Metalinguistic knowledge of low-proficiency university EFL learners

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In language learning, metalanguage is used to describe target language, and lack of metalinguistic knowledge may hinder the learners' understanding of textbook content and classroom explanations. To measure metalinguistic knowledge of low-proficiency EFL students, a simple metalanguage test was developed and administered to 195 Japanese university students with TOEIC Bridge scores between 64 and 170 (mean 117). Correlations were found between the Rasch measure of the metalanguage test and scores on all sections of TOEIC Bridge; the highest correlation was with the reading section (r = .784). Many students had difficulties identifying parts of speech, with only 32% of the subjects correctly identifying the word "slowly" as an adverb, and 44% recognizing the word "the" as an article. From the results of this study, it seems that understanding students' metalanguage level and providing necessary remedial intervention may be helpful, especially with low-proficiency students.

メタ言語とは言語の仕組みを表現するために用いられる言語であり、メタ言語知識が不足すると教科書や授業での説明を理解するのに支障をきたす可能性がある。本研究では、習熟度の低い英語学習者のメタ言語知識を検証するため、195名の大学生（TOEIC Bridgeのスコア64～170、平均117点）を対象にメタ言語テストを実施した。その結果、メタ言語テストのラッシュ分析による能力推定値とTOEIC Bridgeのスコアに相関性が認められ、一番相関性の高かったのはReadingセクションであった(r = .784)。多くの学生は品詞の名前を認識することができず、"slowly" を副詞と認識できた学生が32%、"the" が冠詞であると理解している学生も44%にとどまるという結果になった。これらの結果から、習熟度の低い学習者においては、学習者のメタ言語知識を確認し、必要な場合にはメタ言語に関するリメディアル的指導を行う必要性があると考えられる。

Background

Declining academic standards of Japanese university students

In recent years, many universities have been confronted with declining academic standards of their students, and remedial education has become indispensible. According to a report by the National Institute of Multimedia Education, only 24 % of non-English major students at private universities have a high-school graduate level of English proficiency, and 33% have less than junior high-school graduate level (Ono, 2005). As one reason for the declining English proficiency of university students, Ono (2006) mentions varying types of entrance examinations and lowered standards set by universities, which have made it possible to enter universities with very low English proficiency or even without taking any English examinations. Saita

(2003) explains that English proficiency levels at the time of high school entry have dropped since the implementation of a new Course of Study emphasizing communication. Consequently, there seems to be an increasing number of university students who do not understand the explanations by teachers and textbooks even in their L1 because they lack the basic English knowledge and metalinguistic knowledge assumed to have been acquired at high school.

Metalanguage

Metalanguage is a language to talk about language (Jakobson, 1956); and talking about language in an "illuminating way" in teaching "requires the establishment of a common, acceptable and adequate metalanguage that is accessible to both teachers and learners" (James & Garrett, 1992, p. 7). Thus, before metalanguage can be used to describe another language, metalanguage itself needs describing and explaining to be understood by the audience (Berry, 2005). Use of metalanguage may be minimized in communication and listening classes where emphasis is on practice rather than explanations. However, in reading, grammar, and test preparation classes (e.g. for TOEIC), basic metalanguage is crucial to understand teachers' explanations and textbooks.

Previous studies on metalanguage

Metalinguistic knowledge tests are often used to measure explicit knowledge of the target language. Ellis (2008) defines explicit knowledge as conscious and declarative knowledge which is verbalizable with semi-technical or technical metalanguage; and implicit knowledge as intuitive and procedural knowledge which is not verbalizable. Metalinguistic knowledge is considered to be related to learners' explicit, but not implicit, knowledge (Ellis, 2009). Green and Hecht (1992) presented 12 sentences containing underlined grammatical errors to 300 German EFL learners and English native speakers, and asked them to correct the errors and state the violated rules. While the English native speakers corrected more errors (96%) than the German EFL learners (78%), the EFL learners were slightly better at explaining errors than the native speakers (46% and 42% respectively). This suggests that, because the EFL learners could correct more errors than they could explain, they relied on implicit knowledge to correct some errors. The results also show extensive reliance on implicit knowledge by the native speakers.

Kubota, Itagaki and Sugiyama (1999) repeated Green and Hecht's study with 160 junior college and university students in Japan. While the Japanese students could explain as many errors (46.5%) as Green and Hecht's German students, the Japanese students provided less accurate corrections (54%), indicating that German students depended on intuition based on implicit knowledge more than the Japanese students. The results also showed that Japanese students provided only 14% (junior college) and 17% (university) accurate corrections when they failed to give correct explanations, suggesting heavy reliance on explicit knowledge. Japanese students do not seem to have the same level of implicit knowledge, possibly because, compared to the German students, they are in an input poor environment, where such knowledge is difficult to acquire. Sakai (2004, 2008) also repeated Green and Hecht's test with two groups of Japanese university students, finding that both groups corrected fewer errors than Green and Hecht's German students (70.6% in 2004, and 72.3% in 2008), but could state the errors better (61.7% and 61.6%). Although there were some items that were corrected without correct explanations, the percentages of those items in both groups (18.4% and 40.9%) were much lower than of the German EFL learners (70%). These results suggest that Japanese EFL learners seem to possess limited implicit knowledge of English grammar and rely significantly more on explicit knowledge.

Metalanguage and language proficiency

Some earlier studies have investigated correlations between language proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge (e.g., Steel & Alderson, 1994; Alderson, Clapham & Steel, 1997; Elder, Warren, Hajek, Manwaring & Davis, 1999; Elder & Manwaring, 2004; Roehr, 2008; Elder, 2009). Steel and Alderson (1994) conducted a pilot study on first-year undergraduate learners of French, finding a moderate correlation (r = .435) between their metalinguistic knowledge test and a French language proficiency test results. Following that pilot study, Alderson, Clapham and Steel (1997) gave a metalinguistic assessment test and several forms of proficiency tests to French learners at British universities. Again, they only found moderate correlations (r = .34 to .47) between the metalinguistic test and proficiency tests, concluding that "there is no evidence from this study to justify the teaching of metalinguistic knowledge as a means of improving students' linguistic proficiency" (Alderson, et al. 1997, p.118). However, one potentially critical problem with those studies is that their metalinguistic assessment tests include identifying parts of speech (Steel & Alderson, 1994; Alderson et al., 1997) and explaining errors using specific rules that are broken (Alderson et al., 1997) in sentences in English, which is the learners' L1. Their subjects had much higher mean scores for providing rules violated in French sentences, and this section of their metalinguistic test had higher correlations with the French proficiency test (r = .49), and correcting errors in French sentences (r = .75).

More recent studies investigating relationships between L2 proficiency and L2 metalinguistic knowledge have found different results. Roehr (2008) gave a German language test and a metalanguage test to 60 university students taking Advanced German at a British university. The language test had 45 gap-fill and multiple-choice items testing grammar and vocabulary features commonly taught in German instruction for English speakers. The metalanguage test had 15 items requiring the learners to correct, describe, and explain L2 features matching the language test and 15 items requiring identification of the grammatical role of highlighted parts. Roehr found a strong correlation (r = .81) between the language and metalanguage tests.

Elder (2009) conducted a metalinguistic knowledge test with 229 ESL and EFL learners in New Zealand and other countries, comparing the results with the TOEFL CBT, IELTS, and an institutional English diagnostic test. Although correlations with components of the diagnostic test were weak, correlations were significant with its reading component (r = .363). With IELTS, significant correlations were found with all parts (listening, speaking, reading, writing and overall) of the test, the reading section (r = .540) correlating most strongly. The metalanguage test correlated relatively strongly with all sections of TOEFL CBT (Listening r = .490, Reading r = .574, Structure/Writing r = .573 and Total r = .613).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to develop a simple metalanguage test for low-proficiency students, to investigate the following two research questions: 1) What is the correlation between English proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge among low-proficiency students? 2) How much metalanguage do low-proficiency EFL students have?

Subjects and the test

The metalanguage test was given to 249 non-English majors at a private university in the first class of the 2009 spring semester. 195 native Japanese speaker students consented to be included in the research, spanning nine classes of different years and proficiency levels. The TOEIC Bridge scores from an achievement test in January 2009 for sophomores and juniors and a placement test in April 2009 for freshmen were also obtained. The

subjects' TOEIC Bridge scores had a mean of 117 and ranged from 64 to 170. According to Educational Testing Service (2009), 120 on TOEIC Bridge is equivalent to 310 on TOEIC.

Although many previous studies measured metalinguistic knowledge through learners' ability to find and/or describe errors in ungrammatical sentences and to identify parts of speech, Iida, Teele and Kuwayama (2005) found that the metalanguage test they used, in which the subjects were asked to find, correct, and describe errors in sentences, was too difficult for their "low-intermediate" subjects with average TOEIC score of 413.6. A simpler test would thus be necessary to measure the metalanguage knowledge of the lower proficiency subjects of this present study.

The metalanguage test designed by the author had four sections of ten items each, testing parts of speech, parts of sentence pattern, tense and mood, and others (Appendix). Students were asked to identify the underlined part of each sentence and choose the term which best described the part from lists of terms provided. The directions and answer choices were all given in Japanese. The target terms and structures were chosen from ones commonly taught in Japanese high-school English classes and used in many textbooks. The same answer choices were used for all ten questions in each section, and all sections' answer choices included "I don't know" to minimize guessing. Students were encouraged not to guess as the results were to be used to understand students' needs in classroom and textbook terminology. Only simple, high frequency words were used to keep the difficulty of the test to a minimum. The vocabulary analysis using Vocabulary Profile (Cobb, n.d.; Heatley & Nation, 1994) showed that the test consisted mostly of 1K words (74.8%) and 2K words (3.28%). The only academic word was "computer" and off-list words were very simple words which were all "katakana" loanwords in Japanese (avocado, baseball, boyfriend, guitar, and homework), contracted words (isn't and it's) or proper nouns (Jane, Kyushu, Takuya, Tama, Tom and Yumiko).

Results and analysis

A reliability analysis using Winsteps (Linacre, 2007) showed person reliability of .89 and item reliability of .97. As explained by Linacre (2010), Rasch person reliability is similar to classical measures of internal test reliability such as Cronbach's alpha, criticized by Schils, van der Poel, and Weltens (1991), but excludes persons with extreme scores, tending to underestimate reliability, whereas Cronbach's alpha tends to overestimate it. High person reliability indicates high probability that persons reported to have higher ability measures do, in fact, have higher measures than persons reported to have lower ability measures. Item reliability has no direct analogue in classical analysis, but low item reliability would indicate that the sample of responses is inadequate to provide stable estimation of item difficulty, so a larger sample of persons would be required. Person reliability of .89 is good, although not exceptional, (Hughes, 2003, p.39), while item reliability of .97 is extremely good.

The minimum raw score of the test was 6, and the maximum raw score was 40, with mean of 26.7. Table 1 lists students' TOEIC Bridge scores and raw scores and Rasch measures of the metalanguage test.

Table 1. TOEIC Bridge and metalanguage test results

	Maximum possible	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
Bridge listening	90	34	88	59.1	10.2
Bridge reading	90	24	84	57.9	14.8
Bridge total	180	64	170	117.2	23.8
Metalanguage test, raw score	40	6	40	26.7	8.4
Metalanguage test, Rasch measure		25.7	107.9	63.0	15.6

Pearson correlation was used to analyze the correlations between the Rasch measure of metalinguistic knowledge, and the listening, reading, and total TOEIC Bridge test scores (Table 2). Significant correlations were found with all the sections, the reading section showing the strongest correlation of .784.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations between the metalanguage test results and TOEIC Bridge scores

	Bridge L	Bridge R	Bridge T	Metalanguage test
Bridge listening	1	.788**	.918**	.641**
Bridge reading	.788**	1	.961**	.784**
Bridge total	.918**	.961**	1	.763**
Rasch measure from the metalanguage test	.641**	.784**	.763**	1

Note. $N = 195$. ** $p < .01$(2-tailed).

Table 3 lists the five most difficult and five easiest items. The most difficult items were causative, two adverb items, and two complement items. The easiest items were noun, subject, present progressive, verb, and conjunction. Although the most difficult and easiest items do not share the same target metalanguage, three of the five sentences are the same: "Jane is a doctor," "Please speak slowly," and "Yumiko and Takuya can speak English well." Most students could identify "Jane" as a subject, but they could not identify "a doctor" as a complement. They knew "speak" as a verb, but not "slowly" as an adverb. The conjunction "and" was identified correctly, but "well" as an adverb is less understood. This suggests that some metalanguage features are better understood than others even when they appear in the same sentence.

Table 3. Most difficult and easiest items

5 most difficult items	5 easiest items
I need to have my computer fixed. (causative)	Tom is a teacher.(noun)
Please speak slowly. (adverb)	Jane is a doctor.(subject)
Jane is a doctor. (complement)	The cat is sleeping on the bed.(present progressive)
Yumiko and Takuya can speak English well. (adverb)	Please speak slowly.(verb)
Jane calls her cat Tama. (complement)	Yumiko and Takuya can speak English well. (conjunction)

Table 4 shows responses to the difficult items in order of Rasch measure. Thus, the answer choices high on the list were chosen by low-ability students, and the responses low on the list were chosen by the high-ability students, the bottom response

being the correct answer. In the most difficult item, 35 higher proficiency students chose present perfect instead of causative, and 21 lower proficiency students chose past perfect. This suggests that many students know "have plus past participle" often means perfect tense. However, only 49 students identified the sentence correctly as causative. For the second most difficult item, 73 students chose adjective, which is more than the 62 students who correctly answered adverb. The fourth most difficult item was also an adverb item, and 46 chose adjective instead. These results suggest confusion between adjective and adverb. Also, on this item, 27 students chose auxiliary verb, which could be due to confusion between "well" and "will". The third most difficult item was a complement. For this item, higher proficiency students chose "I don't know" and no answer, while lower proficiency students may have responded randomly. The fifth most difficult item was another complement item. The sixth most difficult item, past passive, was confused with past and present perfect by higher proficiency students even though there is no "have" or "had". This could be because it has "1950", and sentences in perfect tense are often used with a time reference at the end of the sentence. The seventh most difficult item was the article "the". Only 85 out of 195 students recognized "the" as an article. Even though using English articles is difficult for Japanese speakers, it was surprising that over 100 students did not know that "the" was an article.

Table 4. Number of responses on some of the difficult items in order of Rasch measure of the subjects

1. I need to have my computer fixed.		2. Please speak slowly.	
Present progressive	1	Verb	26
Past perfect	21	I don't know	11
Subjunctive	4	Article	1
Future	10	Auxiliary verb	21
Passive	19	Adjective	73
Tag question	2	No answer	1
Present perfect	35	Adverb	62
Causative	49		
3. Jane is a doctor.		**4. Yumiko and Takuya can speak English well.**	
Subject	7	I don't know	23
Predicate verb	33	Verb	2
Object	76	Article	11
I don't know	4	Auxiliary verb	27
No answer	1	Preposition	4
Complement	74	No answer	1
		Adjective	46
		Conjunction	1
		Adverb	78

6. The house was built in 1950.		7. I will call you in the morning.	
Future	4	Adjective	3
Tag question	2	Auxiliary verb	7
I don't know	13	I don't know	21
Causative	3	Adverb	14
Subjunctive	5	Preposition	53
Present progressive	2	Verb	2
Past perfect	71	Conjunction	7
Present perfect	13	No answer	1
Passive	83	Noun	1
		Article	85

There were some other interesting findings. The sentence "Tom is a teacher" was used twice in part one of the test, the first one asking the part of speech of "Tom", and the second one asking the part of speech of "teacher". While 193 out of 195 students correctly identified "Tom" as a noun, only 159 students identified "teacher" as a noun. This suggests that many students might believe noun only refers to person's name. Question 10 in part one and question 6 in part three of the test were both "I will call you in the morning," the former testing "will" as an auxiliary verb and the latter testing the future tense. While 170 students understood that the sentence was future tense, only 120 students knew "will" as an auxiliary verb. Although it is important to know that the word "will" often indicates future tense, it is also important to know that the word is an auxiliary verb – because of its role in forming questions and negative sentences. Also, teaching that a base form verb follows an auxiliary requires understanding what auxiliaries are.

Passive mood was tested in two different sentences, "Cheese is made from milk" and "The house was built in 1950." While 130 students correctly identified the first sentence as present passive, only 83 students recognized the second sentence as past passive, with 71 students choosing past perfect instead. This difference could have been caused by trying to guess the meaning. In "Cheese is made from milk," the relationship between "cheese" and "milk" is easy to guess even without the knowledge of structure of passive mood (be verb plus past participle). On the other hand, "The house was built in 1950" is missing the agent to show that "the house" is receiving the action. Thus, unless students understood the meaning or knew the passive structure, this was a difficult item.

Table 5 shows the descending order of difficulty of test items, with students having difficulty identifying basic parts of speech except for nouns and verbs. Even though students could identify nouns more easily than other parts of speech, this test did not distinguish types of nouns such as countable/uncountable nouns and common/proper nouns. Further investigation can address whether learners can distinguish differences of pluralization and capitalization. For parts of sentence pattern, students had difficulty identifying complements and objects. Teaching five sentence patterns (SV, SVC, SVO, SVOO, and SVOC) are common in English grammar education in Japan, but these students did not demonstrate familiarity with them. For tense, mood and others, results were somewhat surprising. Identifying grammatically difficult structures such as perfect tense and subjunctives were not as difficult as word-level items, possibly markers such as "have" and "if" helped students recognize the name of the structure. "Relative pronoun", third person "s" and plural "s" were also easy to recognize, even though they are difficult for Japanese EFL learners to use.

Table 5. Order of items from the most difficult to the easiest

1. causative	21. present perfect
2. adverb	22. past participle
3. complement	23. preposition
4. adverb	24. past participle
5. complement	25. relative pronoun
6. passive	26. subjunctive
7. article	27. comparative adj.
8. present participle	28. noun
9. object	29. verb
10. complement	30. third person *s*
11. gerund	31. superlative adj.
12. object	32. verb
13. object	33. future
14. causative	34. plural *s*
15. adjective	35. tag question
16. antecedent	36. conjunction
17. auxiliary verb	37. verb
18. past perfect	38. present progressive
19. object	39. subject
20. passive	40. noun

Conclusions

This research investigated two points: 1) Is there a correlation between English proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge among low-proficiency students? 2) How much metalanguage do low-proficiency EFL students have? The results supported the findings of other recent studies by Roehr (2008) and Elder (2009) of correlations between metalinguistic knowledge and proficiency in more advanced learners, and found significant correlations between students' TOEIC Bridge proficiency test scores and metalinguistic knowledge. The strongest correlation was found with the TOEIC Bridge reading section, supporting previous findings.

The low-proficiency EFL learners in this study had difficulty identifying parts of speech other than nouns and verbs, but generally recognized structures and inflections with clear markers such as "if" for subjunctive and "s" for third-person verbs and plural nouns.

A practical implication of these results is that students may not understand basic metalanguage used in instructions by teachers and textbooks. Teachers may assume that students can read and understand written Japanese explanations, but the results showed many students having problems distinguishing simple, word-level metalanguage such as "article" and "adverb" in Japanese. Consideration should be given not only in classroom but also for independent study assignments. When dealing with low-proficiency students, it is easy to blame poor homework completion or low motivation, but it is possible that students simply do not understand the material.

EFL instructors at Japanese universities face declining entry levels of English proficiency, with 33% of non-English major students at private universities having only junior high school level English proficiency (Ono, 2005), so teachers are often required to provide remediation and many textbooks for that purpose are published. However, simplified content alone does not solve the problem. Students cannot understand Japanese instructions and explanations if they include unknown metalanguage. Assessing students' metalinguistic knowledge and providing targeted remedial instruction is thus essential, especially with low-proficiency learners.

Informed consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

Bio data

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Appendix

Metalanguage test (The directions and answer choices were in Japanese on the original test. This is a version translated by the author.)

Please mark all your answers clearly on the answer sheet.

I. Choose the part of speech of the underlined words from (a) ~ (i). Some may be used more than once or never.
(a) noun (b) verb (c) adjective (d) adverb (e) auxiliary verb (f) article (g) preposition (h) conjunction (i) I don't know.

1. Tom is a <u>teacher</u>.
2. <u>Tom</u> is a teacher.
3. Please speak <u>slowly</u>.
4. Please <u>speak</u> slowly.
5. There is a red bird <u>on</u> the tree.
6. There is a <u>red</u> bird on the tree.
7. Yumiko <u>and</u> Takuya can speak English well.
8. Yumiko and Takuya can speak English <u>well</u>.
9. I will call you in <u>the</u> morning.
10. I <u>will</u> call you in the morning.

II. Choose the name of the underlined sections from (a) ~ (e). Some may be used more than once or never.
(a) subject (S) (b) predicate verb (V) (c) complement (C) (d) object (O) (e) I don't know.

1. Jane is <u>a doctor</u>.
2. <u>Jane</u> is a doctor.
3. Jane loves <u>music</u>.
4. Jane <u>loves</u> music.

5. Jane gave her boyfriend a present.
6. Jane gave her boyfriend a present.
7. Jane looked tired this morning.
8. Jane looked tired this morning.
9. Jane calls her cat Tama.
10. Jane calls her cat Tama.

III. Choose the term that best describes the underlined sections from (a) ~ (i). Some may be used more than once or never. (a) tag question (b) passive (c) future (d) subjunctive (e) causative (f) present progressive (g) present perfect (h) past perfect (i) I don't know.

1. Cheese is made from milk.
2. The cat is sleeping on the bed.
3. I have finished my homework.
4. I need to have my computer fixed.
5. If I were you, I would study harder.
6. I will call you in the morning.
7. The teacher made me do my homework.
8. She is your sister, isn't she?
9. The house was built in 1950.
10. The train had already left when I got to the station.

IV. Choose the term that best describes the underlined parts from (a) ~ (k). Some may be used more than once or never. (a) third person "s" (b) plural "s" (c) regular adjective (d) comparative adjective (e) superlative adjective (f) relative pronoun (g) antecedent (h) gerund (i) present participle (j) past participle (k) I don't know.

1. I like watching baseball.
2. The book was written by a famous writer.
3. My sister is taller than me.
4. It's raining outside.
5. He likes to play the guitar.
6. The man who is sitting over there is my teacher.
7. The man who is sitting over there is my teacher.
8. I have never eaten an avocado before.
9. Fukuoka is the largest city in Kyushu.
10. There were books on the desk.