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Abstract

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Keywords

metalinguistic, investigating, understanding, writing, children, about, talking

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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 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 Halliday's 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.

While this body of research into grammar learning has been significant in reinforcing the critical role of metalinguistic understanding in shaping writing, little is known about how students develop their metalinguistic understanding. This paper aims to extend the body of research into grammar learning by examining the nature of metalinguistic understanding as it is demonstrated in the ways in which students think grammatically with language.

1.3. Identifying metalinguistic understanding

As argued above, our main interest is in finding ways to identify what students understand about language. Central to this concern is the need to examine the kind of metalinguistic understanding that may lead to conversion of abstract knowledge into 'know how'. In reflecting on challenges posed by a metalinguistic curriculum such as the *Australian Curriculum: English*, Macken-Horarik et al. (2011) point out that for metalinguistic knowledge to work productively to enhance literacy development and informed appreciation of literature, students need to develop coherent and transferrable knowledge, knowledge that will 'serve literate "know how" and deep engagement with literature' (p. 21). Arguably this literate 'know how' will require a particular kind of metalinguistic understanding that can facilitate the transfer of knowledge.

Previous research in applied linguistics relied on decontextualised and limited grammatical judgment tests to identify metalinguistic understanding. Recent studies have consistently shown that students' use of metalanguage provides a valuable window into their metalinguistic understanding about writing, and their 'regulatory processes', particularly as they reflect on their own language use (e.g. Chen & Jones, 2012; Myhill et al., 2016; Phillips Galloway, Stude, & Uccelli, 2015). Myhill et al. (2016) point out that a core feature of metalinguistic understanding is that it is verbalizable and can be displayed and witnessed through metatalk or metalinguistic discussion. In this paper, we draw on this argument to access students' metalinguistic understanding through an analysis of students' reflections about their language use.

Metalinguistic understanding has traditionally been categorized into implicit and explicit metalinguistic understanding linking implicit with unconscious and explicit with conscious awareness (Gombert, 1992; Karmiloff-Smith et al., 1996; van Lier, 1998). However, it is important to note that metalinguistic discussions can occur without the use of grammatical or writing-related metalanguage. For example, Gutierrez (2008), in the context of collaborative writing in a second language, has extended theoretical thinking about explicit and implicit metalinguistic understanding through demonstrating how verbalized interactions around a shared writing task are characterized by both explicit metalinguistic activity where 'attention to language is directly observable in the student's words' and implicit metalinguistic activity where there is 'no explicit reference to language' (p. 521) but where understanding is evidenced by their speech actions such as acceptances, rejections, questionings and reformulations. Of direct relevance to the present paper is Tolchinsky's (1999) distinction between metalinguistic work, 'a linguistic event at any level of consciousness' and metalinguistic reflection, 'cases in which explicit attention to a particular set of linguistic features' (p. 32). As our paper is concerned with students' metalinguistic reflection, we require an analytical framework that captures the ways in which grammatical concepts are articulated as students reflect on their language use and taught grammatical concepts. This paper draws on Vygotsky's theory of concept formation and Halliday's systemic functional linguistic theory of language learning to explore this possibility.

1.4. Analysing metalinguistic understanding

A central premise underpinning our analytical framework is that developing metalinguistic understanding involves a process of concept formation. It follows that the nature of students' metalinguistic understanding can be identified through analyzing how they talk about a grammatical concept in their metalinguistic reflection. Vygotsky's (1986) theory of concept formation offers a framework for such an analysis. Vygotsky argues that concept formation is in essence the formation of a system of representation made possible through two key processes of abstraction and connection: generalization and systematization. The generalization of a concept occurs when the learner identifies and abstracts the attributes of a concept. The process of systematization takes place when the learner is able to organize ideas and concepts based on their properties and include them in a system of relationships with other concepts – 'deliberate structuring of the web of meaning' (1986, p. 182). In the case described here, grammatical concepts can be considered as scientific concepts in Vygotsky's sense. Although Vygotsky developed his framework in relation to scientific concepts, it can be argued that the processes of abstraction and systematization also apply to grammatical concepts and the framework provides a fruitful way of examining how children develop their metalinguistic understanding of a grammatical concept. Insights into the ways in which defining attributes of a grammatical concept are identified, explained and related by students will shed light on the features of their metalinguistic understanding.

Considerations about the relationship between metalinguistic understanding and the defining attributes of a grammatical concept necessarily lead to a consideration of the interplay between knowing and meaning making – a central tenet of Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics theory of language learning. Like Vygotsky, Halliday views knowing as meaning making through the formation of 'a system of interconnected concepts' (Bartlett & Chen, 2012, p. 3). Defining knowing and cognition in semiotic terms, Halliday and Matthiessen (1999) argue that 'understanding something is transforming it into meaning, and to "know" is to have performed that transformation' (p. x). For Halliday (1993), language learning results in the expansion of one's meaning potential. His notion of 'expansion relations'¹ comprises three categories: *elaboration* (restating, exemplifying), *extension* (adding, offering an alternative), and *enhancement* (qualifying with circumstantial details of time, space, cause). The notion of 'expansion' presupposes the processes of generalization and systematization. Using Halliday's categories of expansion relations, Chen and Jones (2012) trialed the use of a three-category framework to analyze the connections learners make with respect to a grammatical concept in their metatalk. An *elaborated* concept is one where learners can explain or give examples of the concept; and when this is *extended*, they can also explore its alternatives. When learners can define the attributes of a concept, this constitutes an *enhancing* relation.

As discussed above, metalinguistic understanding involves both recognizing and identifying patterns of language use, and being able to regulate one's own language use and choices (Bialystok, 2001). In this paper, we extend Chen and Jones' (2012) framework by offering a refined framework of four categories of metalinguistic understanding taking into consideration of Bialystok's concepts of *analysis* and *control*. The features of students' metalinguistic understanding can be examined through the following four categories with the first two categories equate to Bialystok's concept of *analysis* with the latter two relating to her concept of *control*.

¹ According to Halliday (2004), clauses are related to each other through either expansion or projection (locution or idea) relationships.

- *Identification*: the locating and/or naming of a particular concept;
- *Elaboration*: the elaboration of the concept through explanation or exemplification;
- *Extension*: the stretching of understanding from the concept to its link with writing;
- *Application*: the articulation of how the concept creates meaning in written text.

2. Methods

The data drawn on to inform this article have their origins in two separate studies, one in Australia and one in England, both investigating the explicit teaching of grammar in the context of writing. The Australian study (Chen & Jones, 2012; Jones & Chen, 2012) was a qualitative study exploring how explicit teaching of grammar impacts on learners' development of metalinguistic knowledge and understanding. The English study (Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012) was a mixed methods study, involving a randomized controlled trial (RCT) and a complementary qualitative data set. Its principal research focus was to investigate the impact of explicit grammar teaching on students' writing attainment and on their metalinguistic understanding. Thus both studies share a common focus on the relationship between grammar teaching and metalinguistic understanding.

The Australian study sample comprised six children drawn from one class aged 9–10 in one primary school and six from another class aged 12–13 in one secondary school. The participating students were selected based on their writing levels (good, average, and weak), nominated by the teachers of the participating classes. Data were collected through two classroom observations per class, post-observation interviews with the teachers, and paired interviews with six learners in each class, and collation of samples of writing. The two lesson observations per class were undertaken in lessons where grammar was being taught explicitly in the context of a particular text type. Observation notes were taken on strategies and activities teachers employed to promote metalinguistic understanding. Semi-structured interviews ($n = 24$) were conducted with the students to ascertain their responses to grammar instruction. Using the classroom observation notes, an example of a model text, and students' own writing as stimuli, the semi-structured interviews probed students' responses to grammar instruction and their metalinguistic understanding.

The English study involved a large sample because of the demands of the RCT component of the study. Thirty-two classes of students aged 12–13 ($n = 744$) in 32 comprehensive schools formed the core student sample. The 32 teachers were ranked in matched pairs based on their performance in a test of grammatical knowledge and were then randomly allocated to a comparison or an intervention group. The year-long intervention took the form of one unit of work per term, each addressing the teaching of a different genre of writing, in which grammar relevant to each genre was explicitly taught. For each unit of work, one lesson was observed using a semi-structured observation schedule, and the teacher was interviewed post hoc to probe his or her pedagogical decision-making in that lesson. A semi-structured 'writing conversation' ($n = 96$) was conducted with one student in each class after the lesson observation. The writing conversation involved reflecting on the learning in the lesson and questions which probed students' authorial choices in their own writing and their comments on a prompt model text.

This paper draws on data from the semi-structured interviews and writing conversations, collected for both studies. Both studies provided detailed qualitative interview data which could be constructed as vignettes – thus creating similar/comparable data representations for analysis. The paper illustrates the

manifestation of metalinguistic understanding through a vignette technique (Hughes, 1998), constructed through four detailed short stories about the four participants with reference to their developing metalinguistic understanding. The main aim of the analysis is to explore the feasibility of the four categories, *identification*, *elaboration*, *extension* and *application*, as a means to understand students' metalinguistic development.

The two vignettes from the Australian sample are drawn from the teaching of a unit of work on Visual Literacy focusing on Picture Books, Narrative and Film. The specific curriculum outcomes addressed include: responding to and composing texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis and pleasure; using a range of processes for responding to and composing texts; using and describing language forms and features, and structures of texts appropriate to different purposes, audiences and contexts; making informed language choices to shape meaning with accuracy, clarity and coherence (*English Years 7–10: Syllabus*, 2002). The unit of work explicitly used diary writing where the student was asked to write in role as a character from a film to develop these outcomes. The teacher drew on worksheets downloaded from the BBC English Learning website and used the movie *Tron* to contextualize the shifts in time. One specific focus was on how tense and voice is used in diary writing to manage different time frames and viewpoint. The metalanguage used in the observed lesson included first/third person voice and present/past/future/present perfect tense.

The vignettes from the English sample were derived from a unit of work on Fictional Narrative. The specific curriculum outcomes addressed included: developing viewpoint, voice and ideas; varying sentences and punctuation for clarity and effect; improving vocabulary for precision and effect; and developing varied linguistic and literary techniques. Prior to the writing conversations informing the vignettes, the students had read an extract from *Jaws* by Peter Benchley, describing the boy afloat on his lilo just before the shark attacked. They were asked to write a paragraph that could be inserted into the narrative, describing events from an additional viewpoint, for example, the boy's mother or a lifeguard on the beach. The metalanguage discussed in the lesson included first/third person voice, past and present tense, nouns, and verbs.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Vignette 1: England – Sarah

The selected writing conversation with Sarah follows a lesson where she has just begun to draft a small section of narrative. Sarah's draft, produced in the lesson and which formed the basis of the writing conversation, is reproduced below.

I gazed out to the sea, the water seemed calm and peaceful. A small boy and his father played, splashing in the cool water at one another. A bit further out was another small boy, lying face down onto the raft, he was slightly out of the safety zone but nothing really to worry about, he must have realized this as he began to splash his way forward toward the beach. Suddenly there was a jerk from underneath him, his raft went flying up, a feeling of shock and terror swept across the beach, a horrified audience fled out of the sea, and a pool of scarlet blood spread across the water, dyeing it with a grim sheet of redness, and not a soul could forget the horrific event which would later haunt many.

Sarah's writing conversation revealed different facets of her metalinguistic understanding. An analysis of the vocabulary choices made and the images selected in her writing conversation indicated that her metalinguistic understanding was at the

level of *application* when she talked about the design of her writing. She was able to identify specific words and images she had used, and could explain why those choices supported the development of viewpoint in her writing. In particular, she seemed to be aware of how she chose to craft a description which positions the reader to view the narrative action in particular ways. She said she was satisfied with the 'good descriptive words in the first sentence about the water being calm and peaceful, because you can just imagine it being calm, and then all of a sudden Jaws coming. . .', implying a conscious choice to juxtapose the calmness with the violence of the attack. She described her choice of the word 'audience' in the text as deliberate, to create a sense of the event being viewed: 'you can imagine "the horrified people in the audience" is like the people that it describes, like they were watching it.' She highlighted her use of 'suddenly' as a choice she was pleased with because 'you can just imagine his raft going up and everyone being terrified on the beach and watching'. Likewise, she was able to articulate how the image of the blood spreading across the water was an effective choice because 'you can almost imagine the sea being like stained and it being like really grim and horrible because it's like a little boy's blood. . .'

In contrast, however, Sarah's discussion of her sentence structure and shaping was far less precise and suggests metalinguistic *identification*, rather than any higher level of metalinguistic understanding. She used the metalanguage of the classroom and the curriculum, that is, she talked about 'long sentences' and 'short sentences', but there was little evidence that this was a meaningful part of her metalinguistic decision-making repertoire. Early on in the interview, she said, unprompted, that 'I think the sentences are quite long and interesting but maybe I should add in some a bit shorter because I used quite a lot of commas in it, but other than that I think they're quite good'. Later in the interview, the interviewer tried to probe Sarah's understanding further to elicit *application* of this metalinguistic understanding, but Sarah's attempts at articulating a response to the questioning remained limited:

- Interviewer: What do you think the effect might be of putting some shorter sentences in?
 Sarah: Well, if it's a shorter sentence then it's almost, do you know what I mean, like facts like he was worried, do you know what I mean, it's almost short but really effective, and maybe the longer ones might drag it out a bit and it would be better if it was short but it's still quite good, but yeah. . .
 Interviewer: You're getting at something quite interesting I think, so can you just, I'm sorry to push you, can you just try to say why you think shorter sentences can be effective?
 Sarah: Because sometimes the simpler sentences are more easier to understand and they have quite a bit of impact on the reader, it really makes them think about it instead of describing it for them, they get to make it up in their mind a bit as well.

In the exchange above Sarah repeats two ideas which were echoed in several other interviews across the sample: the idea that long sentences 'drag', and the idea that short sentences are 'easier to understand'. However, there was little evidence in Sarah's reflections that she has any secure metalinguistic understanding of how syntactical choices in sentence structure can alter where the emphases in meaning occur, or how sentence variety can alter the prosody of a text. There may be an emerging *application* of understanding that short sentences can be emphatic when she suggests they have 'impact on the reader', although it is not clear why Sarah thinks short sentences leave readers to make up their own mind.

When asked what she might do to improve this first draft, Sarah suggested that 'I would like to describe some of the verbs a bit more with adverbs like what we learnt today'. Sarah felt that adding an adverb would strengthen one of her descriptions. Explaining this in the quote below, she demonstrates her ability to *identify*

adverbs and verbs correctly and *elaborate* on her identification with explanatory examples:

- Sarah: Maybe when it said 'he must have realized this as he began to splash his way forward toward the beach' I could have added in something before 'splash', like 'he must have realized this as he began to frantically splash his way toward the beach' because that would make it a bit more interesting, and it describes the verb so instead of just being boring it adds more interest to it.

However, unlike her explanations of word choice earlier where she was able to express how the choice may affect meaning and how the reader is positioned, here she does not show *application* of her metalinguistic understanding, as the addition is very generally explained as 'a bit more interesting'.

3.2. Vignette 2: England – Matt

In the second vignette, Matt was undertaking the same narrative task, though he was in a different school with a different teacher. The draft produced in the lesson and which formed the basis of the writing conversation is below:

She was just laid there on the floor on a towel sunbathing, she glanced up to see where her boy was, that's a bit too far out she said, but nonetheless she carried on sunbathing, about five minutes later there was a series of screams coming from the sea and everyone was swimming to shore, her head popped up and she was looking for her boy but where was he? She looked terrified and then she saw it, the blood covered lilo which her son was on.

Matt seemed to be less assured than Sarah in articulating his metalinguistic understanding, and could not always explain his choices. Although he was able to *identify* words which he thought supported the development of viewpoint, he struggled to *elaborate* his answers. He frequently said 'I don't know' or 'I don't know why', both in response to the interviewer's questions, but also as an extension to his own reflections. For example, he selects 'her head popped up' as something he was pleased with but continued on to say 'I think that's quite good, I don't know why'. When trying to explain his choice of the word 'terrified', he concludes by deciding 'I don't know how you would explain it'. Later in the interview, however, he returned to this choice and did provide a more reasoned explanation, where there was some evidence of *extending* his understanding from the identification of the word to the potential effect it will have in the writing: 'It's dramatic, if that makes any sense . . . I could have just put she was scared, but she's terrified.' A similar pattern occurred when Matt was asked what he might improve. In the exchange below Matt describes how he selected the word 'glanced' as one he might alter by replacing it with 'scanned', and although he initially cannot explain it, he does finally arrive at a justification of the choice, albeit only partially developed:

- Matt: or she 'scanned' the sea instead of 'glanced' . . .
 Interviewer: Why would you change that to 'scanned' the sea?
 Matt: I don't know really.
 Interviewer: Can you say what the effect might be?
 Matt: It's just like, the effect is different, see she 'glanced' up and looked so she 'scanned' to see where her boy was to see where everyone else was and where the boy was.
 Interviewer: Why, what effect does 'scanned' give?
 Matt: 'Scanned' gives . . . oh, can't explain it, it's just like they scanned the playground for trouble like the teachers do every day and at break times they scan the playgrounds, like they look everywhere, if they just glanced up they just look in one place but if they scan they look everywhere

Unlike Sarah, there is no evidence of *application* in Matt's explanation: he made no reference to the reader or to making metalinguistic decisions in shaping his narrative to position the reader

in any way. However, like Sarah, his discussion of sentences was highly limited and centered upon rather basic *identification*. Like Sarah, he echoed the curriculum discourse which gives currency to the terms ‘short sentence’, ‘long sentence’ and ‘variety of sentences’. For example, in the quotes below his focus appears to be wholly upon the presence of these, rather than upon any influence on how meaning is shaped:

Matt: There is a variety of them, there is some short sentences and there isn't many short sentences but mostly they're long sentences.

Matt: I don't know, it's kind of good that you've got a variety of sentences in there but there's too many long sentences in there, I reckon, there could be a couple more short ones.

As the following exchange suggests, Matt seems to have learned syntactical ‘rules’ – he can *identify* a sentence where he has used ‘and’ where he believes he should not have – however, he is not able to *elaborate* upon this beyond remembering the teachers’ injunction that he shouldn’t begin a sentence with ‘and’; nor is there any evident awareness of when a writer might choose to flout this ‘rule’:

Matt: I shouldn't really have put ‘and’ at the beginning of a sentence, I could have changed it to something else.

Interviewer: Why should you have not put ‘and’ there?

Matt: I don't know... you don't normally start sentences with ‘and’ really, I can't remember what it was, we got taught you shouldn't do it in primary, I can't remember why, something like ‘and’ should always be somewhere in the middle of a sentence.

3.3. Vignette 3: Australia – Tony

Tony's diary entry was based on a movie, *Cars 2*, current at that time of the study. When asked about what he had learned from the lesson, he demonstrated emerging metalinguistic understanding by describing how he ‘got further into the tenses’. However, he was unable to elaborate his engagement with the concept of tense beyond *identification* of ‘three types of tenses’. He was unable, for example, to make connections to the impact of tense on text shaping and referred instead to the way a knowledge of how tenses work helped him to achieve ‘a higher standard’ writing. At the same time, he struggled to articulate how tense helps to improve his writing, other than the rather vague comment that it made his writing ‘sound better’. In a later interview, Tony revealed that he equates high standards of writing with accuracy and being ‘correct’:

Tony: It was fairly ok. Just a few touchups here and there to make sure it was all right. I got most of it correct, just like one or two just wrong. Just learning tense new things just wasn't... perhaps quite there...

In this quote, Tony's discourse is heavily orientated toward things that help him to achieve a ‘high school’ standard. For example, in the following quote he associates knowing about tenses with an increased repertoire of choices, which allowed him to move beyond using ‘simpler’ tenses:

Tony: Yeah, this time I was able to choose more continuous tense, more perfect. Like I said before that I chose more... simpler, because that's all we were taught. Now that I've learnt some of this... more of this high school kind of standard, I understand and I'm able to write it down properly.

However, none of this metalinguistic discussion moved beyond *identification* to any kind of more elaborated or extended understanding, and there was no evidence of the kind of metalinguistic understanding which he could apply meaningfully to his choices as a writer.

At other points in the interviews, there is a sense that Tony is beginning to *extend* his metalinguistic understanding from the identification of a concept into linking it with his writing of the diary entry. In the quote below, although his ability to articulate an understanding of why and how these deliberate choices are

made remains limited, there are signs of developing metalinguistic understanding.

Tony: Like I said, this one here was the one where I done more in the past tense than future and present, because that would be normal, because this time I've just gone into this because it suits the story itself, because it yeah puts it with it.

Tony: Um, well mainly I've just been writing like present tense and future tense, but I'm not, we haven't been using much of the past lately, but now, since we've done this diary entry I've probably gone more into the past than usual.

When talking about the voice used in his diary entry and the choice between first or third person, Tony began to express how his understanding of the concept of first or third person has an *application* in the context of his writing. He suggested that first person voice is more ‘legitimate’, as though ‘you were the actual character in the actual story actually writing an entry’. This comment suggests that he had some understanding of the distinction between the insider perspective of the first person compared with the third person narrator stance, which can result in ‘sounding like you're a third party person doing it on behalf of a person’.

Throughout the interviews, Tony demonstrated some understanding of what makes a good piece of diary writing but his understanding remained quite intuitive. As the exchange below illustrates, he struggled to find his voice in articulating his metalinguistic understanding:

Tony: I was quickly able to go over it and read it and to me it sounded better than this one here, than the first one we did, so... like. It just sounded... like I said more secondary school standard...

Tony: It would have probably helped if we were able to watch it a couple more times. That way it just sinks into your head a little bit. You know what it's actually completely about, where just watching it once, and the over again just looking at it, it was a little bit tricky trying to understand just how he said it and what he would actually mean on it, but once you were writing it and it started to come back to you, it got easier by the time you looked down to the bottom.

3.4. Vignette 4: Australia – Riley

Riley's diary entry was on *Appleseed*, a Japanese animated science fiction action film. Written in the character, Deunan Knute's voice, the entry drew on a five minute scene about how Deunan found out about her mother's death.

Riley found the tasks of projecting his voice through a selected character and through shifts in time challenging. In the quote below, he explicitly articulates this in terms of using first and third person voice.

Riley: Um I've never... I've only done two diary entries before because I never did any of them back at my primary school and I've always been good at writing 3rd person instead of 1st person, and that's what I'm used to doing. At first I didn't actually get the concept of a diary entry but my teacher and my mum and dad have run me through everything and they've actually helped me with this. I had a draft but this is the one that my mum checked and everything. I had to write it all out again, and so far I've only missed the ‘-ed’ on ‘call’. That's about it.

His final comment here draws attention to using the past tense. Like Tony, Riley thought the grammar lesson had extended his knowledge of tenses and helped improve his diary writing. In the quote above, Riley uses the grammatical terminology of tense (*identification*) and describes learning about tense as supporting his diary writing, though precisely how this made a difference is unclear. His *application* of his grammatical knowledge to his own writing was thus less secure.

Riley: Well, I kind of learnt a bit more about tenses – past and present, and eventually future – a lot more than I did in primary school. And that's kind of helped me figure out some things with my diary entries, because I struggled a bit with that.

The developing status of Riley's application of his metalinguistic knowledge was further reinforced by his comment that 'I reckon I could have done maybe a little bit more on that, on the past, present and future part'... Although Riley thought that knowing about tenses helped him with his diary writing, he was unable to elaborate in detail how the tenses might be drawn on in his writing to achieve a purpose. For Riley, using tenses was about fulfilling a requirement of diary writing as is demonstrated in the quote below.

Riley: Um... Imagine you are Sam Flynn. Write a full-page diary entry. And she gave us... we had to say... We each had to put one part, it doesn't matter if it was big or smaller than the others, of past, present and future. And we had to kind of mumble jumble up a full page. But I had to do two.

Like Tony, explicit teaching helped Riley articulate his metalinguistic awareness of the concept of tense. He could refer to tense, and could notice the usage in his own writing but, as evident in the following quotes, he did not *elaborate* or *extend* his explanations:

Riley: It was sort of strange but I was amazed about how it changed from... about how primary school was all, 'This is past tense', but how in high school, 'This is the actual past tense.' And present. Um so that's kind of changed what I've really done, in writing. And that's, yeah, that's also helped me.

Riley: Um I did a lot of past and present. That was [pointing], I think, the only part that was... yeah this [pointing] was the only part of future. Bit of that was all... that's past, present and um a bit of past and present in here [pointing]. But that's just how I decided to write it, 'cause I thought that that [pointing to end of first page] would have been good enough, but then Ma'am said I've got small pages I've got to write even more, so... um... what I had to try and do was I had to try and see which ways I could try to extend it, saying at the start of it, hopefully Tron was destroyed once and for all... So that took me about five minutes trying to figure out how to write the rest of it. Which was a bit hard. But, yeah, I got through it.

Vygotsky (1986) suggests that access to everyday concepts grounded in everyday experiences facilitates the development of scientific concepts. Past tense did not appear to be an easy concept to develop for Riley. Riley told us that his predominant reading experience in action books did not prepare him for understanding 'past worlds', suggesting he sees some connection between tense and the time setting of the story, when of course it is highly likely that Riley's action books are also in the present tense.

Riley: Yep. Part of it again, why I had trouble with it, really, 'cause, um. I'm used to reading books with, not that... I don't know whether it matters or anything, but I'm used to reading book with a lot of action in them... I'm not used to reading books on like how they're going to past worlds and kind of... like Ghost Boy... It really didn't click in my mind as much as other books did. Um that might have made me a bit off in the diary entry.

The four vignettes presented here offer an insight into students' thinking about the language choices they make in writing, and the nature of their developing conceptual understanding of grammatical ideas. In the next section we will discuss the theoretical implications of these insights in advancing our understanding of metalinguistic development in relation to writing.

4. Discussion

In terms of the four category theory of concept formation, drawing on Vygotsky and Halliday, which was used to analyze these vignettes, it is clear that identification was evident more frequently than elaboration or extension, and evidence of application in these

learners was both more limited and more infrequent. To an extent, therefore, this suggests that the nature of metalinguistic understanding of writing as represented in these vignettes aligns well with the features of expansion relations suggested by Halliday. However, we would like to take this discussion a little further.

4.1. The dominance of identification

Whilst the prevalence of examples of learner identification of a grammatical concept might seem a simple endorsement of Vygotsky's notion of generalization, there is a real sense in these vignettes of a link between the students' experience of the lesson, as evidenced in their interview responses, and their identification of a grammatical term. Indeed, one could argue that much of this identification is simply 'echoing back' the teacher's voice, with key concepts such as tense or variety in sentence length reflecting the learning focus of the lesson. The students' tendency toward identification suggests that their metalinguistic understanding is more aligned to a particular language of description, than Halliday's notion of grammar as social semiotic and a meaning-making resource. The vignettes suggest the extent of the conceptual understanding underpinning this identification may be limited: Riley's comments about tense in his writing imply he thinks the study of tense is concerned with 'more' use of tense, rather than choice of tense, and Sarah's discussion of short and long sentences seem more focused upon a notion that length makes sentences 'interesting', rather than any understanding of textual rhythm². It may be that what we are seeing here is not so much *identification*, as the *location* of a feature in the written text, or *naming*, without strong conceptual understanding. This view is reinforced by comments which point to the use of a particular feature in response to perceived teacher expectations. Riley explains that 'We each had to put one part, it doesn't matter if it was big or smaller than the others, of past, present and future' suggesting his use of tense was more about deployment than choice; and Matt's understanding of the appropriacy of using 'and' at the start of the sentence is limited to a recollection that 'we got taught you shouldn't do it in primary'.

It is noticeable, also, that the two Australian learners made greater use of grammatical terminology to express their metalinguistic understanding than do the English learners, who were more likely to use common sense knowledge of language. This may be because the focus of the Australian lessons was on explicit grammar teaching, whereas the English lessons focused on shaping writing through use of grammatical terms. Nonetheless, if metalinguistic understanding is to enable young learners to be more empowered and effective shapers of written text, then conceptual development of metalinguistic ideas needs to move rapidly from identification to the elaboration and extension of their thinking, thereby providing a fuller understanding of the way grammatical structures make meaning in written text.

4.2. The significance of the role of the teacher

Although the vignettes do show moments when these learners can elaborate and/or extend their ideas and demonstrate stronger concept development of particular grammatical structures, it is also evident that the content of these elaborations and extensions are often highly dependent on students' experience of the lesson.

² It is important to note that the concepts underpinning metalinguistic understanding of writing are not exclusively grammatical concepts: there are a host of other concepts for students to learn such as literary metalanguage (e.g. *textual rhythm*), rhetorical metalanguage (e.g. *triple emphasis*, *tricolon*) and the metalanguage of the writing process (e.g. *drafting* and *revision*). This paper, however, focuses on grammatical metalanguage.

Firstly, Sarah's responses point to the influence of prior learning in shaping responses to new metalinguistic experiences. Although the lesson observed focused on making more judicious choice of nouns and verbs, Sarah still talked about adding in an adverb to improve her writing, reflecting a repeated pattern in classrooms in England of teaching children to improve their writing through adding adjectives or adverbs. Secondly, students used more elaborating or extending talk at a lexical level than at a syntactical level. Whilst this could be taken as evidence of a natural developmental trajectory from lexical to syntactical level, the fact that this pattern mirrors the tendency for teachers' own subject knowledge of grammar to be stronger at the lexical rather than the syntactical level (Myhill, 2005), suggests this may be a phenomenon less due to natural development and more likely attributable to areas of pedagogical confidence. Gombert (1992, p. 62) noted that metasyntactic understanding is achieved 'through school work on the formal aspects of language'. Where teachers themselves are less secure in their subject knowledge of grammar, learners' metalinguistic development may progress at a different pace and their ability to elaborate, extend or apply that metalinguistic understanding is likely to be hindered; conversely, where teachers are confident with grammar, they are likely to enable faster and richer development of metalinguistic understanding of writing. But importantly, this is not simply about teachers' subject knowledge, it also relates to pedagogical knowledge. Whilst identification might be an important first step in the development of metalinguistic understanding, more crucially, teaching needs to support learners in becoming more metalinguistically aware of grammar as social semiotic and how meaning is made in different contexts.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined and extended a conceptual framework for delineating metalinguistic development. The paper has demonstrated that development in metalinguistic understanding can be construed by the kind of conceptual connections displayed in the learner's representations of a grammatical concept. The four categories of *identification*, *elaboration*, *enhancing* and *application* provide a useful taxonomy with which to describe different levels of metalinguistic understanding learners demonstrate in talking about their writing. Our analysis has shown that while *identifying* may represent an initial point for the development of metalinguistic understanding, it is not sufficient for effective mastery of a grammatical concept. Learners need to be supported to move beyond basic *identification* to more elaborated or extended understanding in order for the concept to be generalized and systematized into enabling resources for writing.

The data reported in this paper are used in an exploratory way, and we make no claims for generalizability. Rather, we argue the relevance of this study is in its particularity, and in opening up new avenues for further research. From a cognitive perspective, Gombert notes 'the higher level of abstraction and elaboration required in the processing of written language' (1992, p. 151) and argues therefore that 'metalinguistic development thus appears to be of primary importance in the acquisition of writing' (1992, p. 152). But writing is not acquired; it is not an objective entity out there which the learner has to possess – it is a process of learning how to make meaning drawing on the available semiotic resources. All children, except those with specific learning difficulties, learn to talk through social interaction and without direct instruction; but learning to write requires support from a more expert other.

This paper has demonstrated developing metalinguistic understanding is more than accumulation of grammatical knowledge. The level of metalinguistic development relies, to some extent, on the learner's capacity to identify and elaborate on a grammatical

concept, and to extend this understanding by relating it to other concepts. The four categories of metalinguistic understanding may contribute to understanding what it means to acquire a grammatical concept and may support teachers in developing students' metalinguistic understanding from an initial notion of grammar as a system of signs to a systemic resource for meaning-making.

Whilst current literature has supported a contextualized approach to grammar teaching (Myhill et al., 2012), this paper makes an important contribution to understanding how this approach may be complemented by attending to ways in which a grammatical concept may be introduced and built on. However, further research is required to examine what pedagogical strategies might facilitate higher-level metalinguistic understanding, enabling learners to elaborate, extend and apply their grammatical knowledge.

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