

# Strategies to develop metalinguistic awareness in adult learners

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**Savoir. Surprendre.**

# Presentation plan

It is all about metalinguistic awareness...

- What
- Why
- Strategies
- Conclusion

**What**

**Why**

**Strategies**

**Conclusion**

# What is metalinguistic awareness?

- The ability to think about language and talk about it.
- Having an explicit knowledge about the structural features of language.
- High-level cognitive ability which is part of the more general concept of *metacognition*.

What

Why

Strategies

Conclusion



# Metalinguistic awareness and metacognition

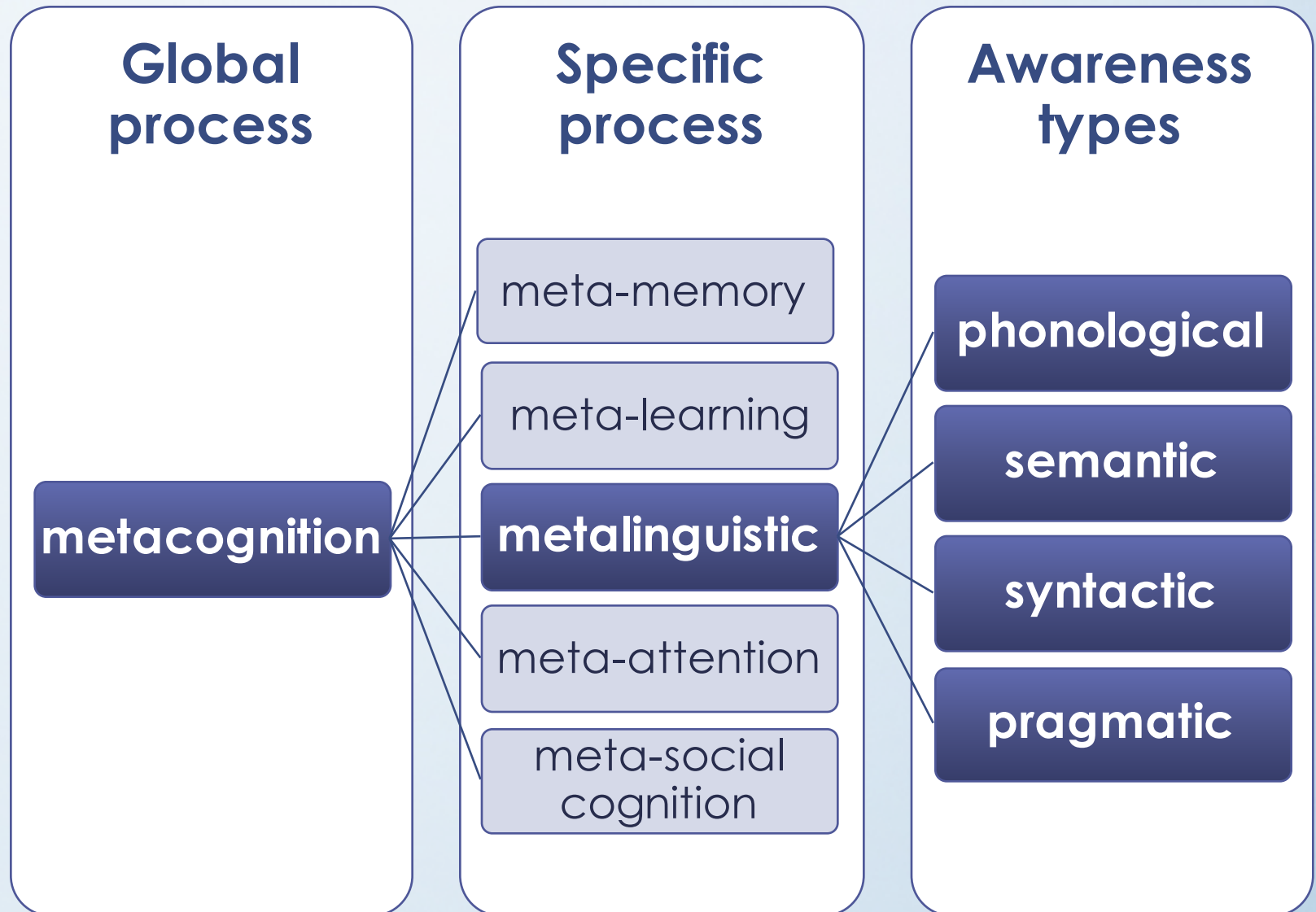
- Meta = *beyond*
- Metacognition = *beyond cognition*
  - Ability to contemplate one's own thinking, to observe oneself when processing cognitive tasks, and to organize the learning and thinking processes involved in these tasks.
- Metalinguistics: *beyond language*
  - Consciousness or awareness of the linguistic aspects of a language.



# What is metalinguistic awareness?

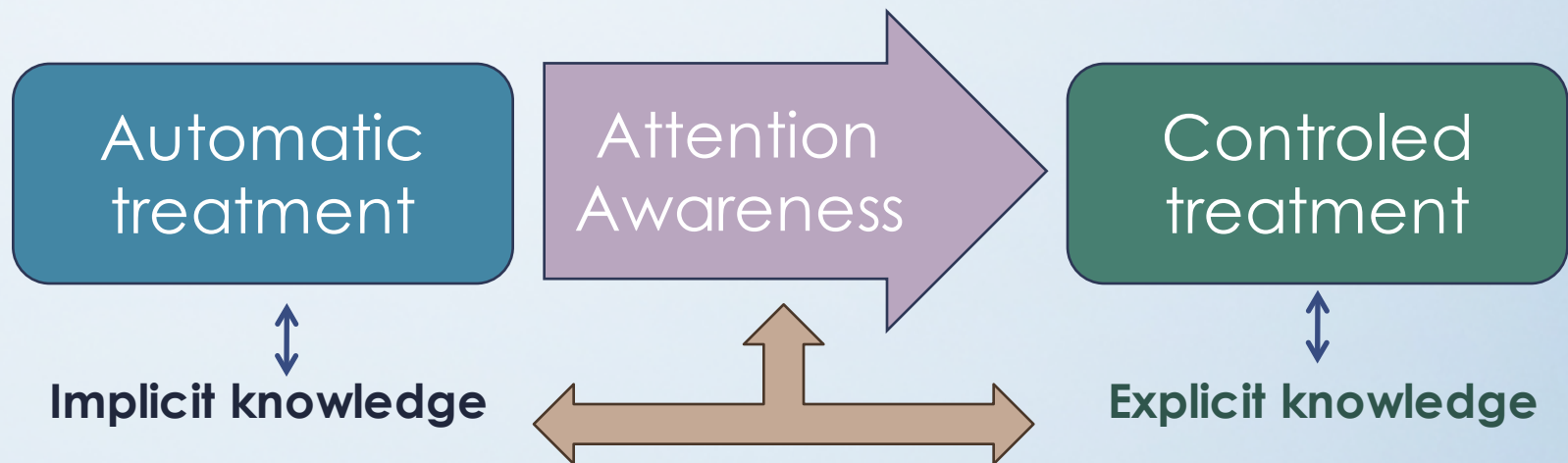
- Allowing “the individual to step back from the comprehension or production of an utterance in order to consider the linguistic form and structure underlying the meaning of the utterance. Thus a metalinguistic task is one which requires the individual to think about the *linguistic nature* of the message, to attend to and reflect on the structural features of language. To be metalinguistically aware, then, is to know how to approach and solve certain types of problems which themselves demand certain cognitive and linguistic skills.” (Malakoff, 1992, p. 518)

# Processes and awareness types



# Metalinguistic awareness requires...

- Special **attention** that can go from an almost unconscious state to a state of focused **awareness** (Bialystok, 2001).





# Why is metacognition important?

## Why should we teach metalinguistic awareness?

What

Why

Strategies

Conclusion

# Why is metacognition important?

- It is an important cognitive process involved in different aspects of an individual's life:
  - At home, by parents
  - At work
  - In school, by teachers and school principals

# Do and make them do...

- Broyon (2006, p.109, our translation)
- « To act effectively on the development of metacognition of their students, teachers must have already succeeded in developing their own metacognition, some related intervention strategies, and an ability to analyze their own professional practice by adopting a reflexive habit ».



# Why should we teach metalinguistic awareness?

- Enables the learner to understand how language is used in various contexts.
- Helps the learner use language with high confidence in a variety of contexts.
- Learner controls the message s/he would like to convey.
- Improves reading (Bialystok, 1988), mathematics (MacGregor & Price, 1999), and writing (de Haro, Delgado, & López, 2012).
- Predicts performance level on literacy tasks.

# Why should we teach metalinguistic awareness?

- Studies (e.g. Bloor, 1986; El Euch, 2010, 2011) have shown a very low level of metalinguistic awareness in undergraduate students and have related this level to the students' low performance level in tests that call for analytic and argumentative skills.

# Strategies to develop metalinguistic awareness in adults

- Self-talk
- Predicting
- Paraphrasing
- Summarizing
- Comparing sentences with discourse markers and coherence relations
- Playing with language
- Teaching ambiguous language

What

Why

Strategies

Conclusion



# Strategies to develop metalinguistic awareness in adults

- Skill needs to be practiced in various contexts and on a long time period.
- Individuals think metacognitively in two ways:
  - must be aware of their own cognitive processes;
  - must be able to apply available cognitive processes for purposes of learning or devising solutions to problems.

# Self-talk

- An important strategy for success in that it develops an awareness of what is expected in a text, be it oral or written in order to ensure the clarity and exhaustiveness of the message.
- Makes people stretch their thinking, analyse the language they are using or facing and make sense of it beyond its intuitive use.

# Self-talk (examples)

- “Will my message be clearly understood without any confusion?”
- “Can I express this differently to make it clearer?”
- “Can my words/my explanations be more explicit/more precise?”
- “Will my message have a negative effect on the reader/listener? An effect that is not intended in the first place...”
- “What makes me sure that I understood well? Can I relate what I understood to the other parts of speech?”
- “Did I answer each question thoroughly addressing each element in the instructions?” (In case of a testing situation)



# Self-talk (examples)

**Self-talk can also be in a declarative affirmative way to foster positive feelings of self-achievement. For example:**

- “I can make this text exhaustive by explaining, justifying and giving examples.”
- “I’m going to write this text in a way they will think I’m smart.”
- “I’ll do a good job.”
- “I’ll give this text/task my best shot!”
- “There is a way to make my text/work better and I’ll do it.”

# Predicting

- Based on an « educated guess ».
- Involves a good analysis of the available information and a sense of logic to reach the plausible missing information.
- Activates background knowledge, draws attention towards key concepts or key words, and shows learners that they are smart enough to figure out things.
- Assists students in thinking, analysing and making a deep sense of the message at hand.

# Predicting (examples)

Some predicting activities for adults are:

- Predicting the meaning of unknown words from surrounding text;
- Predicting the meaning of a sentence which structure is unknown or complex;
- Predicting a conclusion, based on previous parts of the text;
- Predicting a decision based on pros and cons;
- Predicting an opinion on the basis of for and against arguments;

These activities need to be followed by a justification to make sure students make their thoughts explicit.

# Paraphrasing

- Successful paraphrasing is one's own comprehension and production of another person's oral or written text.
- Involves not only understanding the message, but also to use different sentences and words to express the same ideas.
- Calls for two cognitive processes:
  - language analysis
  - language control



# Paraphrasing (examples)

- At the words level by asking students to provide synonyms.  
For example: “80% of the participants were women.” (= *The majority of the participants were women.*)
- At the voice level by asking students to:
  - Change the sentence from the active to the passive voice (or the opposite);
  - Explain the transformation process;
  - Explain when they would use the active voice and when they would use the passive voice.
- At the clause level by asking students to:
  - Combine two sentences;
  - Say if there is another way to combine them;
  - Identify the best way, according to them, and justify their answer.

# Paraphrasing (examples)

At the linguistic function level by asking students to:

- Change verbs to nouns or vice versa;
- Identify the sentence that seems best to them;
- Explain which sentence they would use.

At the semantic level by asking students to:

- Express the whole meaning of a paragraph in their own words;
- Indicate if the reported information is sufficient and justify their answer.

# Summarizing

- The most important parts of something.
- Activity 1
  - Highlight the parts of text that need to be focused on.
  - Write a text with the highlighted parts.
  - In pairs, students exchange their texts and discuss/justify their choice.
- Activity 2
  - Keep a journal for courses.
  - In pairs, they discuss the correctness and the pertinence of the information.

# Comparing sentences with discourse markers and coherence relations

- Relations in discourse that join sentences or clauses to express cause, condition, elaboration, justification or evidence, as defined in Rhetorical structure theory.
- Triggers the student's analysis ability of both sentences.
- Brings along the student's language control ability.
- Different types of relations:
  - Qualitative
  - Temporal
  - Spatiotemporal



# Comparing sentences with discourse markers and coherence relations (e.g.)

- He provided an acceptable solution to the problem.
- He provided a good solution to the problem.
- Read first, then think.
- Start thinking after reading.
- The city hall is facing the theatre.
- The theatre is facing the city hall.

# Playing with language

- Requires the learner to establish a distance from the text, to go beyond the literal meaning of words to get the intended message.
- Is the first step in the process followed by language control, the awareness of the meaning of words and the reasons they are used in a specific context.

# Playing with language (examples)

- The mind is a sponge.
- Success is a bastard as it has many fathers, and failure is an orphan, with no takers.
- The teacher planted the seeds of wisdom.
- She cut him down with her words.
- Life is a stage.

Students may also be asked to explain advertising slogans, such as:

- “Wii would like to play.”
- “We don’t charge an arm and a leg. We want tows.” (From a towing company)
- “Beer, now cheaper than gas. Drink, don’t drive.”

Teachers may also ask students to explain sentences that include a play on words such as in the following sentences:

- Know safety, no injury. No safety, know injury.
- Shortcuts cut life short.
- “Don’t count the days, make the days count.” (Muhammad Ali)

# Creating metaphors, using figurative language, playing with sounds (examples)

- Blanc sans N, ça fait black.
- He gave me carte blanche to finish it.
- I've just flunked my test! Qué sera sera.
- We finally found time for a tête-à-tête.



# Teaching ambiguous language

- Drawing the students' attention to the possibility that words and sentences may have several meanings will certainly help learners acknowledge the arbitrariness character of language.
- Being aware of the existence of two incompatible meanings to a word or sentence and being able to determine which meaning is preferred will play a major role in reading comprehension (Yuill, 1998).
- Helps students for life in an ambiguous world.

# Teaching ambiguous language (examples)

- Blood work and x-rays showed all is *negative*.  
What *good* news! (How is negative good?)
- “You know, somebody actually complimented me on my driving today. They left a little note on the windscreen; it said, 'Parking Fine.' So that was nice.” (English comedian Tim Vine)
- At the syntactic level, students may be asked to explain sentences that are ambiguous because of their structure, such as the following:
  - Please wait for hostess to be seated.
  - The children ran outside.
  - The chicken is ready to eat.
  - The burglar threatened the student with the knife.

# Conclusion

- Effective learners use metacognitive knowledge and strategies to self-regulate their learning.
- Effective learners show high levels of analysis and control of language.
- Essential to promote the development of metalinguistic awareness.
- Have an effect on the learners' standing in society, in addition to the fact that it may strongly favour employment opportunities.

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