English Metalanguage Awareness Among Primary School Teachers In Hong Kong

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Abstract

With the introduction of the English Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers in Hong Kong, local English teachers' performance in the assessment has been in the spotlight. Among the five papers in the assessment, teachers' scores for the writing paper, a composite of two tasks—expository writing and error correction and explanation, have consistently recorded the lowest since the implementation. One recurrent comment is teachers' insufficient understanding and use of metalinguistic terminology. It is against this background that the present study was conducted. It aimed to explore the extent to which local English teachers in primary schools were aware of English metalinguistic terms at different structural levels. 20 in-service primary English teachers participated in an English grammar metalanguage test, modelled on Andrews (1999), and their performance revealed three key patterns: (1) the lowest mean score in the explanation component, (2) recognition of examples of grammatical functions being much harder than that of grammatical forms, and (3) errors at the word level being more readily to be corrected and explained than those at the phrasal and clausal levels. Their performance also suggested one possible discrepancy between primary English teachers and the secondary counterparts, where the primary teachers were better at the lower level of metalanguage application (e.g., recognition of examples for metalinguistic terms) and the secondary teachers at higher-level applications (e.g., error correction). The paper concludes with a suggestion that systematic micro-metalinguistic input be integrated in teacher training courses and be used more actively among in-service teachers in their teaching context.

Keywords: metalanguage awareness, primary English teacher, grammar.

Introduction

With the implementation of the English Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT) for all local English teachers in Hong Kong since 2001, teachers' performance in the assessment has been in the spotlight in the territory. Teachers, both primary and secondary English ones, are evaluated via five papers in the assessment, namely, Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Classroom Language Assessment. Their scores for the respective papers are assumed to be a reflection of how good they are in those areas concerned. Among the five papers, the writing one, which is a composite of two components with more or less equal weighting—(1) expository writing and (2) error correction and explanation, is the most noteworthy in that teachers' scores for this paper have consistently been the lowest since the implementation of the assessment (See Appendix 1). One comment which has been recurring in the assessment reports is

teachers' insufficient ability to state the appropriate 'underlying rules and generalisations' or even confusion about metalinguistic terminology (e.g., HKEAA, 2008).

While attempts have been made to understand the type of metalinguistic knowledge local secondary English teachers possess, little has been done on primary English teachers who also take the same assessment. It is against this background that the present small-scale study was conducted, which aimed to examine the extent to which a group of primary English teachers in Hong Kong were aware of English metalinguistic terms at different structural levels. Given the small sample size in this study, the patterns observed can by no means be generalised to all primary English teachers in Hong Kong; however, at least the study will indicate any possible discrepancies between primary and secondary school teachers who have been treated as a group in the LPAT assessment.

Literature Review

The LPAT performance of the teachers, concomitant with the Language Awareness Movement in the UK (as reviewed in Andrews, 2007), has stimulated discussion about 'teachers' language awareness' in the Hong Kong context, as marked by a series of studies by Andrews (e.g., 1999, 2006) and McNeill (e.g., 2005).[1]

Andrews (1999) examined language awareness of a group of local English pre-teachers, local English teachers and native-speaking English teachers in Hong Kong. Among the various foci of the study, the investigation of metalinguistic awareness is of our concern. In his study, metalinguistic awareness was regarded as a combination of 'teachers' reflections upon [their] explicit knowledge about the knowledge' and 'the interrelationship between the declarative and procedural dimensions of teacher language awareness' (Andrews, 1999, p. 144). A test with four tasks was conducted to unveil such declarative or explicit meta-knowledge of the participants: recognition task, production task, correction task and explanation task. The recognition task involved the identification of an example with the given metalinguistic term; the production task was where the participants wrote down appropriate metalinguistic terms for examples highlighted; the correction and explanation tasks required the participants to correct sentences and provide explanations with appropriate grammatical terminology. The local teachers were found to perform the best in the correction task, and their mean score for the recognition task was higher than that for the production task. However, they were weak at rules and explanations in the explanation task. Their performance, according to Andrews, suggests a mismatch between their proficiency (as implied by their performance in the correction task) and their ability to produce accurate metalanguage (as revealed in the other three tasks).

Adopting Borg's (2003) definition of 'cognition'—'know, believe and think', Andrews (2006) conducted a follow-up study of three of the teacher participants in his 1999 study

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[1] As reviewed in Andrews (2007), language awareness has aroused much attention in first or second language teaching. A lot of studies have been carried out, with their foci mostly at the macro-level, for example, Wright and Bolitho's (1993) paper on the need of language awareness in language teacher education and the effectiveness of a number of relevant activities, and Borg's (2001) cognitive discussion about language awareness. Despite different foci, these studies help highlight and reinforce the importance of language awareness.

and focused on the possible change in their cognitions of the English grammar. With both qualitative and quantitative data (from sources like teacher's written narrative, lesson observation and metalanguage test), it was noted that there seemed to be no difference among the teachers in terms of their knowledge of English metalanguage but some change in their interaction with their teaching environment. One interesting claim is that years of teaching appear to be independent of the confidence in using metalanguage. In other words, longer teaching years does not necessarily guarantee a higher level of confidence in the use of metalanguage.

While Andrews focuses on the English grammar metalanguage, McNeill and Lai (2008) examine teachers' awareness in the English vocabulary. They presented the results of two sets of pre- and post- vocabulary awareness tests for their 9-month 'Magic of Words' Project. The two tests examined the teacher participants in terms of (i) vocabulary awareness and (ii) vocabulary-related error awareness. Vocabulary awareness covered teachers' knowledge of vocabulary metalanguage (e.g., compound noun), word structure (e.g., affixation) and lexical relations (e.g., synonymy); vocabulary-related error awareness referred to the teachers' ability to correct and explain lexical errors. While the participants performed better in the post-test on vocabulary awareness, there was not much difference in the post-error awareness test, which can be viewed as an echo, from the lexical perspective, with the plausible 'fossilised' nature of teachers' English metalanguage as shown in Andrews' (2006) study.

As a discussion of teachers' grammatical and vocabulary awareness, Andrews and McNeill (2005) studied the notion of 'Good Language Teacher' from three levels, one of which was concerned about teachers' metalanguage of both English vocabulary and grammar. Teachers were asked to complete language awareness tasks on grammar and vocabulary metalanguage. A pattern similar to Andrews' (1999) was observed among the three teacher participants for the grammar tasks, despite slight variation among the three teachers. The correction task was again where the teachers attained the highest scores whereas the explanation task displayed the lowest accuracy scores. As to the vocabulary counterpart, the correction task recorded the highest scores, and two of the teachers performed the worst in the explanation task. Variation among the three teachers was noted in their performance in the recognition and production tasks.

Instead of looking into teachers' metalanguage awareness, Berry (1997) investigated teachers' awareness of their students' metaknowledge, with particular attention to the possible discrepancy between (i) teachers' awareness of their students' metaknowledge and (ii) students' awareness of metalinguistic terminology in the context of 'transition from secondary to tertiary education' in Hong Kong. The university teachers were found to have overestimated their first-year students' knowledge of the English grammar metalanguage (e.g., '*pronoun*' and '*plural*'), implying possible misunderstanding of the metalinguistic terms among the students when teachers use metalanguage in their teaching.

Similar to Berry (1997), McNeill (2005) also looked into the difference between teachers' awareness and students' awareness. In particular he examined the discrepancy between non-native English teachers and native English teachers in predicting students' vocabulary difficulty. A group of students were asked to work on two tests with 40 words from the text; teachers were invited to choose 12 words from the text which they believed

were unfamiliar to their students, and account for their choice. The analysis showed that local English teachers were more accurate than the native English counterparts in predicting students' vocabulary difficulties, probably because of their own English learning experience. Meanwhile, no difference was noted between experienced and novice non-native English teachers.

The above studies do not only highlight the significance of research into the notion of language awareness, but also imply that the term 'metalanguage' can be interpreted in different ways (as discussed in Berry, 2005), depending on the focus of the research. Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, and Williams (1999, p. 13) refer to 'metalanguage' as 'a language to describe language'. Thornbury (1997, p. x), as reviewed in Andrews (1999), addresses the pure linguistic nature of the term by linking it to teachers' knowledge of 'the underlying systems of language'. Bolitho et al. (2003, p. 251) state further that language awareness is 'mental' and involves 'attention to language in use' and understanding of how the language works. Andrews (1999) and Andrews and McNeill (2005) define metalinguistic awareness as a composite of teachers' beliefs or reflections and their 'declarative' and 'procedural' knowledge of the target language. In the present study, metalanguage, similar to Celce-Murcia et al.'s and Thornbury's interpretations, is confined to the terminology of the English grammar (e.g., '*noun*' and '*adjective*').

The Present Study

As the above review shows, much attention has been paid to teachers' language awareness at a macro-level (e.g., production, recognition, reflection, and cognition). The next stage of inquiry can be at a micro-level, with particular attention to which type of metalinguistic knowledge teachers have most difficulty in at a local level, for example, (i) which metalinguistic aspect of the English grammar teachers fail to produce or recognise or (ii) which aspect of the English grammar is the most difficult for correction and explanation.

The present study focuses on teachers' metalanguage. It aims at exploring the extent to which local English teachers in primary schools are aware of English metalinguistic terms. In particular, it targets at examining their awareness of English metalanguage at different structural levels, with specific attention to the following questions:
   1. To what extent are teachers accurate in providing the appropriate metalinguistic terms for the examples highlighted?
   2. To what extent are teachers accurate in identifying the nature/examples of the given metalinguistic terms?
   3. To what extent are teachers accurate in correcting and explaining mistakes or errors with accurate metalinguistic terminology?
   4. To what extent do teachers perform better in working on grammatical forms than grammatical functions?
   5. To what extent does teachers' accuracy in English metalanguage differ across the word level, phrasal level and clausal level?
   6. To what extent are the primary English teachers different from the secondary English teachers across all tasks?

Methodology

Test design

This study was modeled on Andrews' (1999) one on the metalinguistic awareness of a group of L2 English teachers. A test with four tasks, one on metalanguage production, one on metalanguage recognition, one on error correction and the last one on explanation, was conducted. As in Andrews (1999), there were 12 sentences in the production task, 18 sentences in the recognition task, and 15 sentences in the correction task and 15 sentences in the explanation task. It was intended that such design of the study would make it comparable to Andrews' one on secondary school teachers to a certain extent.

The production task, in response to research question 1, focused on the participants' ability to provide grammatical forms (e.g., '*noun*' and '*determiner*') for the underlined words in the given sentences. In the recognition task (research questions 2 and 4), the participants were expected to circle the words/phrases which exemplified the grammatical forms (e.g., '*noun*' and '*determiner*') and grammatical functions (e.g., '*subject*' and '*indirect object*') concerned. This was motivated by Carter's (2003, p. 64) definition of language awareness in terms of 'the forms and functions of language'. In total, 12 grammatical forms and six grammatical functions were included. Lastly, the correction and explanation tasks (research questions 1, 3 and 5) comprised five questions involving errors for each of the following three levels:

(i) Word level
   e.g. tense form
      The students have finished their rehearsal half an hour ago.
      (where the verb form '*have finished*' does not correspond to the tense indicated by the adverbial '*ago*')
      subject-verb agreement
      Everyone thinks that the design of the jeans are good.
      (where the main verb '*are*' does not agree with the subject '*design*')

(ii) Phrasal level
   e.g. location of modifying/prepositional phrase
      The in the blue basket kitten belongs to the orphan.
      (where the post-modifier/prepositional phrase '*in the blue basket*' is placed in between the determiner 'the' and the noun being referred to)

(iii) Clausal level
   e.g. sentence fragment/incomplete sentence
      While I was reading the guidebook written by a famous tour guide.
      (where the main clause, e.g., '*the phone rang.*', is missing)

The participants were required to correct the sentences and explain their corrections. (See Appendices 2 and 3 for the instructions and sample test items.)

Procedure

The arrangement of the four tasks is as follows:

production → recognition → correction and explanation

Unlike Andrews (1999), the participants were asked to complete the recognition task after the production task in that the former (i.e., recognition task) could cause a cross-over effect by providing some kind of metalinguistic input for the participants in doing the latter (i.e., production task). They were instructed not to refer back to the recognition task while they were working on the production task.

As in Andrews, the correction and explanation tasks were conducted at the same time and the participants were asked to correct the given sentences and explain their corrections. Again, they were reminded not to refer to the recognition/production tasks for reference.

After the test, the participants filled in a questionnaire on personal information such as educational background, years of teaching and levels of English taught. They were also invited to share with the researcher their views on the tasks in the test and their perceived performance in the tasks.

Participants

20 in-service teachers, who finished an LPAT training course at a tertiary institute in Hong Kong, agreed to complete the test. At the time of the test, all of them had 1 to 17 years of teaching experience and were teaching in local primary schools as English teachers.

Data analysis

The data collected were analysed at different levels. First an overall average score of each task in the test (e.g., production) was compiled. After calculating the four average score, the responses in the recognition task were grouped in terms of two categories: (i) grammatical forms and (ii) grammatical functions, and the average score of each category was calculated. The responses in the correction and explanation tasks were grouped in terms of three levels: word, phrase and clause, with the average score of each of the three levels being calculated.

Results and Findings

In this section, the overall performance of the teacher participants is presented first, followed by their performance in each task.

Overall picture

Table 1 shows the overall performance of the teachers in the four tasks:

Table 1: Mean scores for four tasks

Tasks	Lowest scores	Highest scores	Mean scores	SD
Production	12.5%	70.83%	51.67%	15.02
Recognition	16.67%	72.22%	47.22%	16.96
Correction	20%	80%	50%	16.82
Explanation	0%	53.33%	19.17%	14.58

The above performance of the teachers, as indicated by their mean scores, displayed the following sequence:

production → correction → recognition → explanation (Sequence 1)

Should only the questions on grammatical forms in the recognition task be considered (as in Andrews), the mean score of the participants in the recognition task reached 60.83%, which was higher than that of the production task (51.67%) and showed the following sequence:

recognition → production → correction → explanation (Sequence 2)

The above sequences are similar to Andrews' one (correction → recognition → production → explanation) in that the explanation task was also found to be the most difficult in this study. However, it is different from that of Andrews since the correction task was found to be more difficult than (i) the production one (in both sequences 1 and 2) or (ii) the recognition of grammatical forms (sequence 2). This in turn implies a possible divergence in the ability of primary and secondary English teachers: the primary teachers seemed to be more competent with the lower level application (e.g., recognition) of their metalanguage than the higher level ones (e.g., correction); the secondary teachers, however, could be more competent with error correction, a higher-level metalanguage application.

As the mean scores showed, there was a striking contrast between the error explanation task and the other three tasks. The accuracy of error explanation was very low (19.17%), with the average mark much lower than those of the other three tasks (*production* vs. *explanation* (t=8.32, p <.05); *recognition* vs. *explanation* (t=6.77, p <.05); *correction* vs. *explanation* (t=6.91, p <.05)) (a point to be discussed later in this section). As to the other three tasks, the score for the production task (51.67%) was slightly higher than that for the correction task (50%) and that for the recognition task (47.22%).

The slight difference between the production task and the correction one might be related to the nature of the possible answers to the two tasks. In the production task, participants were asked to provide the metalinguistic terms which were expected to be specific (such as '*collective noun*' instead of '*noun*'). When the participants provided a partial answer (e.g., '*noun*'), one mark would still be awarded. On the other hand, in the correction task, the answer could only be either correct or incorrect. No marks would be given to any partially correct answer. This difference in the nature of the possible answers might have affected the scores as a result.

The difference in the score for the production task and that for the recognition task might relate to the test items of the two tasks. The recognition task involved the identification of examples of both grammatical functions (e.g., '*direct object*') and grammatical forms (e.g., '*noun*') while the production task involved only the grammatical forms. The questions on grammatical functions seemed to have dragged down the overall score of the recognition task.

The difficulty of the tasks as revealed by the overall scores corresponds to what the participants expressed in the informal chat with the researcher after the test. They found the explanation task the most challenging and some even admitted that they could hardly recall the metalinguistic terms or explanations they had learnt in the LPAT course.[2]

Production task

After looking at the overall picture, we will discuss each task in greater detail. First, the production task. The participants were found to provide slightly more partial or general answers (e.g., '*noun*') than complete ones (e.g., '*collective noun*') for the given 12 questions in the task:

Table 2: Response pattern in the production task

	Average number of questions (N = 12)
Complete answers	3.9
Incomplete answers	4.6
Wrong answers	3.5

As shown in Table 2, on average, only 3.9 out of 12 questions were given complete responses (e.g., '*count noun*'), while slightly more questions (4.6) went with incomplete answers (e.g., '*noun*'). About one third of the questions (3.5) were even answered wrongly. This suggests a general or partial understanding of the metalinguistic terms of the English grammar and their little knowledge of the sub-categories of the grammatical forms.

Recognition task

As to the recognition task, the participants obtained 60.83% on average for grammatical forms but 20% for grammatical functions:

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[2] An attempt was also made to analyse the data in terms of years of teaching since teaching experience has been one of the concerns in earlier studies. Data from the participants were put into two groups: 1 to 6 years of experience (N= 11) vs. more than 6 years (N= 9). However non-significant patterns were noted, possibly because the sample size was small and the participants were not evenly distributed among the years concerned (e.g., five participants with five years of teaching but one participant with 16 years of teaching), which constitutes one of the limitations of the present study.

Table 3: Mean scores for grammatical forms vs. Mean scores for grammatical functions
in the recognition task

	Lowest scores	Highest scores	Mean scores	SD
Grammatical forms	25%	91.67%	60.83%	20.78
Grammatical functions	0%	66.7%	20%	20.26

The mean score for grammatical forms was much higher than that for grammatical functions (t=7.804, p <.05). The mean score for grammatical forms was also the highest as compared with those for the other three tasks. In other words, for the participants, examples of grammatical forms were easier for identification than those of grammatical functions. This corresponds to earlier studies (e.g., Andrews, 1999), where the mean score for the recognition of grammatical forms was also found to be the highest as compared with those of other tasks.

Correction and explanation tasks

Recall that all the participants attained an average score (50%) in the correction task and a low score (19.17%) in the explanation task. This mismatch between the two corresponds to the one as noted in Andrews (1999) as well.

The mean scores for the questions which targeted at three levels in the correction and explanation tasks—word level, phrasal level and clausal level—are displayed below:

Table 4:   Mean scores for three levels in the Correction and Explanation tasks

Levels	Correction				Explanation			
	LSs	HSs	MSs	SD	LSs	HSs	MSs	SD
Word level	20%	100%	57%	20.80	0%	60%	30.5%	21.88
Phrasal level	20%	60%	44%	15.36	0%	60%	12%	16.42
Clausal level	0%	100%	49%	25.53	0%	60%	15%	20.39

(Key: LSs = lowest scores, HSs = highest scores, MSs = mean scores)

The scores revealed that the participants attained a higher mean score for the word level, as compared with their score for the phrasal level, in their corrections and explanations (Correction task: t=3.322, p <.05; Explanation task: t=3.399, p<.05). Their score for the clausal level was found to be slightly higher than that for the phrasal level in both corrections and explanations.

Interestingly, while the mean score for the word level and that for clausal level did not reveal any statistical difference in the correction task, the score for the word level in the explanation task was found to be significantly higher than that for the clausal level (t=2.510, p<.05). The different scores for the two tasks simply denote that the participants were more competent at the word level in their explanations than at the clausal level, although they might have similar competence level in correcting errors at both the word and clausal levels.

All in all, the scores of the participants for the four tasks revealed three key patterns. First, the participants performed better in the production, correction and recognition tasks than in the explanation task, which corresponds to the patterns observed in Andrews (1999).[3] Second, recognition of examples of grammatical functions was found to be much more challenging than that of grammatical forms. Last, errors at the word level were more readily to be corrected and explained than those at the phrasal and clausal levels.

Discussion

The three major findings as reported in the previous section are discussed here in terms of (i) the four tasks, (ii) the distinction between grammatical form and grammatical function, and (iii) the three levels of errors (word vs. phrasal vs. clausal), with a link to the design of grammar training course/assessment for teachers or pre-teachers and their practice at school.

First, the four tasks. Recall that the performance of the participants was the worst in the explanation task. This can be largely due to the cognitive demand of the task (Andrews, 1999; Andrews & McNeill, 2005). As discussed in Sorace (1985, as cited by Berry (2005)), a more advanced level of 'conscious metalinguistic knowledge' is needed for the explanation task than the correction one. Andrews also suggests a higher cognitive load of the task by listing three cognitive activities that the participants were required to carry out: 'reflecting upon' the error, identifying the relevant rule and expressing the rule with proper metalanguage.

On a similar basis, recognition and production relating to grammatical forms can be interpreted in terms of the notion of cognitive load. The recognition task required the participants to identify examples with a scope (i.e., the given sentences). An implication is that the answers are in the sentences. On the other hand, in the production task, the participants needed to search among a vast number of metalinguistic terms for the ones which appropriately corresponded to the nature of the underlined words. This kind of search demanded more cognitive thinking, as compared with that involved in the process of recognition.

Second, the distinction between grammatical forms and grammatical functions in the recognition task. By definition, 'grammatical form' refers to the shape of a grammatical item or 'how something looks' (University College London, 1998). For example, the presence of -*ful* and -*ness* in 'careful' and 'carefulness' helps indicate the nature of the words, that is an adjective and a noun. On the other hand, 'grammatical function' means the function which a grammatical form performs in a structural context (University College London, 1998). Quite often, one grammatical form can bear more than one grammatical function, depending on which context or structure the form is used. For example, 'teachers' can be the subject or object of a sentence, even though the form remains the same. This context-dependent variation is likely to make grammatical functions more difficult than grammatical forms.

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[3] The noted performance in the present study also corresponds to Shuib's (2009) study on a group of primary English teachers in Malaysia. In Shuib's study, the primary teachers scored the lowest in the explanation task (10.75) and the highest in the recognition task (61.43).

What is more, metalanguage of grammatical functions, especially the specific ones, is less covered or found in the textbooks for teachers and students (cf. Andrews' (1999) comment on the term '*predicate*'). Most of the time, we might just come across terms such as '*subject*', '*direct object*' and '*indirect object*' in those textbooks. There was hardly any mention of more specific grammatical functions or specific explanations. Therefore, even confusion over some simpler or more common grammatical functions such as direct and indirect objects was noticed among the participants, let alone the more technical functions.

Not only textbooks but also daily teaching goes against grammatical functions. While the primary English language curriculum covers the teaching of language structures such as '*Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object*' and '*Subject + Verb + Complement*' (The Curriculum Development Council, 2004, p. 48), teachers seldom make use of more specific metalinguistic terms like '*complement*' or '*indirect object*' in their daily teaching, probably due to their partial understanding of the functions and the adoption of the communicative or task-based approach, which discourages the use of metalanguage in class. Hence, teachers' limited exposure to and use of these terms might also have contributed to the pattern revealed.

As to the comparison among the word level, phrasal level and clausal level in the correction and explanation tasks, the word level by and large relates to the local use of the target word, and changes are made on the local or word basis. For example, a change in tense is represented by the corresponding change in the word form. On the other hand, the phrasal or clausal level can involve a slight change such as the addition of an argument for a ditransitive verb or a change in the structure of the whole sentence. Surprisingly, the patterns at the clausal level appeared to be more transparent than those at the phrasal level in that we can find in typical textbooks more description or discussion of the basic structure of a grammatical English sentence or the use of different adverbial clauses like '*because*' or '*when*'. It seems that we need to have further description or explanation of the English language in terms of the structure of different types of phrase, like ditransitive verb phrases or adjective phrases which require the obligatory presence of an argument (such as '*fond*').

In light of the results of the study, one further question to ask is how to improve the metalinguistic awareness of primary teachers. There seem to be two facets we can explore: (i) grammar training courses for pre-service and in-service teachers and (ii) teachers' practice at school.

First, grammar training courses for pre-service and in-service teachers. There appears to be a need to structure the course content in a way that the grammar component can be examined from both the macro- and micro-levels. More systematic organisation and presentation of the English metalanguage, particularly at the micro-level, can help enrich teachers' awareness of and thereby confidence in how the English language is structured, what they already know and what they do not know. As Berry (2005, p. 16) states, one seemingly essential component of the teacher training or retraining scenario is 'metalanguage [of] the right kind', and this present study has suggested terminology from the micro-perspective be among the right kind we can pursue. Awareness of and familiarity of the terminology at different levels of the language, as Celce-Murcia et al. (1999) explain, can be beneficial to teachers in their daily teaching and their exploration

of different teaching resources. This might lower the likelihood of their forgetting the terms covered in the course (cf. the remark mentioned by some participants in the informal chats after the test in this study).

Second, as stated earlier, there is little use of metalinguistic terms in their daily teaching. However, this scarce use in class does not justify their limited knowledge of the English language or ability to talk about or explain the language. As Shuib (2009) points out, sound knowledge of the English language is a prerequisite to the correction and explanation of students' work. To supplement the infrequent use of metalanguage in the daily teaching, teachers at school may consider having some regular cross-checking or discussions of students' work where the students' mistakes are examined and certain sets of metalinguistic terms (e.g., '*subject*', '*object*', '*direct object*' and '*indirect object*') are adopted in the explanation. This, to a certain extent, is likely to incorporate the use of metalanguage naturally in the primary school setting.

Conclusion

In summary, this study revealed the general/partial knowledge of the English metalanguage among local primary English teachers at the structural level, and one possible way to supplement their meta-knowledge are (i) to devise more systematic metalinguistic input in terms of grammatical functions and patterns at the phrasal and clausal levels for teacher participants, and (ii) to increase the regular or systematic use of metalanguage at least in the discussion of students' work among teachers at school. However, given the very small scale of the study and the difficulty of having teachers complete more rigorous tests in their tight working schedule, more research is much appreciated in terms of different levels of metalanguage, from both theoretical and teacher-training or teacher-assessment perspectives, so as to investigate the terms for the systematic input and to incorporate them in the teacher training courses or teacher assessments.

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Appendix 1

**Teachers' Performance in Language Proficiency Assessment for
Teachers (LPAT) since 2001**

Year	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	CLA
2001	85.68%	33.33%	68.35%	50.71%	89.25%
2002	55%	29%	39%	58%	91%
2003 (March)	63%	41%	72%	45%	89%
2004 (March)	71%	40%	49%	47%	88%
2005	59%	30%	64%	39%	92.5%
2006	85.5%	45.9%	74.3%	37%	92.7%
2007	78.8%	39.6%	80.4%	47.7%	92.7%
2008	81.8%	42%	71.8%	62%	94.6%
2009	80.3%	46.2%	69.5%	50.6%	97.2%

(Source: http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=1365&langno=1)

Appendix 2

Instructions for the Four Tasks

Part 1   Metalanguage production and recognition

Task 1   Metalanguage production (12 items)

Look at the twelve sentences below. What grammatical terms would you use to describe the item underlined in each of the sentences? WRITE your description in the SPACE provided. NOTE: For each item provide a full description.

For example:
1. He is the <u>funniest</u> clown in the circus.   *superlative adjective*
2. John <u>phoned</u> me last night.   *verb in past simple tense*

Task 2   Metalanguage recognition (18 items)

Look at the eighteen sentences below. What item in each of the sentences would you select to exemplify the grammatical term requested? CIRCLE the selected item.

For example:
1. (He) is the funniest clown in the circus.   *subject*
2. John talked (loudly).   *adverb of manner*

Part 2   Grammatical error correction and explanation

This section consists of fifteen English sentences, each of which contains a grammar mistake. For each sentence:
   1. Rewrite the faulty part of the sentence correctly. (There is only one part that is wrong.) DO NOT rewrite the whole sentence.
   2. Underneath each sentence, explain the error.

For example:
1. I often goes to the cinema.
    Correct version: **go**
    *Explanation: **The verb must agree with the subject.***
    [DO NOT write: *Change 'goes' to 'go'*.]

Appendix 3

Sample test items (with suggested answers in brackets)

Part 1   Metalanguage production and recognition (Tasks 1 and 2)

Task 1   Metalanguage production
1. The <u>public</u> is disappointed with the election results. (*collective noun*)
2. Look at <u>that</u>! It's my favourite brand. (*demonstrative pronoun*)

Task 2   Metalanguage recognition
<u>Grammatical form</u>
1. Uncountable noun
    The victims are still waiting for news of their family members. (*news*)
2. Ditransitive verb
    She felt surprised when he showed her that diamond necklace. (*showed*)

<u>Grammatical function</u>
3. Indirect object
    The student sent the teacher a Christmas card. (*the teacher*)
4. Direct object
    No one will ever understand what he is talking about. (*what he is talking about*)

Part 2   Grammatical error correction and explanation (Tasks 3 and 4)
        (brief answers in brackets)

Word level
1. John aware of the seriousness of the problem. (*missing main verb*)
2. The students have finished their rehearsal half an hour ago. (*mismatch between the tense required by the adverb 'ago' and the one of the verb*)

Phrasal level
3. Kitty's favourite toy is her soft lovely bear. (*wrong adjective order*)
4. Everyone thinks that the new boss is fond. (*missing prepositional phrase*)

Clausal level
5. Feeling curious, the computer will be on for a while. (*dangling modifier*)
6. Grandma hates her neighbour's sausage dog because it is ugly and barking a lot. (*imbalanced coordination*)

About the author

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