part includes categories based on comprehension, such as semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic levels. Morphological awareness represents an intermediate level, which can refer to both aspects of reading (Juhász–Kegyes, 2022).

Experience from an action research study –
Testing the linguistic awareness of 10–11 year-old students

The pilot study was conducted with fourth graders in a primary school in District XVII (Budapest), with a total of 27 participants. We sought to answer the question of what operations (recognition, matching, task execution, interpretation) students can perform with affixed words and compound words. The test, consisting of 15 tasks, measured the retrieval of metalinguistic expressions related to compound words and affixed words. Students were asked to reflect on their own answers. We did not provide criteria for completing the worksheet – we told the children that multiple correct answers could be accepted in the "playful" exercise.

Below, we limit ourselves to the description and presentation of those results that are important for the overall dissertation.

The research

We created a worksheet with several tasks in September 2023 in order to answer the question whether fourth graders use the terms and metalinguistic expressions (affixed words, compound words, antonyms, etc.) from their grammar books. The first research question was: Do the students involved in the research use the terms (metalinguistic expressions) from their grammar books when they need to explain certain linguistic phenomena, rules, or relationships?

We examined (meta)linguistic awareness at the level of compound words and affixed words. The tasks were based on textbook examples. We were also interested whether compound nouns or affixed words were easier for students to learn and recall. We formulated the following hypotheses:

H1) The participants achieve better results in tasks related to affixed words.

H2) Those who can justify their answers and reflect on their question answering process using grammatical terms will achieve better results in completing the worksheet.

Another objective of the research was to measure attitudes towards the grammar textbooks used in the lessons. In other parts of the worksheet, students had to create and define compound words belonging to different word categories. These aspects will not be detailed in the present paper.

The worksheet

The words listed in tasks 5 and 12 can be categorized both as verbs or nouns. The aim was to assess students' skills to recognize and categorize words which can belong to multiple word categories. Can a 9-10-year-old child simultaneously pay attention to both formal and semantic features?

Tasks 8–9 examined the explicit and implicit skills to add affixes to words, first in sentence context and then using visual aids (e.g. figures, tables and diagrams). In task 9, students were asked to complete a group of affixed nouns answering the questions of tridirectionality: where from, where, where to?

Five tasks required student "reflection" or metalinguistic statements after completing the tasks. These include the following:

Task 7.b focussed on the word category of compound words. One of the answer options was: "the word category of a compound word is always determined by the last element" or briefly: "the last element/word", etc. Task 9.b asked students about the criteria for grouping nouns in the table. The answers could refer to affixes, question words, etc. The answer options for Task 10.b were: "synonymous words", or "words with similar meanings," etc.

In Task 12.b, the correct answers were verb and noun, or alternatively the students could have written that the listed words are common nouns and describe actions as well. Task 14 aimed to determine whether the students' answers contained metalinguistic terms. Did the students recognize a strategy for completing the tasks?

Results

Almost half of the participants (i.e. 13 out of 27) answered at least one question referring to metalinguistic knowledge. In Task 7/b, the term *word category* appeared twice. The terms *last element* and *compound suffix* were not mentioned at all. In Task 9/b, the question was: What can be the criteria for grouping? In this task, the term *affix* occurred twice, *question word* three times, and *question* four times. In Task 10/b, the term *synonymous* was mentioned once, *similar meaning* once, while someone gave the wrong

answer *verb with verbal prefix*. The term *verb* occurred four times in the answers for Task 12/b, while *word category, syllable, vowel* and *consonant* appeared once, In Task 14, in relation to defining the strategy for completing the worksheet, the term *word category* was mentioned only once. No other metalinguistic terms related to grammar were found.

The responses of these 13 students contained a total of 36 items that can be classified as metalinguistic elements (53%). When the entire data set is considered, this is 11%.

The results show that students performed better in tasks requiring operations related to affixed words. This may be due to the context created by sentences or texts and the tabular format, which made recognition easier. In the task types related to compound words, the example which was intended to increase analogical productivity did not have much effect.

We then compared the results of those who answered the metalinguistic questions and those who did not complete these tasks. It is clear that, on average, those students who could justify their answers achieved better results (56,8% vs. 61,1%). Based on this, we can conclude that there may be a need to develop metalinguistic awareness and the use of grammatical terms in grade 4, as it is evident that those who could reflect in some form on their question answering process performed better in most sub-tasks.

Figure 1: The relationship between results and reflections that can be regarded as metalinguistic 4th grade students
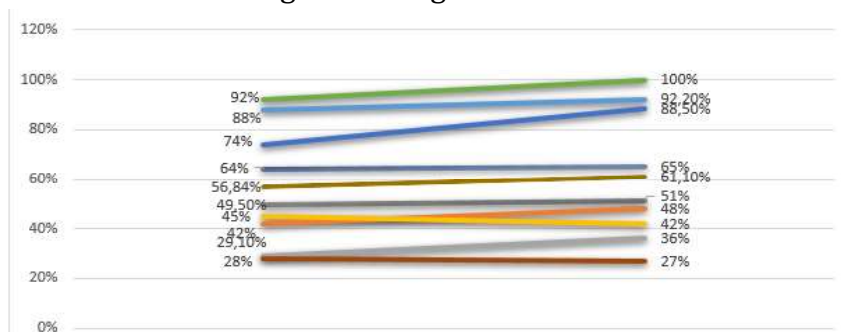
Colored lines: The results of the tasks. Brown line: Average result. Task completion results projected onto all respondents (N=27) Percentage results of task completions for those who provided textual responses to the interpretive questions more than twice (Nma=13)
Source: (Budapest, 2023, Own Research, Nma=metalinguistic awareness)

Conclusions

Metalanguage plays a crucial role in reading comprehension and the development of linguistic awareness. Also, the knowledge of metalinguistic terms would make foreign language learning more effective. Note that focusing on metalanguage in grammar lessons does not exclude the possibility of making language, grammar, and language learning an enjoyable activity in both lower and upper grades.

Since the knowledge of primary school pupils is usage-based, i.e. they are familiar with the system of language, but in a basically instinctive way. Therefore, first language pedagogy is to expand this metalinguistic knowledge and make it more conscious through various interactions. This can be achieved by presenting symbolic sound-meaning pairs embedded in context and situation, building on the students' previous knowledge of the

mother tongue, and drawing attention to the structural and semantic connections (Tolcsvai Nagy 2013, p. 23).

The development of linguistic awareness plays a major role in the 2020 National Core Curriculum (NCC) – in the Hungarian language and literature specialisation programme. The following sentence confirms that there is a paradigm shift in first language teaching, since the focus is on gaining linguistic experience: "*In order to develop first language skills, instead of learning grammatical rules, students experience the interrelations and functioning of language through creative, playful or experimental tasks using various techniques and strategies, e.g. individual work, pair work, group work and frontal work*" (NCC, 2020).

Textbooks should provide this empirical basis, but the role of creative teachers in developing meta-linguistic awareness is also crucial.

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