

Metalinguistic awareness and article production: Implications for teaching

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The relation between explicit and implicit knowledge, or between metalinguistic awareness and competence, is probably central to any theory of language didactics (cf. Smith and Truscott 2014). The present study investigates (i) metalinguistic awareness of article semantics and (ii) article use in a group of second language (L2) speakers of English. The question is whether those learners who are consciously aware of the fact that the choice of article depends on the hearer's state of mind do also use articles in a more accurate way in a communicative production task.

Twenty-six (26) Belarusian students participated in the study (mean age: 19). Their L1s are Russian and Belarusian, both languages lacking articles. Most of them started to learn English in school at age 6–8; a few started later, at age 10, 13, 15, or 17. Their self-reported English proficiency level ranged from CEFR A2–C1. They participate in a larger project; here, data from two tests are reported. First, about a hundred noun phrases per participant, modified and non-modified, were elicited with a map-task (cf. Trenkic 2007). According to the behaviour of native controls, most of these phrases have a clearly definite or indefinite reference; with these, the L2 speakers' spontaneous use of articles can be evaluated. Second, the participants completed an experimentally designed multiple-choice test (cf. Ionin, Ko & Wexler 2004 and Trenkic 2008). Importantly, like in Yang and Ionin (2009, reported in Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Philippov 2009), the participants were also asked to explain their choices in this test. These explanations were then analysed qualitatively. In my presentation, the relation between their behaviour in the map-task, assumed to depend on implicit knowledge, and these metalinguistic explanations will be focused.

The map-task showed that 9 out of 26 participants used articles in a more or less native-like way. From the metalinguistic explanations, it is clear that most of them assumed that article use has to do with referentiality (cf. Bultler 2002 and Yang & Ionin 2009) and information structure; only 12 of the 26 students were aware of the fact that the choice of article depends on the hearer's state of mind. A preliminary analysis indicates a positive correlation between this insight and target-like production of articles. Potentially, both variables also correlate positively with the participants' general English proficiency level. However, there are unexpected cases: The only speaker claiming to be a beginner of English (CEFR A2) surprisingly belongs to those few that both use articles according to the target norm and show a metalinguistic awareness of the principles governing this usage. Moreover, two participants used articles correctly despite not being able to explain this usage, just like a few were aware of the semantics of articles without being able to use them. In my presentation, special attention will be paid to these cases.

The results will be interpreted within the Modular On-line Growth and Use of Language framework (Smith & Truscott 2014). In this cognitive model, “the development of the language module is in essence unconscious” (p. 288). Nevertheless, Smith and Truscott recognise that “awareness of what is being learned [...] is associated with greater success” (p. 283), and this is explained in a precise way within the framework: “There is a clear logic to the monitoring function of metalinguistic knowledge” (p. 302), they claim. Especially, awareness seems to play a role in the growth of knowledge outside the language domain (phonology and syntax), that is, – like in the case with articles – in semantics and pragmatics (p. 286). Clearly, the findings from the present study are in line with this weak teaching–learning interface hypothesis (cf. Smith & Truscott 2014, p. 306). Thus, just like argued in Butler (2002, p. 476), a clear implication for language didactics is that language learners would benefit from teachers and textbooks being more accurate in their description of article semantics (cf. Ionin et al. 2004; White 2010; Snape & Yusa 2013).

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