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Metalinguistic Awareness in TEFL: Preliminary Notes

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I. Introduction

This short note describes an outline of a research program in progress in my lab. The research topic is the importance of metalinguistic awareness in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language).

The research program in question is based on the idea that the purposes of TEFL in Japanese schools are as follows:

Primary Purpose: To provide students with a viewpoint that is different from their mother tongue (i.e., Japanese in most cases), thereby helping them enrich their metalinguistic awareness. The enriched metalinguistic awareness would help students use their mother tongue effectively.

Secondary Purpose 1: To provide students with abilities to use English effectively.

Secondary Purpose 2: To help students understand the relativity of language and culture by learning and using English.

Notice that the primary purpose of TEFL, according to the above view,

is not to provide students with abilities to use English effectively, an idea of which is shared by many people. In fact, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced a “Strategic Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities” (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/2002/07/020901.htm>) in July 2002, and subsequently an “Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities” (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm>) in March 2003. Atsuko Toyama, the MEXT minister, made the following statement regarding the establishment of the “Action Plan” on March 31, 2003.

Cultivating “Japanese with English Abilities” is an extremely important issue for the future of our children and for the further development of our country. However, this issue will only be resolved when the relevant parties related to English education (such as relevant personnel in national, public, and private elementary, junior high, senior high schools, and universities as well as relevant personnel in local municipal bodies) seek to realize this goal by making improvements to the system from their respective positions. (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm>)

Thus, it is clear that our view on the purposes of TEFL makes a sharp contrast with the predominant view, as represented in the above quote. The reason why we take such a view is partially because not all Japanese citizens need to use English for practical purposes, and is partially because we believe we cannot expect English abilities from those who do not have sufficient metalinguistic awareness in the foreign language learning environment, i.e., the environment in which English is used in daily interactions among people.

II. TEFL and Metalinguistics Awareness

Our basic idea on TEFL can be schematized as follows:

As is clear from Figure 1, TEFL is located in the whole framework of what we call “language teaching.”

The process begins with Stage 1. This represents the process in which

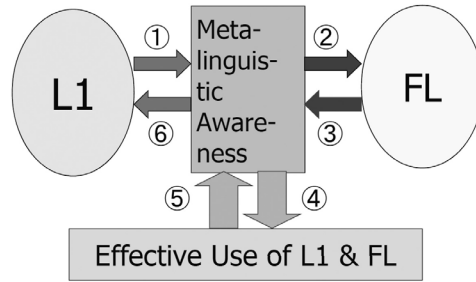


Figure 1. “L1” represents “first language,” namely, students’ mother tongue. “FL” represents “foreign language,” namely English in the TEFL context.

the development of metalinguistic awareness is bootstrapped by making use of students’ L1. Stage 2 is the process in which students learn FL with the help of their metalinguistic awareness developed in the first process.

Students’ knowledge of/about FL developed in the second stage in turn helps students further develop their metalinguistic awareness (Stage 3). This is because they now have two “windows” through which they view language.

We hasten to add at this point that what we claim is the importance of L1 in the initial (or, bootstrapping) stage of metalinguistic awareness. This is because students have intuitions about L1, which would be an effective tool with which they develop their metalinguistic awareness. Surely, as we mentioned just above, having two “windows” would facilitate development of metalinguistic awareness, but that only applies to stages after the first one.

The further enriched students’ metalinguistic awareness thanks to the collaboration of L1 and FL helps them use L1 and FL effectively (Stage 4). By “using L1 and FL effectively,” we include the following three aspects:

- (1) To clarify thoughts that come to mind by making the components and the relations among them explicit,
- (2) To express thoughts in such a way there is the least possibility of misunderstanding
- (3) To try to understand messages other people attempt to convey with the least possibility of misunderstanding

Those can be achieved, for example, by avoiding ambiguous expressions.

Stage 5 constitutes the subsequent process in which students' efforts to use L1 and FL effectively further substantiates their metalinguistic awareness. Stage 6 completes the cycle of language teaching/learning by enriching students' knowledge of L1. The latter process is most typically realized by enriching students' L1 lexicon.

An important, in fact, probably the most important, feature of our idea of language teaching as represented in Figure 1 is that L1 teaching and FL teaching are united as parts of a single enterprise systematically related to each other.

It might be useful to point out that the "Strategic Plan" and the "Action Plan" that we took up in the first section both refer to the importance of "cultivat[ing] Japanese language abilities" in addition to cultivating English abilities. However, it is not at all clear how the two are related.

III. TEFL without Metalinguistic Awareness

As is widely known, TEFL in Japan has in general been notorious for not having succeeded in producing people with practical English abilities. Although our view on the purposes of TEFL mentioned in the first section states that making students proficient in English is not the primary purpose, TEFL should make students learn about English sufficiently enough to enrich their metalinguistic awareness.

We claim that the failure of TEFL in Japan is mainly due to the fact that students' metalinguistic awareness has not been developed sufficiently before they start learning English at junior high school. Once they enter junior high school, they encounter such grammatical notions as "subject," "object," "case," "person," "number," (to a lesser degree) "gender," "agreement," "tense," "aspect," "voice," "phrase," "clause," and "modification," among others.

The above-mentioned notions should have become familiar prior to English learning, namely, in their elementary school days, by making use of students' L1 knowledge. Readers familiar with Japanese might wonder that some of those notions are not as "visible" in Japanese as in English. That is correct, but it should be remembered that they are only less

“visible,” not non-existent.

Take “number” for example. Unlike English, most Japanese nouns do not manifest number distinction, such as *child* vs. *children*. However, some Japanese nouns do, such as *as kodomo* “child” vs. *kodomo-tachi* “children,” although the unmarked *kodomo* can either be used as singular and plural.

More important is the fact that the reciprocal predicate *-au* “each other” can only be used with plural subject NPs.

- (1) **Hitori-no kodomo ga oshi-at-ta.*
 one child NOM push-reciprocal-past
 “A child pushed each other.”
- (2) *Futari-no kodomo ga oshi-at-ta.*
 two children NOM push-reciprocal-past
 “Two children pushed each other.”
- (3) *Futari-no kodomo-tachi ga oshi-at-ta.*
 two children NOM push-reciprocal-past
 “Two children pushed each other.”

Thus, in (2), *kodomo* bears “abstract,” i.e., invisible, plural number forced by the numeral *futari-no* “two,” and hence the sentence is grammatical with a reciprocal predicate, parallel to (3), where the plurality of *kodomo* is explicit with the plural suffix *-tachi*. On the other hand, in (1) *kodomo* bears abstract singular number forced by the numeral *hitori-no* “one,” and hence is incompatible with the reciprocal predicate.

Readers who are not familiar with elementary schools in Japan might wonder if such grammatical notions are not introduced in elementary schools. The fact is that there is a school subject in Japan that corresponds to language arts, namely *kokugo* “national language,” but the primary emphasis is on the literal appreciation of stories and poems in addition to learning *kanji* characters. Some textbooks contain columns, or even chapters, that treat grammar, but many, if not most, teachers skip those materials thinking that they are secondary.

Thus, not surprisingly, there are many junior high students who have trouble in recognizing “modification.” Without the notion “modification”

being familiarized in Japanese, it is quite natural that students would have difficulty in understanding “modification” in English.

IV. Our Proposal

Based on the observations and considerations thus far, we propose the following:

- (4) Language arts should be introduced to elementary schools in order to make students develop sufficient metalinguistic awareness.
- (4) does not only help students prepared to start learning English in junior high school, but also make students better off in using their L1 effectively.

In passing, we would like briefly touch on the issue of teaching English in elementary school. MEXT announced the introduction of English to elementary school fifth and sixth grade classrooms in the form of *gaikokugo katsudo* “Foreign Language Activities.” A tentative English translation of the relevant chapter of the new “Course of Study” is found at http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/gai.pdf. Although we do not intend to discuss this policy change in detail in these notes, we point out that the endeavor would not succeed unless sufficient development of students’ metalinguistic awareness based on their L1 knowledge has been achieved.

The next question is how (4) can be realized. We claim that the following change is realistic to be introduced at the time of the next revision of the Course of Study:

- (5) “Language (Arts) Activities” is introduced in place of “Foreign Language Activities” to elementary schools.

As is clear from its name, “Language (Arts) Activities” are not intended to be a school subject, but are activities in the technical sense of MEXT. Namely, since it is not a subject, MEXT-inspected textbooks will not be

prepared. Nor, will there be teachers dedicated solely to language arts. Instead, homeroom teachers will organize them. (5) is “realistic” in that it would not cause unnecessary concern on the part of *kokugo* “national language” teachers.

V. Conclusion

We close these short notes by pointing out that in order to realize (5), we need to prepare necessary teacher training workshops as well as teaching materials. As for the latter, Otsu and Kubozono (2008) can be used for that purpose. Needless to say, we need more materials.

Reference

Otsu, Yukio and Haruo Kubozono. 2008. *Kotoba no Chikara wo Hagukumu* (Developing Children’s Language Skills). Keio Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai.