Metalinguistic Awareness and Teacher Explanation

Stephen Andrews
Department of Curriculum Studies, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong

In Hong Kong in the past five years, there has been a marked increase of interest in the language awareness of teachers (their 'metalinguistic awareness'). This interest has been stimulated partly by a concern about declining standards of student achievement in both Chinese and English. Dissatisfaction with learners' standards of English is linked to officially expressed concern about the quality of teachers of English, many of whom are neither subject-trained nor professionally trained. The present study is part of on-going research into the metalinguistic awareness of Hong Kong secondary-school teachers of English. One observable behaviour most obviously exemplifying the metalinguistic awareness of L2 teachers is explaining grammar. The aim of this particular study was to explore the relationship between a teacher's metalinguistic awareness and her ability to explain a grammar point: how might the latter be affected by the former, and what might the latter reveal about the former? A number of teachers with different backgrounds and experience were asked to role-play the explanation of a grammar point on two separate occasions. The explanations were video-taped, transcribed and analysed. The paper reports the results of the analysis of four samples of performance.

Introduction

The most recent report of the Hong Kong Education Commission[1] was prepared against a background of concern about declining standards of language skills in both English and Chinese. Among the report's major recommendations was a proposal to establish 'benchmark' qualifications for language teachers:

> As regards training for language teachers, the Commission considers that benchmark qualifications should be developed as soon as possible and that, in the long run, Hong Kong should aim for a fully-trained language teaching profession. (Education Commission, 1995: viii)

The Commission went on to recommend that the concept of 'benchmark' qualifications for all language teachers should be explored by the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education Qualifications (ACTEQ). In response, ACTEQ appointed a team of consultants to explore the notion of benchmarking and to propose a possible framework within which to set benchmarks.[2]

The team of consultants have proposed as 'core' benchmarks four competencies: language ability, pedagogical content knowledge, subject knowledge and teaching ability. The first three competencies are seen as interacting, with the interaction being realised through the fourth competency: teaching ability. In terms of language benchmarks for language teachers, the consultants have identified a need to establish accepted and agreed benchmarks for the first three of those competencies:

(1)   ... for ... levels of general language ability in the language for which they (i.e. language teachers) are responsible;

(2)   ... for the language used in the classroom in order to teach the major language teaching subject effectively. This competency will entail an element known as 'language awareness' and will be referred to generally as pedagogic content knowledge;

(3)   ... for subject content knowledge of the language to be taught.

(Coniam & Falvey, 1996: 6)

This paper attempts to shed light on the second of these so-called 'competencies' as observed in the context of teacher explanation.

Language Awareness, Metalinguistic Awareness and Pedagogical Content Knowledge

In its adoption of the term *pedagogical content knowledge*, the 'benchmark' consultancy team takes as its inspiration the work of Shulman (1986) and his associates (see, for example, Brophy, 1991) quoting Brophy's definition:

> ... a special form of professional understanding that is unique to teachers and combines knowledge of the content to be taught with knowledge of what students know or think they know about this content and knowledge of how the content can be represented to the students through examples, analogies etc. in ways that are most likely to be effective in helping them to attain the intended outcomes of instruction. (Brophy, 1991: xii)

At first sight, the concept of pedagogical content knowledge appears an attractive one, forming a convenient bridge between subject knowledge and language ability. On closer examination, however, and especially when considered in relation to language teaching, the concept seems rather more problematic. For one thing, Brophy's definition is extremely wide-ranging: presumably in the language context such knowledge would have to encompass, among other points, both an understanding of language learning/acquisition theories and language teaching approaches, and a pedagogically-oriented 'Knowledge about Language' (KAL — see, for example, Carter, 1990). In addition, taking from general education a term such as pedagogical content knowledge and applying it to language teaching entails the risk of over-simplifying the process of language teaching, in which content and medium of instruction are inextricably linked, because language is taught through language.

The view adopted in the present paper is that it is essential to observe teachers' explicit knowledge of language (their 'language awareness' in the terms used by the 'benchmark' consultants) *in operation* in order both to appreciate its complexity and to understand fully the impact it can have on the teaching/learning process. One of the assumptions underlying the study described in this paper is that the declarative form of a teacher's language awareness, which is in principle measurable by means of conventional pencil-and-paper tests, may be significantly different from the same teacher's procedural language awareness. Possession of knowledge and having the ability to make that knowledge explicit are not the same as applying that knowledge in the context of the language

teaching/language learning process. It is the latter, this procedural language awareness, which is the principal focus of this paper. The combination of the declarative and procedural dimensions of language awareness is described as *metalinguistic awareness* in the rest of this paper.

The term *metalinguistic awareness* has been chosen for two main reasons. First, it helps to emphasise the extra dimension of cognitions and reflections about language competence and communicative competence which is required by the language teacher in addition to the language awareness exhibited by any competent user of a language who consciously manipulates that language in order to achieve specific communicative purposes. Second, it allows one to propose a construct which incorporates the operationalising of these cognitions and reflections, in contrast to a view of teachers' language awareness which sees it simply as declarative KAL related to pedagogy.

Clearly, metalinguistic awareness can encompass cognitions and reflections covering the whole range of linguistic concerns — Gombert, for example, distinguishes between what he terms metaphonological, metasyntactic, meta-lexical, metasemantic, metapragmatic and metatextual activities (Gombert, 1992). The focus of the present study is confined to grammar. However, the term 'metalinguistic' is used in preference to 'metasyntactic', partly because of its greater familiarity, but also because there is an inevitable interaction between metasyntactic awareness and other aspects of metalinguistic awareness.

The Design of the Study

Rationale

In designing this study, it was felt that observing teachers' explanations of grammar would be one obvious way of gaining insights into the nature of their metalinguistic awareness. It was thought that explanations would reveal features of both the declarative dimension of teachers' metalinguistic awareness (as shown by the content of their explanations) and the procedural dimension (seen, for example, in the extent to which they structure their explanations in order to facilitate student learning), as well as something of the ways in which these dimensions interact with each other, and with teachers' language competence/communicative competence.

Aims

The aims of the study were therefore exploratory: to find out what would be revealed about:

(1) the nature of the construct metalinguistic awareness;

(2) the metalinguistic awareness of individual teachers; and

(3) the interaction between a teacher's metalinguistic awareness and her ability to explain a grammar point.

Task design

In designing the study the aim was to create a controlled environment in which

individual teachers would explain a grammar point. At the same time, a context was created in order to make the situation and the role-play relatively authentic:

> You are the teacher of a Form 3[3] class of average ability. You recently gave your students a composition concerned with sport. You have corrected your students' compositions and are going over some of their mistakes in class.

Procedures

Three different versions of the task were prepared in order to reduce the chances of teacher performance being influenced by discussion with someone who had already performed. The three 'composition extracts' were all concocted for the purposes of the study. It was felt that this would reduce the amount of variation between extracts, each of which was written in order to pose challenges at more than one level: an obvious formal error with an underlying conceptual issue to be considered. The potential disadvantage of concocting extracts was that teacher behaviour might have been affected by the fact that these were not necessarily the sorts of error most characteristic of Cantonese-speaking learners. Task instructions were deliberately kept somewhat vague, particularly in relation to the focus of the explanation, so that each teacher would be responsible for selecting a focus. Teachers were asked to:

> Identify that part of the extract which, in your view, requires some clarification,

and then to give their explanation, making use of the blackboard if they wished.

In order to increase the validity of any generalisations about the performance of individual teachers, each performed twice, dealing with a different extract on each occasion. On the first occasion, the subjects had no opportunity to prepare, being given just a minute to look through their 'composition extract'. On the second occasion, they were all given ten minutes' preparation time and the opportunity to consult reference grammars. On both occasions teachers' performances were video-taped. The only person present in the room with each teacher was the researcher, whose main role was to smile encouragingly and to provide a point of eye-contact, if required. For practical reasons there was an interval of a week between performances.

The subjects

Fourteen teachers took part in the study. Of the 14 subjects, only five were in fact practising teachers of English: all graduates (of a range of subjects) following a part-time Certificate of Education course at the University of Hong Kong. The other nine were prospective teachers of English: students in the third year of a four-year Bachelor of Education (Language Education) programme. One of these nine was a certificated teacher with several years' experience, who had returned to full-time study. The other eight had all had only three weeks' teaching experience, gained during their first spell of teaching practice.

Results

Analysing the data

The performances of the 14 subjects were transcribed and then analysed. In analysing the data, a number of options were considered. The first of these, evaluating the effectiveness of each explanation as 'giving understanding to others' (Wragg & Brown, 1993: 3), was quickly rejected for two reasons. First, such an option was not possible, because there was no audience whose understandings might be investigated. Second, the explanations were in any case not the major focus of the study: instead their function was merely to provide a context for examining teachers' metalinguistic awareness.

A second option was to evaluate each performance as a demonstration of metalinguistic awareness against a predetermined set of criteria. Examples of such criteria might be found in Andrews's list of factors which (according to trainers of native-speaker EFL teachers) characterise the grammatical knowledge/awareness required of EFL teachers (Andrews, 1994: 75), or in Leech's list of what a teacher is ideally required to do with her 'mature communicative knowledge' of grammar (Leech, 1994: 18). Leech's list, in particular, would seem to have potential value as a check-list against which to measure subjects' performances on this task. In the end, however, it was decided not to make systematic use of such a check-list, because of the risk of being prematurely evaluative, seeing subjects' performance as deficient in relation to a postulated ideal.

A third option was to decontextualise and recontextualise the segments (Tesch, 1990: 115), separating samples of teacher behaviour from their original context and assigning them to categories emerging from the data. This might indeed be a useful approach to adopt in any future re-examination of the data. In the first instance, however, it was felt that it might be more illuminating to examine each subject's metalinguistic awareness in context, to see how different features of behaviour interrelate within a single performance.

Caveats

Before discussing the data, it is important to make a number of cautionary remarks:

(1) The video-clips which have been analysed show subjects dealing with arbitrarily selected grammar points under artificial conditions. Each subject performs only twice. For these reasons it would be impossible to generalise about either individual teachers or about the group as a whole. It should be noted, however, that in general the opportunity to prepare influenced accuracy of content far more than any other aspects of performance, which tended to be relatively stable for each teacher.

(2) It would be unjustified to assume that behaviour manifested under such stressful and unfamiliar conditions reflected what happens in the classroom. Many aspects of subject behaviour could be artefacts of the video-based task and the fact that there were no students present.

(3) One aspect of teacher performance about which it would be especially risky to draw conclusions is the extent to which a particular subject refers to (or

uses) L1. Given the absence of students, and the fact that the only person present was the researcher (an L2 speaker), it was highly unlikely that any subject would actually use L1. It could be argued that these same factors may have influenced the extent to which a subject even made reference to L1. In the actual classroom situation, however, one would hypothesise that L1 plays a rather more significant role for many teachers.

Commentary on the data

In order to explore the interaction between teachers' metalinguistic awareness and explaining a grammar-point, the commentary which follows describes the way in which four of the subjects give corrective feedback on the same short extract of text (referred to henceforth as *Sports Day*):

It is our Sports Day next week. I am running in the 100 metres.

I am not very fit. I should to start training a few weeks ago.

The four subjects have been selected as reflecting many aspects of the performances of the group of 14. The performances of the four subjects are discussed individually. Following these descriptions, some general observations are made.

Betty

Betty is one of the prospective teachers of English. Her performance gives an interesting insight into the ways in which language competence, communicative competence and metalinguistic awareness can interact to influence the quality of the corrective feedback offered to students.

When Betty encounters this text, it is her first experience of such a task and she has no preparation time. She adopts an approach to the text similar to that of several other subjects, in that she identifies a number of 'errors', and devotes attention to correcting each in turn without any attempt to prioritise or discriminate between them in any way. This seems to reflect the tendency of several subjects to treat the text as a series of discrete sentences rather than as a single entity. It should be noted that this tendency was more noticeable when subjects were dealing with a text after minimal preparation — Betty's second performance, on a different text, focused on just one perceived error — but some subjects exhibited a similar approach both with and without preparation.

In each of the first two sentences Betty makes a similar correction, replacing a present tense verb phrase with a phrase beginning with *will*. Both of these corrections appear to indicate a failure to recognise the acceptability and appropriacy of using present simple and present continuous for future time reference, although this was something to which all subjects had been exposed at a declarative level during a course lecture exploring grammarians' arguments against there being a future tense in English. Instead Betty focuses on the time adverbial *next week*, and this 'marker' seems to trigger an automatic association with 'future tense', as she conceives it. The result is a series of short prescriptive statements with minimal clarification for the student:

… you're mentioning Sports Day in the next week so … here you should use future tense here [underlines *It is*] … also here [underlines *I am running*]

> we can't use the present continuous tense … and then it is the er I … *I will be* [writing] *I will be* … er … *I will run* [crosses out *be*] *in the er 800 metres…* '

Interestingly, Betty appears to be toying with the idea of *will* followed by a progressive form, which would have been more appropriate than her chosen formulation. Neither of her corrections is necessary; on the other hand, neither results in a sentence which is unacceptable in isolation. For the student, however, there seems to be a clear, but misleading message that present verb forms are not used when referring to future time: for future time you use 'future tense', in Betty's terms, i.e. *will*.

One of the results of these corrections is that, taken together, the two corrected sentences form an oddly stilted piece of text:

> *It will be our Sports Day next week. I will run in the 800 metres.*

Betty may perhaps be unaware of the awkwardness of repeating the use of *will* in this way: in her view the text may flow quite naturally. She may be looking at the text as a set of discrete sentences or she may simply be dealing with perceived 'errors' sequentially and not looking back to consider the global significance of her corrections. A post-task interview would have provided a useful opportunity for clarification of her thinking.

In her approach to the last sentence, on the other hand, Betty does seem to indicate that, in some ways at least, she is looking at the text as a whole, because she is distinctly puzzled by what she describes somewhat confusingly as a change of tense:

> … but it's a bit strange for the last part as erm when we are talking about future the future event … the writer suddenly goes into the past tense …

She acknowledges that corrections are necessary in this sentence, but it seems that the limitations of her language competence and her communicative competence affect her performance in two ways. First, she appears not to understand the meaning that the writer is trying to express. Second, she produces an ungrammatical sentence as her final correction:

> … maybe er he should be *I should be* here … not *to* [crosses out *to*] … *I should be start training a few weeks ago* but it is still odd to mention erm a past … I think that erm it is not coherent with the above sentences …

In these utterances Betty correctly identifies the ungrammatical use of *to* after *should*, but she deals with it so rapidly that it is difficult to evaluate the significance of the correction as a reflection of her metalinguistic awareness. As it stands, her correction could be taken to reflect a belief that *should* is always followed by *be*, which would represent a fairly fundamental misconception. Certainly, as corrective feedback to the students, the amendment conveys nothing but confusion and misunderstanding.

Dina

Dina, like Betty, is following a pre-service BEd programme. However, while Betty has only three weeks' classroom experience, Dina is a certificated teacher with several years' professional experience.

Like Betty, Dina gives no indication of identifying one 'principal' error in the text: instead she goes through the text sentence by sentence correcting everything that she perceives to be inaccurate. This is Dina's second performance, given after ten minutes' preparation. Her earlier performance, on a different text, is very similar in approach.

Dina begins in a very similar way to Betty, making corrections which seem to imply that the present simple and present continuous are not used to refer to future time. However, while Betty's amendments are all couched prescriptively ('you should use X..., not Y...; ... we can't use A...; we need to use B...'), Dina's suggested changes are in the main justified simply by the repeated use of the vague comparative 'better' ('I think it's better ...; ... is it better? ...; .... do you think it is much more better?').

Dina's initial correction is, like Betty's, linked to the time adverbial *next week*, which appears to be associated exclusively with 'future tense', i.e. *will*:

> ... now if you use the time er the adverb of time *next week* then I think it's better to use the future tense ... *It will be our Sports Day next week* ...

She then goes on to make a similar correction in the second sentence. Interestingly, her amendment contrasts with Betty's (or reflects the amendment which Betty appeared to be half-considering), in that Dina retains progressive aspect. As a result, her revised sentences run together rather more felicitously than Betty's, although Dina gives no indication that she is considering such intra-sentential relationships. More significantly, Dina gives no justification for her proposed correction (in preference, for instance, to any other verb form), beyond linking it once more to *next week*:

> ... and then *I'm running in the 800 metres* er you refer to the event next week huh? ... it tells something about something will happen in the future ... so is it better to use *I will be running in the 800 metres?* ... do you think it is much more better?

The extract does not reveal whether Dina in fact possesses the declarative knowledge which would enable her to justify her suggested amendment. From the student perspective, however, the feedback provided by Dina on this point is less than helpful. Overall, Dina does not give the impression in either of her performances that she is aware of a need to monitor her output in order to make it maximally useful to the students. Her one related strategy takes the form of the questions 'is it better? ... do you think it is much more better?' Regrettably, in the average Hong Kong classroom, no student would ever venture to say 'No!!' or even 'Possibly, but why?'

Dina then attacks the third sentence of the extract — *I am not very fit* — making an unnecessary, and indeed incorrect, amendment, by suggesting:

> ... if you add a preposition after it then I think it's better ...

She does make some attempt to interpret the writer's message:

> ... what er what do you mean *I'm not very fit*? ... Fit for what? ... For example I know you means that I am not very fit for running ... for running the 800 metres ...

However, she ends up not only making an unnecessary correction, by suggesting the inappropriate use of *fit for*, but also implying that *fit at* is an acceptable collocation:

> ... so if you add another preposition ... *at it* or *for it* [writes *for*] ... I think it's better ...

The fact that Dina writes only one of the two prepositions she mentions may indicate hidden doubts about the correctness of *fit at*, but her overall performance when dealing with this extract raises serious doubts about the level of her metalinguistic awareness, and indeed of her language competence and communicative competence.

The way Dina deals with the final sentence does little to assuage concerns about her metalinguistic awareness. She begins by recognising, quite correctly, that there is a problem after the modal *should*. However, her initial attempt to resolve the problem is itself problematic:

> ... and then the last one *I should to start training a few weeks ago ... should* is a modal [writes *should* _____] ... so you should not use an infi ... infinitive after it ...

From the learner's perspective, this is a less than helpful correction, since it fails to specify that the difficulty resides specifically with the use of *to*. Certainly Dina's prescriptive remark (which one assumes is meant to apply to *to-infinitive* only) could be very confusing for any student under the impression that *should* is followed by a bare-infinitive.

Dina then goes on to offer alternative amendments to the final sentence. She does not make any clear differentiation between the two sentences she suggests (offering only the briefest justification for *should have started*), and seems to be unaware that the *should start* formulation is semantically anomalous:

> ... so ... you have either to say ... *you should start training a few weeks ago* or ... *I should have started training* [writes *have started*] because you didn't ... so if you didn't do it so if you use the latter one it's also correct for it, OK?

Emily

In contrast with the two preceding subjects, Emily is a serving teacher. Emily's performance on this task was her second attempt, and therefore had the benefit of preparation. As with a number of the other subjects, the combination of previous experience of the type of task and preparation of the specific text may well have contributed to an improvement. Of more significance as a reflection of metalinguistic awareness, however, is the consistency across performances of Emily's attempts to help the students perceive generalisations about grammar rather than treating the error as a little local difficulty. This aspect of performance is particularly marked in relation to the Sports Day text.

Emily begins by immediately focusing on the errors in the last sentence, and separating the two layers of error. In doing so, however, she makes no initial reference to the specific extract. Instead, she draws attention to a general difficulty, which she attempts to clarify with examples similar in form:

> ... I found that most of you do not know that after *should* [writes *should*] you

have to use a bare-infinitive *should do* [writes *do* after *should*] instead of *should to do* … just like *should go* … *should do* … *should swim* …

Having dealt with the formal error of using *to* after *should*, Emily then adopts a similarly generalised approach to the second layer of error, pointing out the broad difference in meaning between *should do* and *should have done*:

> … it seems that most of you do not know the difference between *I should do it* and *I should have done it* … what is the meaning of *I should do it*? … which means at this moment you think what you need to do at this moment … or in the future … so you use *I should do it* … but when you are talking about something in the past … and because it has already happened so you can't go back to the past … so it's something that you can't change … then you use *I should have done it* …

One of the marked characteristics of Emily's approach is its thoroughness, as shown, for example, by the way in which she carefully outlines all the different components of meaning conveyed by the use of *should have done*.

Finally, having provided this recapitulation of general rules relating to *should do* and *should have done*, Emily applies these rules to the specific sentence in the Sports Day text, as she tries to interpret the message that the writer intended to convey:

> … look at this example … [writes *I should to start training a few weeks ago*] … the first mistake is after *should* we don't use to-infinitive [crosses out *to*] … but still *I should start training a few weeks ago* … from the word *ago* [double-underlines *ago*] we know it's about the past … and actually what you mean is … you should have started training a few weeks ago, but you didn't at that time … so it's something you should have done in the past and you can't change … you can't go back to the past … so for this one you should have written *I should* … [crosses out *to* and adds -ed to *start*] … *have started training a few weeks ago* …

Fanny

Like Emily, Fanny is a serving teacher of English. Her approach to the Sports Day extract could also be described as thorough, but in many ways it is in sharp contrast to Emily's performance.

First of all, Fanny writes on the board the 'three common mistakes' she has found, and numbers them:

(1) It is our Sports Day next week
(2) run in the 800 metres
(3) I should to start training a few weeks ago

She then, like Betty and Dina, focuses on *next week*, and makes a very similar prescriptive correction:

> … What should you do when you are … when you have *next week* in your sentence? *Next* the word *next week* indicates a future time … so … the verb here [underlines *is*] should be also in future tense … do you agree with this?

In contrast with Betty and Dina, however, Fanny explains the point in more detail,

trying to generalise the connection between future time adverbials and the use of *will*:

> ... *is* is for present tense ... so what should it be? ... it should be ... *it will be* right? ... the same thing has to be done with *tomorrow* or *next Tuesday* ... whenever you have the word *next* here in a sentence ... it should be written as *it will be* ... OK? ... say *it will rain tomorrow* ...

Also in contrast with Betty and Dina, Fanny does not explicitly suggest the need to make a similar amendment to the second sentence. This tends to reinforce the impression that Fanny's view of grammar is very sentence-based: although the time reference in the second sentence is the same as in the first, Fanny does not appear to see a need for coherence in tense selection. There is no future time adverbial in the second sentence to trigger an amendment, and no such amendment is made.

There is, in fact, some confusion about Fanny's choice of verb form in the second sentence, since she writes on the board the single word *run*, and when dealing with other aspects of the sentence she says either *run* or *I run*. Verb form, however, is not the feature of the second sentence which attracts Fanny's attention. Instead, she focuses on an 'error' which was not picked up by any of the other subjects: the use of the phrase *in the 800 metres*. Her first suggestion is that this could be corrected by omitting *in the* so that the final part of the sentence reads *run 800 metres*. She then offers her preferred amendment:

> ... but even better ... if you want to ... change this to be a noun ... you say I take part in the event, OK? ... er the event requires you to run 800 metres ... then *in the* is required here ... *the 800* hyphenated *metre event* ... the word *event* ... is needed here ... to make it a noun ...

Apart from the fact that such an amendment is quite unnecessary, the explanation is justified in an extremely unclear way, causing one to wonder what sense a student would make of what is said. What, for example, does Fanny mean by phrases like *change this to be a noun* and *make it a noun* and what do the pronouns *this* and *it* refer to?

Fanny then moves on to the final sentence, which she corrects efficiently, with relatively clear prescriptive statements, one layer at a time:

> ... the last thing ... *I should* ... now never follow *should* with the word *to* ... so cross out the word *to* ... [crosses out *to*] it will be all right ... *I should start training* it will be all right ... but here we have *a few weeks ago* ... whenever you have the word *ago* ... it indicates a past ... something that happened in the past ... so we should not use *I should to start* ... because if you say *I should* then it means you should do this thing in the future ... instead we should say *I should have started* ...

Interestingly, and consistent with a view that Fanny adopts a very sentence-based approach to the task, she makes no reference in this explanation to the situation to which this sentence refers. Her correction is primarily focused upon the time adverbial and the need to find a verb form to fit. In contrast with Emily, it is only with her very last words that Fanny refers to the meaning of *should have*,

and when she does so she somewhat obscures the point by making an additional unnecessary correction with the insertion of *my* before *training*:

> … *I should have started* … and you have possessive here *I should have started my training a few days ago* … it means you have not … all right?

There are a number of features of Fanny's performance across both tasks which are worthy of comment. On the positive side, her interventions in both texts indicate a reasonably sound language competence, communicative competence and declarative metalinguistic awareness. Her suggested corrections are formally accurate, and the explanations she offers suggest that she herself has an underlying understanding of these grammar points which she is able to articulate. One might hypothesise that on a written test of language awareness (similar, for example, to those used by Alderson *et al.*, 1996 or Bloor, 1986), Fanny could score comparatively highly.

On the negative side, there are a number of aspects of Fanny's metalinguistic awareness in operation which are rather less satisfactory, particularly when her output is viewed as potential corrective feedback for the learner. First there is the 'scatter-gun' approach to error which she adopts, blasting with equal force at anything which she perceives to be incorrect. From the student perspective, the effect produced by Fanny's corrections on her second task (not described in detail here) is to create an impression that a fairly major error involving both syntax and semantics such as *If I taller, I will be in the school basketball team* is of no greater significance than the alleged (and unwitting on the part of the researcher!) misuse of a comma, or beginning a sentence with *But*.

A second cause for concern is Fanny's apparent unawareness of the need to monitor her own output. She generally makes accurate use of metalanguage. One wonders, however, what the average F3 student would make of words like *hyphenated* and *colloquial*, and of explanations like *the meanings are … parallel*. There are other examples of corrections which are not altogether explicit or precise:

> … if you write down a sentence starting with … *But* … then it is … strictly speaking … not that proper … it is improper to put down *But* …'

Perhaps most striking as giving cause to doubt Fanny's awareness of the need to control the level of her own language is her extraordinary amendment of the sentence *I am very small* to *My major handicap is my short stature*. Disregarding any thoughts one might have about the merits of the proposed amendments, Fanny's suggestion appears to take no account of whether F3 students will understand words like *handicap* or *stature*.

Issues arising

As mentioned earlier, it would be prematurely evaluative to dwell too much on the apparent weaknesses of subjects' performance, although the descriptions above give some cause for concern about the metalinguistic awareness of a number of individuals. Instead, from a research perspective, based on the four performances described, it is perhaps rather more useful to identify a number of

central issues relating to procedural metalinguistic awareness as called upon by this explanation task to which the four subjects respond in different ways:

(1) *Focus on form or meaning*

Is the task perceived as one of interpreting the message which the writer intended to convey, and of finding correct and appropriate forms for expressing that message?

Or is the task seen primarily as one of evaluating surface form?

(2) *Focus on text or sentence*

Is the extract treated as a single unit of text, with the overall meaning being taken into account?

Or is the extract regarded as a set of discrete sentences?

(3) *Error gravity and prioritisation for treatment*

Is the 'principal' error in the text successfully identified?

Is the 'principal' error in the text prioritised in comparison with other perceived errors?

Is the subject able to discriminate between errors and non-errors?

(4) *The nature of the corrective feedback*

Does the corrective feedback convey an understanding by the subject of the point being made?

Is the corrective feedback offered in the explanations correct and precise?

Are suggested amendments

Syntactically accurate?

Functionally appropriate?

Textually coherent?

Is corrective feedback linked to generalisations about language

or is corrective feedback focused on the specific instance?

If the subject explains an amendment by reference to a 'rule', is that rule a correct representation of the grammar?

Does the corrective feedback provide an adequate basis for a student to make an accurate generalisation?

(5) *Taking account of the students*

Does the subject control her own use of language?

Does the subject make connections with, for example, previous learning or familiar examples?

What is possibly most noticeable in deriving such a list from samples of performance is that it demonstrates clearly how the procedural and the declarative aspects of metalinguistic awareness interrelate, and also how they interact both with language competence and communicative competence.

It is also perhaps worthy of note that there is no explicit mention of metalanguage in the set of issues previously identified. This is partly because knowledge of metalanguage did not appear to be a major factor in the metalinguistic awareness revealed by any of the subjects in this particular study. Having said that, however, it is difficult to know precisely how the significance of the use or non-use of metalanguage could be evaluated without information on teachers' beliefs and assumptions, and insights into how teacher behaviour is perceived by students.

Conclusions

It is clear from the previous discussion that teacher metalinguistic awareness is a complex construct, not least because it overlaps with and interacts with so many other facets of teacher belief, assumption, knowledge and behaviour. For this reason, any attempt to build up a complete picture of an individual teacher's metalinguistic awareness must of necessity involve a range of research approaches and techniques. The most that a single study of this sort can hope to offer is a set of snapshots of each teacher involved: these, in the manner of all snapshots, may be revealing or possibly misleading.

Of more significance perhaps than what is revealed about an individual teacher is what appears to be revealed about the proposed construct metalinguistic awareness: in particular, the importance of its procedural dimension. Many of the apparent weaknesses in the performances described above seem to relate to metalinguistic awareness *in operation* rather than to problems with the underlying declarative KAL. Further light can only be thrown on this by more research. In the meantime, however, it appears that there are aspects of a teacher's metalinguistic awareness which might very possibly be missed by any assessment procedure viewing the construct only as declarative language awareness in a pedagogical context. This is a point which needs to be borne in mind by anyone attempting to develop 'benchmarks' for language teachers' pedagogical content knowledge.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. An independent consultative body set up by the Hong Kong Government in 1982 to review the education system and advise on education policy. Its recommendations have had a significant influence on developments in Hong Kong's education system over the past fourteen years. Its latest report — No. 6, referred to in this paper — was accepted by the Government in March 1996.
2. 'Benchmarks' are defined by the team of consultants as '... some form of minimum, agreed and acceptable/imposed standards which are defined by an appointed, authoritative body' (Coniam & Falvey, 1996: 3).
3. In Hong Kong, Form 3 is the third year of secondary school (the equivalent of Year 9 in schools in England and Wales). Form 3 students are typically 14 years old and in their ninth year of studying English.

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