



# Children talking about writing: Investigating metalinguistic understanding

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## ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on explicit teaching about language has suggested that equipping students with metalinguistic knowledge is as an important means of enhancing students' participation in learning. Yet in the context of international jurisdictions which are placing a renewed emphasis on knowledge about language, there is a notable lack of research into the nature of learners' metalinguistic understanding about writing, as evident in their ability to reflect on written language. Using an analytical framework shaped by Vygotsky's and Hallidayan theories of concept formation and language learning, this paper provides insights into the nature of metalinguistic understanding as manifested in ways in which learners engage with grammatical concepts. Drawing on data selected from two parallel studies in Australia and England in which students aged 9–13 were interviewed about their metalinguistic understanding of writing, our analysis has found that learners' metalinguistic understanding is more strongly oriented to identification – naming and specifying taught grammatical concepts. The findings have important implications for pedagogical strategies that might facilitate higher-level metalinguistic understanding, enabling learners to elaborate, extend and apply their grammatical knowledge.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to extend the current knowledge on the nature of metalinguistic understanding about writing, as evident in students' ability to reflect on written language. At the heart of this concern is the conception that the ways in which students engage with a grammatical concept as reflected in their talk about language is a visible display of their metalinguistic understanding.

Internationally, there are now jurisdictions where curriculum policy is giving increasing emphasis to the explicit teaching of knowledge about language in subject English. In Australia, the *Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E)* reinstated Knowledge about Language as the centerpiece of the Curriculum (ACARA, 2009) together with the other two complementary strands of 'Literacy' and 'An Informed Appreciation of Literature'. In England the *National Curriculum for English (NC:E)* re-introduced grammar in 1988. Subsequent revisions (DfE, 1995, 1999) all included some reference to grammar, but the latest version (DfE, 2014) is the most explicit, specifying what grammatical knowledge must be

mastered in each year of the primary curriculum. Similarly in the context of the United States, the inclusion of a Language strand in the new *Common Core State Standards Initiative for English Language Arts and Literacy (CCSSI-ELA, 2012)* reflects a renewed investment in explicit instruction of knowledge about language.

In placing the teaching of knowledge about language at the forefront of subject English curriculum initiatives, the curricula challenge us to reimagine what constitutes the disciplinary knowledge of subject English and what role it plays in language and literacy development (Freebody, Maton, & Martin, 2008; Macken-Horarik, Love, & Unsworth, 2011). The vision for the Knowledge about Language strand in the AC:E is that students are to develop 'a coherent, dynamic and evolving body of knowledge about the English language and how it works' (ACARA, 2009, p. 6) from kindergarten (foundation) through to senior secondary years. Whilst the NC:E makes reference to the term grammar as its language knowledge base, it nonetheless provides a more functional orientation to the role of grammatical knowledge in developing 'more conscious control and choice in our language' (DfE, 2014).

Previous literature on explicit teaching about language has suggested that equipping students with metalinguistic knowledge is an important means of enhancing students' participation in learning (Christie & Unsworth, 2005; Hammond, 2012; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). Access to disciplinary knowledge

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(e.g. knowledge about language) is essential for all students if they are to develop understandings of how language works, and thereby achieve higher educational outcomes (Hammond, 2012; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). The emphasis on metalinguistic understanding has a strong resonance with a social view of language learning which holds that what learners will develop as cognitive resources for future activities is influenced by what they have become aware of in language (e.g. Vygotsky, 1986; Williams, 2005). In that light, it can be argued that a clear role for knowledge about language in a future-oriented curriculum should be founded on the potential for metalinguistic knowledge to support learners in becoming confident and successful users of language. Therefore, the issue of how learners develop metalinguistic understanding as they encounter explicit language instruction is an important area of research.

Despite the centrality of metalinguistic knowledge in subject English curricula, research into how students develop their knowledge about language and how they bring this knowledge to writing in different contexts is limited. We know little, for example, about how knowledge about language is taken up and what facilitates the transfer of such knowledge into 'enabling tools' for meaning making (Myhill, 2005, p. 89). As far back as 1990, Carter (1990, p. 118) pointed out that 'there is much work to be done to explore in what ways knowledge about grammar might inform processes of language development'. In a similar vein, Myhill (2005) argues that the push and pull of claims and counter-claims about grammar instruction stem from a lack of 'a theoretical conceptualization of how grammar might support the teaching of writing' (p. 92). The implementation of policy initiatives, such as AC:E and NC:E, which explicitly require teaching about language, provides a timely opportunity to investigate the development of knowledge about language as experienced by students. This paper uses this particular moment to contribute to the field of English language and literacy education through a theorization of the nature of metalinguistic understanding in learning to write. It does this by drawing on data from two studies in Australia and England which both examined the explicit teaching of grammar in the context of writing in junior secondary school contexts. These data provide the opportunity to draw on a larger data set, one not restricted by national boundaries. Through this we offer an exploratory investigation of how students develop their metalinguistic understanding about writing in response to explicit teaching about language.

### 1.1. Conceptual framework

In this paper, we use the terms grammar and metalinguistic knowledge interchangeably, referring to both as 'any grammatically informed knowledge about language' (Macken-Horarik et al., 2011, p. 11) and focusing on the role of grammar for linguistic decision making (Myhill, 2005; Myhill, Jones, & Wilson, 2016). This functionally oriented conception of grammar differs greatly from the conventionalist views of grammar as concerned with rules and compliance (Myhill et al., 2016). Accepting this functional view, the explicit study of grammar is more than simple mastery of grammatical rules but it itself becomes 'a way of using grammar to think with' (Halliday, 2002, p. 416). In this sense, to develop metalinguistic understanding means to be able to think grammatically about language choices in writing.

In the ensuing sections, we discuss theoretical concepts underpinning key theorisations of metalinguistic understanding.

### 1.2. Metalinguistic understanding in writing

Current research on metalinguistic understanding has been conducted largely within cognitive psychology. Gombert's (1992) analysis of metalinguistic understanding, for example, focuses principally on oral development in the early years, and reflects a

field which has tended to investigate metalinguistic understanding in the context of younger learners (Allan, 1982; Chen & Jones, 2012; Downing & Oliver, 1974; Karmiloff-Smith, Grant, Sims, Jones, & Cuckle, 1996; Tunmer, Bowey, & Grieve, 1983), second language learners (e.g. Bialystok, 2001, 2007; ter Kuile, Veldhuis, van Veen, & Wicherts, 2011), or oral development (Gombert, 1992). So far studies in this area have been limited to the role of metalinguistic understanding in developing spelling competence, particularly in terms of metaphonological (i.e. knowledge of sound patterns) (Bourassa, Treiman, & Kessler, 2006; Nunes, Bryant, & Bindman, 2006; Thévenin, Totureau, Fayol, & Jarousse, 1999), and metaorthographic knowledge (i.e. knowledge of a word) (Caravolas, Kessler, Hulme, & Snowling, 2005). However, learning to write goes beyond simple control over phonological, orthographic and spelling knowledge.

In conceptualizing metalinguistic understanding in writing, we turn to Bialystok's (1987, 1999, 2011) work on metalinguistic development. In her analysis of bilingual cognitive advantages, Bialystok (1987) describes metalinguistic ability as encompassing two linguistic processes: *analysis of knowledge* and *control of processes* (p. 155). She refers to *analysis* as the ability to construct explicit and conscious representations of linguistic knowledge and *control* as the ability to selectively attend to and apply knowledge (Bialystok, 1987, 2001). Bialystok indicates that while solving metalinguistic tasks, children's metalinguistic awareness is evident in their ability to construct mental representations of linguistic concepts and to deliberately direct attention to certain aspects of a representation. A significant point that can be drawn out here is that metalinguistic understanding involves both recognizing and identifying patterns of language use, and being able to apply that understanding to regulate one's own language use and language choices.

In the context of writing, recent research has considered writing as a similar form of metalinguistic activity – an act of selecting, shaping, reflecting and revising (Myhill, 2011). Researchers such as Fortune (2005) and Tolchinsky (1999) have demonstrated that metalinguistic activity is an inevitable element of writing – in other words, it is impossible to write without engaging in metalinguistic activity at some level. Myhill (2011), in a more recent study, argues that it is 'the explicit bringing into consciousness of an attention to language as an artifact, and the conscious monitoring and manipulation of language' that enables the writer to 'create desired meanings' (p. 250). Of relevance to the present paper is evidence that students' metalinguistic understanding of rhetorical goals of a piece of writing facilitated their communicative decisions at the text level.

Other empirical studies have lent further support to the important role of the articulated and conscious awareness of language in shaping writing. In investigating the influence of grammar instruction on students' writing, Andrews et al. (2006) report that the awareness of sentence combining had a positive impact on students' writing production. Discussing the beneficial effects of grammar instruction, they indicate that a focus on sentence combining in lessons had enabled the students to 'splice together simple sentences' to produce compound or complex ones (Andrews et al., p. 42). In another study investigating young children's metalinguistic understanding in writing, Chen and Jones (2012) found that knowing about clause constituents in functional terms (i.e. participants – who is involved; processes – what is happening; and circumstances – how/where it happened) expanded young children's repertoire of resources to represent their experience in their writing. The key here seems to reside in the value of metalinguistic understanding – a conscious and articulated awareness – in moving students beyond an abstract knowledge about language to apply that knowledge to their writing.

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