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23 | Metalinguistic Awareness in TEFL: Preliminary Notes (2)

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I. Introduction

These short notes are a sequel to Otsu (2009). We describe an outline of a research program in progress in our lab, and report some of the initial results of classroom practices based on our ideas.

We begin by summarizing what we described in Otsu (2009).

Our research topic is based on the recognition of the importance of metalinguistic awareness in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language).

We claim 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.

The above is rooted in our belief that TEFL can be most appropriately prac-
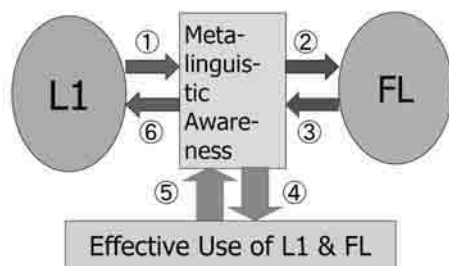
Figure 1. "L1" represents "first language," namely, students' mother tongue. "FL" represents "foreign language," namely English in the TEFL context.

ticed in the context of language teaching as schematized in Figure 1.

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

(I) To clarify thoughts that come to mind by making the components and the relations among them explicit,

(II) To express thoughts in such a way there is the least possibility of misunderstanding

(III) 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 their L1 and FL effectively further substantiate their metalinguistic awareness.

Stage 6 completes the cycle of language teaching/learning by enriching students' knowledge of their 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.
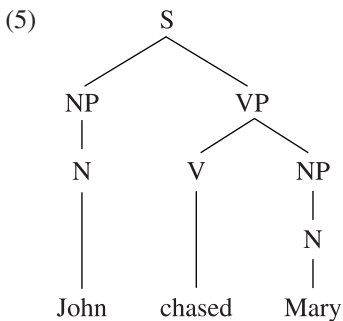
II. Awareness about Hierarchical Phrase Structure

As widely recognized, underlying a linguistic expression such as a sentence is a phrase structure, which contains the following kinds of information:

(1) words linearly ordered
(2) hierarchical structure
(3) syntactic categories each constituent belongs to

Phrase structure is customarily represented in the "tree" structure format. Thus, the phrase structure of (4) looks like (5) with the details omitted.

(4) John chased Mary.

(5)

```
                    S
             ┌──────┴──────┐
            NP             VP
            │          ┌────┴────┐
            N          V        NP
            │          │         │
            │          │         N
            │          │         │
          John      chased     Mary
```

Abbreviations: S: Sentence, NP: Noun Phrase, VP: Verb Phrase, N: Noun, V: Verb

Development of awareness about the hierarchical nature of linguistic expressions is the target of this research.

Nature of the Linguistic Expression Used in the Experiment

The following Japanese expression, which is taken from Haruo Kubozono, is used.

(6)   kowai   me   no   ( )
      Frightening eye(s)   particle

(6) as a whole is an NP if an appropriate N is supplied in the parentheses. The punch line is that the basic phrase structural hierarchy differs depending on what

kind of word is supplied. If words like *sensei* ("teacher") or *kaiju* ("monster") are supplied, the hierarchy would look like the following:

(7)

kowai   me   no   sensei

"a teacher with frightening eyes"
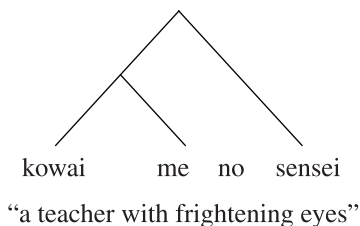
If, on the other hand, words like *byoki* ("disease") or *iro* ("color") are supplied, the hierarchy looks quite different.

(8)

kowai   me   no   byoki

"dangerous eye disease"
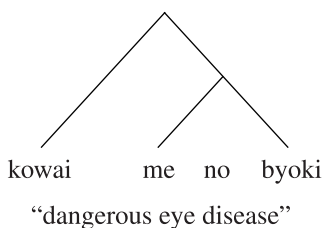
We will call (7) Type A (Hierarchy) and (8) Type B for convenience.

Given (6), adults have strong preference to supply a word in the parentheses that turns the whole expression into Type A.

Subjects

We tested 42 subjects who ranged from the first to the seventh (i.e., first grade in junior high school) grades, with six subjects in each grade. They were students in a public elementary school and a public junior high school in Tokyo.

Procedure

We tested six subjects in the same grade together. The session took 10 to 15minutes. The subjects were told at the beginning that this was not a test and that we were interested in how children understand language. All of them seemed to have enjoyed the task.

Step 1:
The experimenter showed each child group a sheet of paper on which the following was written in Japanese *kana*.

(9)   kowai
                                             me no
                                          (   )

Then the experimenter asked the children to supply a word to make the whole expression meaningful.

If the children could supply words that would make the whole phrase Type B (Type B words) as well as those that would make the phrase Type A (Type A words), they proceeded to work on Step 2. If the children could only supply Type A words, they proceeded to work on Step 3. As expected from adults' performance, there were no child groups that could only supply Type B words.

Step 2:
The experimenter picked up the Type A words and Type B words that the children supplied and asked the children if they could feel any difference between the two. If they could provide a reasonable account regarding the difference, they proceeded to work on Step 4. If not, the experiment ended at this point.

Step 3:
The experimenter provided words like *byoki* ("disease") that make the whole phrase Type B, and asked the children "What about this?" If they showed some hint of surprise, the experimenter asked "Why?". If they could provide a reasonable account regarding the difference, they proceeded to work on Step 4. If not, the experiment ended at this point.

Step 4:
The experimenter showed the children a sheet of paper on which the following was written in Japanese in *kana*.

(10)   seno takai
                                          otoko no ko
                                               to
                                          onna no ko

Each line means "tall," "boy(s)," "and" and "girl(s)," respectively.

The experimenter explained that (10) could mean "boys who are tall and girls," and "boys and girls who are all tall," adding that (10) is ambiguous between the two meanings.

The experimenter then asked the children to make up an expression that is ambiguous between Types A and B.

Results

The first, second, and third graders could only provide Type A words in Step 1, and they thus proceeded to work on Step 3. In Step 3, the first graders did not seem to have felt a difference. The second graders appeared to have felt a difference, but they were not able to give reasonable explanation. The third graders were able to give a reasonable account about the difference. Their account was as follows:

(11) When *sensei* ("teacher") is inserted, it is the teacher's eyes that are frightening. On the other hand, when *byoki* ("disease") is inserted, it is eye disease that is frightening.

The fourth graders and older graders all supplied words of Types A and B in Step 1, and gave a reasonable account in Step 2. On top of the type of account as exemplified in (11), the fifth, sixth, and seventh graders provided an account in which they used a grammatical notion "modification," such as the following:

(12) When *sensei* ("teacher") is inserted, *kowai* ("frightening") modifies *me* ("eyes"), while when *byoki* ("disease") is inserted, *kowai* modifies *byoki*.

In Step 4, the third graders through the seventh graders all succeeded in making up an expression that is ambiguous between Types A and B. The following is a sample list of their work:

(13) yasashii   Hirosen   no   musume
       kind-hearted   teacher's name   daughter
      "daughter of kind-hearted Hirosen" (Type A)
      "kind-hearted daughter of Hirosen" (Type B)

(14) yasashii   kao   no   kakikata
       gentle/easy   face   way of drawing
      "ways of drawing gentle faces" (Type A)
      "easy ways of drawing faces" (Type B)

(14), which was created by a third grader, was especially noteworthy. It makes use of the homophone *yasashii*. It can either mean "gentle" and "easy."

III. Conclusion

The informal experiment reported above has made it clear that awareness about the hierarchical nature of linguistic expressions becomes visible around the third grade. From the third grade on, children can even make up expressions that are structurally ambiguous.

What is important with respect to education is that the participating children seem to have enjoyed the task, and many wanted to work on similar tasks. We thus conclude these short notes by claiming that the use and promotion of metalinguistic awareness can provide an important avenue for education.

References

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