Promoting metalinguistic awareness In group discussions.
A study with university students

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matel
Metalinguistic Awareness Tests
in European Languages

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BACKGROUND

Metalinguistic awareness (MLA) has been defined in multiple ways, within the field of linguistics, theoretical and applied (*Jakobson; 1964, Benveniste 1973; Masny, 1997; James, 1998: Schmidt,1994; Jessner, 2006)*

 and of psycholinguistics, particularly by developmentalists (Hakes, 1980; Tunmer, Pratt, Herriman, 1984; Brédart & Rondal, 1982; Bonnet & Tamine-Gardes, 1984; Bialystok, 1985, 1991; Gombert, 1990; Karmiloff-Smith, 1992)

 Beyond variability, recurrent features can be detected in these definitions

- a) The contemplative character of MLA vs more basic linguistic abilities, for understanding and producing language.

Benveniste (1974)

«la faculté métalinguistique renvoie à la possibilité que nous avons de nous élever au-dessus de la langue, de nous en abstraire, de la contempler, tout en l'utilisant dans nos raisonnements et nos observations»

James (1998):

«Language awareness is the ability to contemplate metacognitively an item of language over which one already has a degree of skilled control and about which one will therefore have developed a coherent set of intuitions. »

- *b)* the objectivation of language as a result of the metalinguistic activity

   Tunmer, Herriman & Pratt (1984):

- «To be metalinguistically aware is to begin to reflect upon and manipulate the structural features of spoken language, treating language iself as an *object of thought*, as opposed to simply using the language system to comprehend and produce sentences,

- (c)The existence of different degrees of consciousness, from intuitive and elementary forms - sometimes even nonverbal (e.g. pauses, hesitations, re-starts) to intentional and explicit analyses (not necessarily with a specialized terminology).

   N.B.

   A typical developmentalist's concern, as degrees of consciousness correspond to developmental stages.

Whatever the definition, all MLA activities always involve two main components:

- On the one hand, reflective processes, more or less verbalized, and when verbalized, mainly expressed by mental verbs:

- *"I thought", "I argued", "I compared", "it seemed to me", "It sounded like".., "I reasoned on…" and the like,*

The subjective side of MLA

- On the other hand, the fact these processes address not any "object of thought", but verbal language.

- The outcome is the detection of structural features in terms of relevant linguistic units (be it a phoneme, an article, and ending, an adjective or a preposition, a tense, word order, etc.) and not necessarily with a formal terminology.

- or the reelaboration of these units under other forms (synonyms, paraphrases)

The objective side of MLA

- Cognitive processes and linguistic outcomes are distinct but complementary in MLA.

- This distinction and complementarity was the key for examining the ML activities performed by the participants of our study,

  whose aim was to enhance MLA through interaction in a focus group.

METHOD

Participants:

6 university students, participating in two distinct focus groups, tutored by the same person at different moments.

Tests and materials:

The experience was based on a mixed methodology,

partly quantitative, in a first assessment phase, for determining a given level of MLA with a validated test, (TAM-3, Pinto, Iliceto, 2007) in written and individual form.

partly qualitative, for analyzing discussions in focus groups, where the participants were stimulated to re-analyze their previous responses to the test.

Procedure:

- **Time 1:** The first half of the items of the test was administered, and the responses permitted to assign a predominant level: (75 % of the responses)

- either 0 (null or insufficient analysis),

- or 1 (relevant but partial analysis),

- or 2 (relevant and exhaustive analysis).

- 3 participants were selected on this basis, each embodying one of these levels, and recruited for participating to a focus groups. Each participant was as "rebaptized" as ML0, ML1 and ML2.

- **Time 2:** These 3 were successively administered the second half of the items, again in written and individual form.

- **Time 3:** The tutor started the discussion in the focus group by recapitulating the responses given at Time 2 by ML0,ML1 and ML2, and soliciting further opinions (Total duration: 2h, 30)

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE

Exploiting   differences in the initial MLA levels as a motivational drive for rethinking one's own thoughts in the light of the other participants' ideas in the course of the discussion.

- **Time 4:** The tutor interviewed each participant individually about the way he/she felt the experience, asking whether the whole experience modified the perception of his/her personal use of language and of verbal messages in general (Duration: 40 min, appr.ly).

We will consider excerpts of the discussion phase.

In **bold blue,** *we marked the words which reveal the argumentative process (the subjective side of MLA)*

in **bold red**, *the words which show the* linguistic endproduct *of the process (the objective side of MLA)*

The excerpt is about an item of one of the subtests, "Comprehension", which require metasemantic abilities.

"The future is already present"

"The present already holds the future"

<u>Examiner:</u>

"Each of these sentences conveys a given time relationship.

You will have to say if this relationship is the same in both sentences and to justify your response."

In strictly logical terms, it is questionable that there is a clearcut truth value.

whereas there may be profound differences as to how the issue is handled at the metalinguistic level.

At the highest level, we will find explicit analysis of the meanings of some central linguistic units (at the lexical, grammatical, syntactic, pragmatic level, etc.)

or, alternatively, a paraphrase of the sentences in a more or less elaborated manner.

N.B. ! The more questionable the response at the content level, the most relevant the quality of the metalinguistic analysis.

Let's see how ML0, ML1 and ML2 cope with this issue.

ML0:

 "I wrote that, **to me**, it's different because in the first sentence it says that in the imminent future there is something that belongs to the present, whereas in the second it **apparently** says that all the present encloses the future, **therefore** also a more remote future".

 If I'm thinking about something I must do in the next 5 seconds, 5 seconds are already there, whereas in the second sentence it says that even the most remote future is in some way present.

T (tutor)**:** _Ok. Then the difference is between an upcoming future and ……_

ML0: Yes, an **imminent and a more remote future.**

Overall, ML0 makes *vague attempts at paraphrasing* *each sentence.*

Note the nebulous expression: "in some way present"

Yet, the Tutor, by simply proposing the adjective "upcoming" for paraphrasing: "imminent", uttered by ML0, stimulates a helpful opposition between "imminent" and "remote", which were not formulated as such, at first.

ML1:

 "I practically wrote the same think: it's a different relationship in the two sentences: the first says the future is about to come and even that it already came while you were thinking about it, whereas in the second it's something…more remote, yes, but **that you are progressively building right now,** in your present time."

ML1 essentially reworks the second sentence, leaving the first practically as is:

 She rationalizes the apparent paradox of the second sentence in terms of a progressive construction of the future that starts right now.

ML2:

"More or less so, but, **paradoxically**, the second sentence **gave me a sense** of past because **the verb "to hold" suggests the idea** of something **enclosed, already closed, and therefore past.**

At the beginning **I couldn't see** the difference between the two sentences but then, **reading** again and again, **I realized** that, in the first, the future is **practically contemporaneous probably** because of the **verb "to be": it says: "it is", therefore right now, necessarily.**

On the contrary, in the second sentence, **if** the present **"holds"** the future, **then it means** that it already **included it, embraced it, it's already behind you".**

ML2 is systematic and methodic.

She embodies both the psychological and the linguistic approach to the analysis of language.

She goes straight to the verb of the second sentence ("to hold") as a central semantic cue, rephrases it and draws a first conclusion: "therefore past".

She then makes her own process explicit by explaining that she has been reading several times for "seeing the difference", and for "realizing".

She then comes back to the first sentence with the same approach, in this case by contextualizing the meaning of the "verb to be": "it is" and drawing conclusions about the meaning of the sentence.

The last considerations recall the whole argumentative process about the second sentence, "if...then", which ends up with three paraphrases for "holds the future":

"it included, embraced it, it's already behind you."

T: then, all your analysis is on the verbs, on "is" and "holds" ?
ML2: right.

The evolution during the discussion

T: Then, for the three of you, the relationships are different in the two sentences.

ML1: That's it ! *(confirmed also by ML0 and ML2).*

T: But what are the elements of the sentences that suggested it ? For instance, some of you pinpointed: "already" or "to hold" or "to be", etc..,

ML1: maybe **word order** ….

(ML1 suddenly notices this syntactic cue as a possible key).

ML0: I agree, **word order in the two sentences**: in the first sentence, for instance, "the future is already present", both future and present are placed on the same plane…

(ML0 also starts analyzing the structure of the sentence as a possible key).

ML1: … and in the second, **I pinpointed "to hold"**, **which implies** that **you lay the grounds for the future right now.**

(Again, instead of simply paraphrasing, ML1 adopts a more analytical and formal approach. This time she hooks into the verb "to hold" for rethinking her previous interpretation of "preparing the future").

ML0: Yeah ! **It's like a timeline**: as you do things slowly and progressively, the timeline encloses the present and you have a glimpse on the future, ok ?

As you experience the present, part of the future becomes enclosed in it, but the present cannot grasp it all because the future is a timeline…. **Let's pretend** it's very, very long…

(ML0 suddenly gets ideas for reshaping her whole representation of the relationships between future and present.

Her paraphrasis is much more elaborated than she was able to do at the beginning.

The initial opposition between "imminent" and "remote", which were - unrelated terms in the two sentences, is now reconciled in a new concept and a new word: "timeline").

ML2: it's infinite, then…

ML0: That's it…

T: Then, the relevant difference is between "to be" and "to hold".

And what about the "already" in both sentences ?

ML2: It's what **suggested** me **the idea** of something past, already behind me. **It influenced** me much, the **"already".**

(ML2 takes advantage of this hint by the Tutor for reinforcing her previous interpretation, both in the outcome and in the process)

ML1: for me **this suggestion** is stronger in the first than in the second sentence.

(ML1 also comes back on her interpretive process)

ML0: Let me **reason about all this**: again, **let's imagine** the **timeline:**

you are here, this is all your timeline, **which then is also** your future. In 5 seconds you'll be there. Ok ?

Then, I already included a little bit of future, **therefore** as you go through the process you **include**, **you enclose** your future…

(ML0 refines her idea of the timeline and mentions "a reasonment" for the first time)

ML2: …which has become your present….

(ML2 accepts the "timeline game"as a possible interpretation)

ML0: …. Which, in turn, will become my past when I am here….

(ML0 shows the consistency of her reasonment).

ML2: Yes, I got it, It's not that I don't agree but **what influenced me** the most it's the **order of the verbs** and of the "**already**", the **change of the verbs** and the **presence of the "already".**

ML2 recapitulates the main cues she has been considering:

- She confirms the formal character of her first approach, based on general categories and on precise linguistic units.

- At the same time, she acknowledges that there may be other plausible interpretations.

T: Let's say that there might be more than a truth value for each sentence, and therefore it depends on what you are considering each time.. Did she (ML2) convince you ? (addressing ML0 and ML1)

ML1: Yes, yes....

The session ends up here (duration: 35 minutes) and the participants pass on to the discussion about the next item.

SUMMING UP

Through the discussion in the focus group, all three participants showed advances in their analysis of the item in question with respect to their starting level, but each in a different way.

- For **ML0,** the passage was from a practically null analysis, correlated to a nebulous view of the issue, to an active attempt at dissecting this issue and at reconciling possible contradictions of meanings.

She would now deserve an ML1, so her improvement might be defined as "vertical".

In the individual interview, after the focus group.

ML0 underlined the value of the discussion in itself, both for the relevance of the contents of the items and for the role of words as vehicle of concepts.

In her opinion, the experience changed her perception of the language of the media.

- For **ML1,** the passage was from an initial paraphrasis to a more formal approach:

  she noticed cues she had overlooked before:

  semantic (the verb "to hold")

  syntactic ("word order").

  Instead of a whole rephrasing, she is now able to pinpoint single relevant elements as a basis for her reasonment.

  Her analysis became more specifically linguistic.

  Her improvement can be defined as "horizontal", in that it enriched her approach, although the new elements still remained fragmented.

- *In the individual interview:*

- **ML1** acknowledged the role of the discussion in itself because "it calls into question the very knowledge of our language, of Italian". *(textual !)*

- The stimulating thing in that experience was to be in the condition of "reflecting about the most appropriate response", and to "reinforce language awareness" *(textual !).*

- **For ML2**,

- the passage was also a "horizontal" one, in the sense that she consolidated and refined her first analysis of the item.

- Her approach was very formal and analytical from the start, yet she acknowledged the contributions from the other participants:

  the relevance of the adverb "already", the "timeline" interpretation, and was the only one who synthesized her own analysis .

In the individual interview:

ML2 performed an analysis of the experience even more sophisticated and exhaustive than the did about the item during the discussion.

She explicitly pointed to the distinction between the outcome of a response and the complexity of the reasonment behind the response.

between the truth value of a response and the metacognitive and metalinguistic processes that can lead to that response.

She praised this aspect as being the most innovative in the experience, and a possible alternative to traditional assessment, namely the focus on the justification processes.

She also claimed that this type of metalinguistic experience makes you more aware of the role of contexts, tones and registers.

an awareness that short, practical communications via e-mail or via social networks tend to reduce.

TO WRAP UP

- Discussions in the focus group about metalinguistic issues enhanced the awareness of the relevance of awareness in each participant, both on the metacognitive and on the metalinguistic side.

- While it respected each individual cognitive style,

  the discussion either raised awareness at a higher level (vertical growth)

  or brought other significant elements to the same level (horizontal growth).

- In both cases, it stimulated a wide range of cognitive processes related to the social use of language.

- As such, this methodology will provide the basis for a didactic video for promoting MLA in young students, from High School to University.

- This video will be one of the products of the MATEL Project (Metalinguistic Awareness Tests in European Languages),

  funded by the European Union, and involving various countries, among which Canada.

THANK YOU !

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