

# Investigating Language Awareness: The Role of Terminology

Roger Berry

**Abstract** This chapter examines critically the way in which metalinguistic terminology has been exploited in a number of tests designed to investigate various constructs which may be loosely grouped under the heading ‘language awareness’. The concept of language awareness is first discussed and a number of tests of it involving terminology are compared. Then a number of problems with such use of terminology are discussed, namely: a failure to distinguish terminology from metalanguage, a failure to question whether any kind of metalanguage is required, a failure to distinguish scientific and pedagogic terminology, and problems with the design of the tests. These points are then applied in a critical evaluation of items from two such tests, showing above all that tests using terminology are in great danger of losing their validity, of becoming tests of terminology alone and not of language awareness. The chapter concludes with suggestions for designers of tests involving terminology.

## 1 Introduction: Language Awareness, Terminology and Tests

In the last 20 years many instruments have been designed to investigate language awareness, and many, if not most, of these have involved the use of terminology, either wholly or partially. The list of papers predicated on such tests includes Bloor (1986); Steel and Alderson (1994); Alderson, Clapham and Steel (1997); Andrews (1994, 1998); Berry (1997, 2009); Han and Ellis (1998); Macaro and Masterman (2006); Elder (2009) and Ellis (2009).

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R. Berry (✉)  
Lingnan University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong  
e-mail: rogerb@ln.edu.hk

These tests vary according a number of criteria:

- the different subjects (learners, teachers, native speakers)
- the prompt involved (underlined forms in a sentence or text, terms, ungrammatical sentences)
- the subjects' task (stating the word class, identifying exponents of terms in a text, correcting and explaining ungrammatical sentences, stating the rule involved, selecting the rule from multiple choice, filling in gaps in an explanation)
- whether the task is productive or receptive
- what kind of productive language is required (terms, metalanguage, ordinary language)

It is clear that an ever-expanding range of formats is being utilised to get at language awareness. Table 1 (adapted from Berry 2010) summarises the different approaches:

There is one more crucial criterion, or variable, that differentiates these tests, namely the construct that they are investigating. What actually is language awareness? Many have questioned the usefulness of the concept, for example Komorowska (2012). Indeed, there may be nothing essential that holds together all the various enterprises that go under the heading of language awareness. It may well be that each narrow field of research, e.g. phonemic awareness, or teacher language awareness (Andrews 2007) needs its own separate definition.

For some, the concept of language awareness is useful precisely because of its vagueness, which allows practitioners from various fields to come together. However, such vagueness is not useful when it comes to devising concrete constructs that may be reliably tested. A number of researchers have attempted to operationalise language awareness as a whole, for example Schmidt, under the concept of 'noticing' (1990, 1994), or Svalborg, under the concept of 'engaging with language' (2009). But neither of these specifically mention terminology, and do not appear to have generated any such tests.

When we look at the tests that have been devised, we can discern a number of different, although not entirely distinct, purposes:

- evaluating learners' explicit knowledge and comparing it with their 'acquisition'
- evaluating learners' explicit knowledge and comparing it with that of native speakers
- testing teacher language awareness (e.g. LPATE)
- testing knowledge of terminology (e.g. Berry 1997, 2009)

The journal *Language Awareness* gives the following statement of its aims and scope:

Language Awareness encourages and disseminates work which explores the following: the role of explicit knowledge about language in the process of language learning; the role that such explicit knowledge about language plays in language teaching and how such knowledge can best be mediated by teachers; the role of explicit knowledge about language in language use: e.g. sensitivity to bias in language, manipulative aspects of language, literary use of language. (inside cover)

**Table 1** A comparison of different tests

Study	Subjects	Prompt	Task	Productive or receptive?	Productive language required
Andrews (1994)	Teachers	Underlined forms in text Terms	State the word class Identify them in a text	Productive	Term
Alderson et al. (1997)	University students	Ungrammatical sentences	Correct and explain	Receptive Productive	Term plus metalanguage
Han and Ellis (1998)	Adult learners	Terms Ungrammatical sentences	Identify them in a text State the rule	Receptive Productive	Term plus metalanguage
Elder (2009)	Native speakers and L2 learners	Ungrammatical sentences	Select the rule from multiple choice	Receptive	
LPATE (1)	Teachers and trainee teachers	Terms Underlined ungrammatical sentences	Identify them in a text Explain using appropriate terminology	Receptive Productive	Term plus metalanguage
LPATE (2)	Teachers and trainee teachers	Underlined ungrammatical sentences	Fill in gaps	Productive	Term (or non-technical word)
Berry (1997, 2009)	University students	Terms	Tick to show knowledge	Receptive/ productive	Language examples

I have included the two versions of the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English (LPATE), as developed and administered in Hong Kong. This is described in more detail below

From this authoritative viewpoint—though some may disagree—it is clear that explicit knowledge about language is an essential feature of ‘language awareness’. But the central issue is: what is involved in explicit knowledge?

## 2 Problems with Using Terminology

The problem of how to access explicit knowledge has long been recognised (e.g. Harley 1994; Macaro/Masterman 2006). The problem is that learners may possess explicit knowledge of a language but be unable to demonstrate it because the concept is beyond their linguistic competence to articulate. To quote Macaro and Masterman:

A difficulty also resides in measuring knowledge about language, in that learners cannot be said to lack explicit knowledge simply because they do not possess the required meta-linguistic competence to articulate it. (2006, p. 299)

The response of many to this problem has been to invoke the use of terminology. But as Carter (2003) pointed out, little research had been undertaken into the use of terminology as a research tool. Ellis’s lengthy article (2004) attempts to redress this lack by listing a number of reasoned principles by which investigation into explicit knowledge, including the use of terminology, could progress; some of these are mentioned below. But still the overall problem remains: that tests of explicit knowledge using terminology are being developed without any evidence that they measure what they claim to measure. Elder (2009) is an attempt to provide this evidence, but there are problems with her attempt, as will be seen below.

A number of specific problems with the use of terminology in testing language awareness may be identified:

### (1) *A failure to distinguish metalanguage and terminology*

I have argued on a number of occasions (e.g. Berry 2005, 2010) that terminology should not be equated with metalanguage. Metalanguage is basically ‘language about language’ according to most definitions (e.g. Johnson and Johnson 1998, p. 212). It is certainly not restricted to a limited repertoire of technical lexis, as terminology might be characterised. Metalanguage is a much broader linguistic concept, involving all of the language that is used to talk about language. So, for example, when someone says ‘I don’t like the way he said that’, this is metalanguage, but it contains not a single term. Grammars of English consist of metalanguage by definition, but one can usually distinguish quite easily between words which are terms and words which are not, as in this extract talking about possessive pronouns from the Collins Cobuild English Grammar (2011, p. 33):

When you are talking about people or things, you often want to say how they are connected with each other. There are several different ways in which you can do this, but usually you do it by using a possessive pronoun to show that something belongs to someone or is associated with them.

There is only one term (underlined) in this lengthy text. The vast majority of it is non-terminological metalanguage. Words such as ‘follow’, ‘omit’, ‘action’ and ‘event’ are disproportionately typical of metalanguage, but they are not terms. Indeed, it is quite possible to talk about language without any terminology at all.

However, when one examines early discussion of the topic, one sees that there is an implicit link between terminology and metalanguage, as in this quote from Ellis:

Metalingual knowledge is knowledge of the technical terminology needed to describe language. (1994, p. 714)

or in this quote from Borg (1999, p. 103), where the two words seem to be used as synonyms:

One argument for not promoting terminology, then, was that some students had no knowledge of metalanguage...

Distinguishing between metalanguage and terminology can help us to partly overcome the ‘access’ problem, to recognise that when they are talking about language, subjects do not need to use terminology.

## (2) *A failure to question the need for terminology/metalanguage*

Once we have established the difference between terminology and metalanguage, we can begin to question whether either is necessary in testing language awareness. Some early researchers seemed to hold the belief that metalanguage was an integral part of language awareness:

Explicit knowledge includes the ability to state linguistic rules, at least the simpler ones. And to do this learners need a metalanguage. Indeed, it would appear that whatever the explicit knowledge looks like, it must include metalanguage, and this metalanguage must include words for grammatical categories and functions. (Alderson et al. 1997, p. 97)

The use of ‘must’ here suggests that metalanguage (and by extension, terminology) is an essential part of metalinguistic knowledge. An earlier statement uses a slightly weaker modality, but nevertheless supports the idea:

What is meant by ‘knowledge about language’ needs to be explored, but it typically includes a knowledge of and ability to use metalanguage appropriately. (Steel and Alderson 1994, p. 92)

However, the prevailing view nowadays is that metalanguage/terminology is merely one means of accessing that knowledge. Some researchers have gone further, suggesting that terminology is not even necessary in accessing it. Thus Ellis:

It is important to recognize, however, that verbalizing a rule or feature need not entail the use of metalanguage. (2004, p. 239) (here metalanguage = terminology)

and also:

...the ability to verbalize a rule is distinct from conscious awareness of the rule. Learners may possess explicit knowledge of a specific rule but fail to verbalize it satisfactorily simply because they lack the necessary skill to talk about language. (2004, p. 263)

And Elder:

... even though a command of this subject-specific lexis (verb, noun etc.) may assist the learner to display his/her metalinguistic knowledge, the knowledge of such terminology is independent of grammatical knowledge per se (...) and indeed of any cognitive or analytical skills associated with such knowledge. (2009, pp. 114–115)

Ellis (2004) makes a number of suggestions for improving the testing of explicit knowledge. Here is the first aim he gives (for measuring analyzed knowledge):

1. The measurement of analyzed knowledge (as opposed to metalanguage) should be the primary goal in testing explicit knowledge. (2004, p. 265)

And later:

1. A test providing a measure of learners' knowledge of metalanguage is of secondary importance, pending studies that demonstrate that such knowledge is an important component of L2 proficiency and/or plays a role in L2 acquisition. (2004, p. 267)

Both of these quotes seek to distance terminology from explicit knowledge.

The issue can be reformulated as a failure to distinguish two different types of knowledge: knowledge about language and knowledge about metalanguage. Elsewhere I have tried to make clear the difference by using the terms 'metalinguistic knowledge' for the former and 'metalingual knowledge' for the latter (Berry 2005, 2010). My own test, the Metalinguistic Terminology Survey (Berry 1997, 2009), is a clear attempt to evaluate the latter, in that it seeks to establish what terms learners know (and not whether the knowledge of terms indicates some form of language awareness).

### (3) *A failure to distinguish scientific and pedagogic terminology*

Even when tests involving terminology are appropriate (e.g. with teachers), some fail to recognise that certain terms may be inappropriate for their subjects. A distinction can be made here between *pedagogic* terms and *scientific* terms, between the limited number of terms that are suitable in pedagogic circles and the potentially unlimited number that might be used in scientific descriptions of English (Berry 2010, pp. 31–43). The point is that some terms are simply too arcane to be thrown at subjects, teachers as well as learners, for example 'paucal' and 'multal'. Few (apart from scientific grammarians) can be expected to know these terms. Thus an 'awareness of terminology' (i.e. metalingual awareness) of which terms, if any, are suitable for a certain group of subjects is required on the part of researchers. The two critical studies below give some more examples of the use of unsuitable terms.

Of course, the distinction between the two types of terms is not an absolute; it is more like a cline, with some terms at one end or the other but most in between on a sliding scale. Some terms may fall into both categories, for example those for the major word classes such as *noun*, *verb*, etc. Moreover, there may be variation according to the context. For example, ‘predicate’ is a distinctly scientific concept in most circles, but amongst learners of English in Austria it is a common one (being borrowed from their L1 studies), though its meaning is somewhat different from the traditional scientific one (Berry 2009).

But even within the pedagogic domain there is no guarantee of uniformity. Many learners of English, for example, have a very limited knowledge of terminology; others, by contrast, have an extensive knowledge. The influential factor would seem to be the practices of their teachers (Borg 1999), rather than the recommended methodology and curriculum. My own research (Berry 1997, 2009) has shown great variation in the knowledge of terminology that learners have, even within such an educationally cohesive territory as Hong Kong. In a study of the knowledge of 50 pedagogic and scientific terms (among English majors who were starting their degree) the range was from 9 to 35; the range was even greater for comparable groups from Poland (7–40) and Austria (5–36). So researchers must be very cautious in assuming that learners have the required terminological knowledge for the tests that are to be administered to them.

#### (4) *Problems with test design (especially a lack of validity)*

It is clear that over the years there has been steady progress in the design of tests of language awareness. Many of the early tests depended on the productive use of terminology, which is not always a valid exercise, especially for language learners, since in ‘real life’ they would only need to understand it occasionally when it is used by teachers or in textbooks.

This distinction between receptive and productive tests (see Table 1) is an important factor for Ellis:

... a test of metalanguage may achieve greater validity if it measures receptive rather than productive knowledge of metalanguage, as, arguably, it is learners’ understanding of explicit linguistic constructs rather than their ability to articulate metalinguistic rules that is important where language acquisition and use are concerned (...) (2004, p. 267).

There is a whole range of receptive test formats that researchers have started to exploit, such as selecting a rule from multiple choice, or filling in gaps (see Table 1), in order to increase validity. However, such tests of language awareness need to satisfy the same stringent criteria that tests of language face. For example, in a multiple choice format the distractors should be carefully worded so as to present plausible alternatives; there is no point in claiming that all subjects are able to identify a correct rule if the other options are implausible.

Increased objectivity of marking (see the discussion of LPATE below) may be another aim, or consequence, of such novel formats. However, as in regular language testing, the designer needs to be aware of the tension that may exist between validity and objectivity, in that an increase in one may lead to a decrease in the

other (Bachman 1990). Thus great care is needed to ensure that tests of explicit knowledge fulfill all the criteria of good tests.

### 3 Critical Studies

Two very different instruments have been chosen for a closer examination of their construction, by way of illustrating some of the problems outlined above.

#### 3.1 *Critical Study 1: Elder's (2009) Metalinguistic Knowledge Test*

This test is part of a study whose aim is not only to investigate explicit knowledge, but also to attempt to validate the techniques that are used to investigate the same (by comparison with other tests).

The first part of the test involves the explanation of errors, but instead of requiring subjects to identify them first (which leads to problems when they focus on the wrong point), it presents the errors as already identified (as with the LPATE below). Furthermore, learners do not have to produce any terminology or meta-language themselves; all they have to do is select from a set of choices; it is therefore receptive and, as such, can claim to be valid.

However, not all the items have been carefully constructed. Elder gives the following example:

If Jane had asked me, I would give her some money.

Out of the four options given, the 'correct' choice is:

When 'if' clause is in the past perfect tense, main clause verb is in the past conditional.

The first problem with this is that the prompt sentence is in fact not erroneous. It is possible to conceive of a situation where the opportunity for asking occurred in the past (but was not taken up), with the contingent event (not) occurring in the future (cf. 'If you had asked me about it yesterday, I would give you the money tomorrow'). It would appear that Elder has bought into the myth of the 'three (or four) conditionals' in English (cf. 'If Jane asks me, I will...', 'If Jane asked me, I would...', 'If Jane had asked me, I would have...'), and since the prompt is a mixture of the third and second has considered it incorrect. But 'mixed' conditionals are common (Lewis 1986, pp. 48–149; Willis 1994, p. 59). Willis gives this example paralleling the above 'error':

If United had won, they'd be top of the table.

Of course, it can be argued that L2 learners (one target group of the test), under the same misapprehension, should have no problem with the item, but then this hardly constitutes a test of their language awareness; it is more a test of their knowledge of



artificial rules. Moreover, there is surely no excuse for grammatical inexactitude. And native speakers (the other target group) may indeed have a problem.

The second problem with this item is the use of rather arcane terminology in the correct option. 'Clause' is largely a scientific term, and 'past conditional' as a concept is rarely encountered nowadays, even in scientific circles, since the 'conditional' (with its past and present variants) is no longer considered a valid verb form (*would* and *would have* being more fittingly consigned to modal auxiliary constructions). Even as a label for the three (or four) constructions described above it has to compete with 'if sentences'. One wonders what kind of teaching the learners have undergone, not to mention the native speakers. The item therefore seems to be more a test of grammar than of language awareness.

The second part of the Metalinguistic Knowledge Test requires subjects to identify examples of given terms in a sentence, following (Alderson et al. 1997). From one prompt, 'definite article', the subjects are supposed to identify 'the' in the text, but of course many would not need a text to make this connection; they could write down 'the' without seeing the sentence. This kind of item is appropriate when there is no one-to-one relationship between form and term, as with other prompts in the item, for example 'verb' and 'noun'.

Moreover, the term 'definite article', even though it can be considered pedagogic in nature, is more relevant for teachers and less so for learners. My research (Berry 2009) shows that there is vast variation in the knowledge of 'definite article' and the related 'indefinite article' among learners of English. In Hong Kong only 28 and 35 (respectively) out of 123 beginning English university majors knew the terms, whereas in Poland, out of 98 comparable subjects, 82 and 93 (respectively) were familiar with them.

The difference can be explained by the fact that it is quite possible, even in a grammar-oriented class, to avoid these terms and to refer iconically to the definite article as 'the', and to the indefinite article as 'a' (though with some potential for misunderstanding). This is indeed a common practice in Hong Kong. In other words, while there seems a difference in metalingual knowledge (the knowledge of terms) between students in Poland and Hong Kong, there is no evidence of a difference in metalinguistic knowledge.

So what is being tested here appears to be partly knowledge of terminology, rather than of explicit knowledge of language. The test could be improved with more careful design, as well as greater grammatical knowledge and an appreciation of the different status of terms. But we should be at least grateful that Elder has made the test partly available for scrutiny, unlike some other researchers.

### ***3.2 Critical Study 2: The Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English (LPATE)***

This exam was introduced in Hong Kong 2000 (Coniam and Falvey 2002) in response to a widespread perception in the community that the linguistic and

metalinguistic skills of many teachers of English were inadequate (due mostly to the fact that many were not subject-trained in English). All practising primary and secondary teachers of English were required to pass it, as well as all entrants to the profession. It is therefore a very high-stakes exam, and was surrounded by much controversy and opposition at its introduction.

It consists of five papers: reading, writing, listening, speaking and classroom language assessment. It is one part of the writing paper that is of interest here.<sup>1</sup> In Task 2A, testees are required to detect and correct errors from an authentic student essay. In Task 2B they are required to explain such errors. In the original version the errors were the same as those they had corrected in 2A, but this led to difficulties since if they had made a mistake with error correction they would be unable to explain; effectively they were being punished twice for the same mistake. So in the new version the errors for explanation are different from those for correction (though taken from the same text). The two versions of Task 2B are summarised in Table 1 at the start of this chapter.

Another change is that, while in the earlier version the answers were open-ended, in the newer version the majority of the answer is supplied, with testees only being required to fill in two gaps per item. This was done for greater objectivity of marking, since with the earlier version much of the markers' time was devoted before and after the paper's administration to deciding on the range of permissible answers. However, even with gap-filling objectivity is not absolute and alternatives are possible, as the suggested answers below indicate. And one can ask whether the increase in objectivity has led to a corresponding decrease in validity.

What did not change was the general principle on which marking was based, namely that an effective explanation consisted of two steps (corresponding to the two gaps in the later version): firstly, classifying or locating the error (in order to make a generalisation), which would involve the use of terminology, and secondly, providing a reason for the error, which might not involve terminology. A typical answer might look like the following:

<i>The <u>present perfect</u> is wrong as the event has <u>no relevance to present time</u>.</i>	
LOCATION/CLASSIFICATION	REASON/JUSTIFICATION

That the use of terminology is advisable in this task is not in doubt, as the current rubric for it (Education Bureau, Hong Kong 2007) makes clear:

You should demonstrate to the examiners your understanding of the underlying rules or generalisations, using grammatical terms where appropriate.

However, the rubric does not clarify what kind of terminology is advisable. Is the task seeking the presentation of terminology that is suitable for learners (i.e. it

<sup>1</sup> From 2001 to 2002 I was Chief Examiner for the writing paper of LPATE.

is pedagogic) or for grammarians (i.e. it is scientific)? Is the aim to test teachers' ability to give appropriate explanations (a pedagogic skill) or to demonstrate their explicit knowledge (a linguistic one)? In fact, it is clearly the latter, as this list of terms in the suggested answers for the sample paper makes clear:

(*'to'*) *infinitive*  
*adverb*  
*subject-verb agreement / single (sic) verb*  
*subject, plural / noun, plural*  
*relative pronoun / subordinator*  
*(non-defining) relative clause / subordinate clause / adjective clause*  
*(present) participle*  
*past continuous tense*  
*past perfect*  
*(subordinating) conjunction / conditional / connective*  
*adverb(ial) of time / adverbial phrase / prepositional phrase*  
*/ connective / adverbial / adverb*  
*verb*

(Slashes indicate alternative answers to the same item.)

Terms such as *subordinating conjunction*, *non-defining relative clause* and *adverbial phrase* are clearly scientific in nature and beyond the competence of most teachers. In fact, for some answers, there is no pedagogic option.

Here is an example from the later version of the test. In one item, shown below, the student error is highlighted as 'to feel very frightened'. Testees are given the following text in which most of the metalinguage has been supplied, only leaving two single-word gaps:

The problem is with the (a) \_\_\_\_\_ 'to feel'. It should be replaced by 'feeling' because the writer wishes to describe (b) \_\_\_\_\_, rather than an intended action.

Intended answers are 'infinitive' for (a) and 'a mental state' (or some similar noun phrase) for (b). (The full text of the error was 'I remember to feel very frightened'.)

The problem lies with the answer for (a), in that testees can supply it without reference to the actual error (cf. the identification of 'the definite article' in Elder's test above). And 'infinitive' is not the only possible answer; another, classifying 'to feel' as a 'verb'—equally without needing reference to the error—would also need to be considered correct. Again, it seems that a test of metalinguistic knowledge has been (at least partly) reduced to one of knowledge of terminology. So while the use of gap-filling in the second version has possibly increased objectivity (in that the answers are relatively easier to mark), there has been a concomitant decrease in validity.

## 4 Conclusions

Based on the above, the following conclusions may be drawn, by way of offering advice to all those who are contemplating the use of terminology in investigating some form of language awareness:

- to demonstrate awareness of language, you do not need to talk about it
- to talk about language, you do not need terminology; in other words, meta-language and terminology are not the same thing
- if you want teachers or learners to use terminology in tests, be aware of the distinction between pedagogic and scientific terminology
- if terminology is to be used in tests, make sure that it is only the means and not the end (unless it really is the end); i.e. be aware of the distinction between metalingual and metalinguistic knowledge. Tests that involve terminology are in great danger of winding up as tests of terminology.
- if you design tests involving terminology, subject them to the same critical scrutiny that is given to language tests; i.e. make sure they are good tests, particularly in respect of their validity; in particular do not expect learners of language to produce terminology.

Designers of tests of language awareness involving metalinguistic terminology need to possess a range of abilities. In addition to a proper understanding of the construct they are investigating, they should also possess a knowledge of:

- the principles and techniques of test design (especially validity)
- the various constraints on terminology (limited learner knowledge, the pedagogic/scientific dimension)
- the grammar connected to the terminology

Hitherto, these qualities have not always been evident.

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Awareness in Action

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