



Inquiring Language Awareness of TEFL Master Students in Advanced Grammar Exams

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Abstract

The Knowledge-based Era demands scholars to be experts in their fields. Language Awareness (LA) is L2 explicit knowledge about language. Its presence as one of the expertise qualifications for foreign language learners is inevitable. This study aims to describe the extent of LA within the qualitative case study approach. Eight TEFL master students were chosen as the subjects. The researchers collected the data from exams and interviews. The general findings showed that the students have 'adequate' LA. In a closer look, their analyzed knowledge was better than metalinguistic knowledge; it was a relatively normal condition since analyzed knowledge requires simpler cognitive process rather than metalinguistic knowledge. Additionally, it seemed that the multiple choices in the exams enlighten the cognitive process within analyzed knowledge. However, their metalinguistic knowledge had a problem with grammatical terminologies. In sum, both types of knowledge are vital but metalinguistic knowledge deserves more priority to be improved.

Keywords: Explicit Knowledge; Metalanguage; Terminology; Grammar Difficulty

Introduction

Language Awareness (LA) is *explicit* knowledge about language (ALA., 2016); explicit means that the users of LA are consciously aware of their knowledge. Bolitho, et al. (2003) define it as a mental attribute which develops through language in use to gradually gain insights how language works. Meanwhile, Carter (2003) sees it as the development of consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language which also stresses the cognitive advantages of reflecting upon language. In short, LA is a form of knowledge within learners' consciousness.

Explicit knowledge, in its complete definition, is "*declarative and often anomalous knowledge of the phonological, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, and socio-critical features of an L2 with the metalanguage for labeling this knowledge* (Ellis., 2004)". Although it covers many areas, most studies select grammar as the most iconic area which represents explicit knowledge. Ellis (2004, 2005, 2006) believes that explicit knowledge is comprised of two independent knowledge. First, analyzed knowledge is knowledge of structures that can be verbalized on demand. Second, metalinguistic knowledge is

knowledge of the metalanguage for labeling the structures; metalanguage is *language* (words or phrases) that is used to explain about language such as grammatical terms (Berry., 2008, 2010).

The similarities between LA and explicit knowledge in cognitive, consciousness, and form/function of language areas imply that these terms can be used interchangeably. Some relevant studies within the grammar area of LA show interesting reports. Based on the test of language awareness, Tsang (2011) found that 20 Chinese English teachers achieved a higher score in the recognition and the production tasks than in the correction and the explanation tasks. It seemed that they had a partial understanding of metalanguage and little knowledge of the sub-categories of the grammatical forms. However, there was no significant difference for less experienced (6 years) and more experienced (>6 years) teachers. Meanwhile, Mirzaei, et al. (2011) proved that the students' explicit knowledge in two different types of tests showed similar results. There was a strong relationship based on their scores in the Untimed Grammaticality Judgment Test/ UGJT (a type of short answers test) and TOEFL (a type of multiple choices test). Particularly, the students' explicit knowledge strongly correlated to their general L2 proficiency. On the contrary, their implicit knowledge did not correlate to their L2 proficiency. Then, Gutierrez (2016) tried to find out a clearer relationship between analyzed knowledge, metalinguistic knowledge, and second language proficiency from 51 Spanish students. The results showed that the students demonstrated a rather low level of analyzed knowledge than metalinguistic knowledge. Although both types of knowledge were important components of L2 proficiency, analyzed knowledge played a major role related to target grammatical accuracy. Moreover, this knowledge was a better predictor of L2 proficiency than metalinguistic knowledge. These previous studies concluded that explicit knowledge, either analyzed or metalinguistic knowledge, was the best predictor of general proficiency in the EFL contexts.

Advanced Grammar Class is one of the major lectures which conducted by TEFL Master Program of Semar University during 6 months. According to the lecturer, its purpose is the students are not only learning how to *know* the (in)correct form of sentences but also to *understand* the reasons or the explanations behind it; it means that this class prioritizes metalinguistic knowledge rather than analyzed knowledge.

This present study focuses on describing the extent of students' LA in *Advanced Grammar Class* based on two different types of test.

Methodology

The researchers used the qualitative case-study (Creswell., 2007). There were 8 students of Advanced Grammar Class who voluntarily enrolled as the subjects. The data was collected from the results of each exam and the interviews. In total, these subjects produced 8 transcriptions of interview sessions and 12 pieces of results from 2 different exams. Here, all subjects used pseudonyms.

As the assessment, this class employs two exams. First, the mid-term exam is a type of short-answer test which is adapted based on *TOEFL Book II*; the guidance book which was used as the primary sources in Advanced Grammar Class. This exam consists of 2 Sections. Section 1 is the identification and correction tasks which contain 15 (un)grammatical sentences. The students are instructed to identify ungrammatical sentences and give the correct form. Meanwhile, Section 2 is the explanation task which contains 10 ungrammatical sentences. In this Section, the students are instructed to explain the reasons why those sentences are ungrammatical. Second, the final term exam is a type of multiple choices test which is adopted based on *TOEFL Model Examinations (structure and written expression)*. This exam consists of 2 Sections. Section 1 was the completion task which contained 15 incomplete sentences. Section 2 is the identification task which consisted of 25 ungrammatical sentences. In this Section, surprisingly, the lecturer gives an additional instruction to explain what the error for each sentence is.

The interval period between the mid- and the final-term exam was 2 months. Both exams are marked by the lecturer himself. The lecturer gives 1 point for the correct answer and ½ for the partially correct answer. To analyze the data, the researchers calculated the mean score for each exam and its section then converted it into a letter.

Table 1 The score conversion

Score	Letter	Level
>90	A	very good
80-89	A-	
75-79	B+	
70-74	B	good
67-69	B-	adequate
64-66	C+	
60-63	C	
50-59	D	poor
<50	E	very poor

For the short answers, the researchers compared the similarities between the lecturer's answers and the students' answers. The interpretation of the interviews was used to explain the reasons related to the exams' results.

Result and Discussion

Based on mean scores from both exams, the students had 'adequate' LA. Table 2 shows that the students achieved better in the final exam rather than the mid exam. Even though there was a slight improvement of their LA, however, the lecturer said that these results were less ideal (B or higher). The factor which affected these results was the type of the exams; the short answer and the multiple choices. (n= total items in the exam).

The multiple choice test (i.e. the final exam) was easier than the short answer test (i.e. the mid exam). All students agreed that the multiple choice test was easier to be done than another test according to the interviews. The multiple choice test required less cognitive process than the short answer test because any multiple choice tests had been provided by its possible answers. The provided or possible answers were narrowing others possible answers which are thought by the students; it also meant that the provided answers reduced the probability of error. Additionally, the majority of the students were more familiar with the multiple choice test rather than short answer test in any grammar exams in their undergraduate degree.

Table 2 Results of the exams

Exam	Score (%)	Letter
Mid (n=25)	63,5	C+
Final (n=40)	67,7	B-
Mean	65,6	C+

“I’m not used to doing TOEFL exam with reasons, because beforehand... nor the real TOEFL did not ask for reasons”
(Farel/ Interview04/ February 2017).

“In my experiences, doing grammar or structure exams, we choose the right or the wrong answer, or making sentences based on the patterns, without explaining why it is wrong... So, it is something new for me”
(Atep/ Interview03/ January 2017).

The familiarity towards the type of the test made them more comfortable than unfamiliar ones because they felt a bit nervous. In sum, the type and the familiarity towards the exam became the influential factors of these results.

Analyzed Knowledge

The students’ analyzed knowledge was categorized as ‘good’. Table 3 shows that the students performed better in Section 1 of the final exam than the mid exam.

Table 3 Results of section 1

Exam	Score (%)	Letter
Mid (n=15)	65,7	C+
Final (n=15)	78,3	B+
Mean	72	B

Analyzed knowledge was used differently in the mid and final exam. On the one hand, analyzed knowledge which used to complete the mid exam required more complex processes than the final exam. In the mid exam, analyzed knowledge was used to judge whether the sentences are grammatically correct or not. If it was ungrammatical, analyzed knowledge should revise it with appropriate features to make it grammatically correct. For instance, on item number 5 should be done by a tiny correction-omitting the commas after ‘winter’ and ‘unit’. The example as follows.

Item 5, the mid-exam, identification and correction

- *In the cold winter, the wall heating unit, would not turn on*

Answer key

-*In the cold winter the wall heating unit would not turn on*

Examples of the students' answers

-*In the cold winter, the wall heating unit would not turn on.* (Partial correct)

-*The electrical *mechine, the wall heating unit, would not turn on.* (Correct judgment, incorrect answer)

These answers indicated the students' analyzed knowledge was able to judge that item number 5 as the ungrammatical sentence. Unfortunately, many of them omitted only one of the commas and it made them only got half point. Meanwhile, the others failed to analyze what the ungrammatical feature is. *One of them even made the unrelated answer with incorrect spelling (mechine-machine) by replacing 'in the cold winter' with 'the electrical mechine'; it seemed they forgot the instruction of the exam. This error of unrelated answer only can be found in the short answer test because there is no choice that can be selected.

On the other hand, in the final exam, analyzed knowledge was only used to select multiple choices (parts of speech) in completing the sentences. As mentioned earlier, the multiple choices not only prevent unnecessary or unrelated answers which possibly produced by the students but also 'enlighten' the cognitive 'burden' of analyzed knowledge. The students perceived that they just needed to select the answers, not to search it.

"Multiple choices [is easier than short answer] because we only need to choose it"
(Rulo/ Interview04/ February 2017).

It meant that they did not have to retrieve their (cognitive) memory. A multiple choices item seemed less challenging than the short answer item.

At a glance, the students' analyzed knowledge may be similar with implicit knowledge because the quick judgment in deciding the grammaticality of sentences or the appropriateness of missing features of incomplete sentences could be done in seconds. However, it had been proved that this judgment has no relationship with implicit knowledge (Mirzaei et al., 2011). Besides, studies (Ellis., 2005; Han & Ellis., 1998; Mirzaei., et al., 2011) so far reported that the evidence of implicit knowledge only can be validated if the tests are in a type of TRUE/FALSE test which must be done in less than 10 seconds/item. Clearly, analyzed knowledge and implicit knowledge are two different things.

Metalinguistic Knowledge

The students' metalinguistic knowledge was categorized as 'adequate'. Below, Table 4 shows that metalinguistic knowledge in the mid and final exam achieved same results.

Different from the use of analyzed knowledge, the use of metalinguistic knowledge in the mid and final exam was quite similar. Both exams required the use of metalanguage to explain what the grammatical error in each sentence. In the mid exam, there were many students failed to achieve full point because their answers were incomplete.

Table 4 Results of section 2

Exam	Score (%)	Letter
Mid-exam (n=10)	60	C
Final-exam (n=25)	60	C
Mean	60	C

“Because although the answer is correct, but the rules or reasons are too long, it would be wrong, so... there is no point in it”
(Ivan/ Interview03/ January 2017).

For instance, on the item number 8, the full correct answer used grammatical terms such as *inverted*, *subject*, and *verb*. Meanwhile, the partial correct answer replaced *subject* and *verb* with *I* and *believed*. Indeed, ‘*I*’ and *subject* were interchangeable but it seemed that the use of grammatical terms was preferable in the lecturer’s judgment. The example as follows.

Item 8, the mid-exam, explanation

-Never in the world I believed that this would be happened

Answer key

-Problem with inverted subject verb after negative

Examples of the students’ answers

-Inverted subject and verb after negative is incorrect. (Full correct)

-There is no inversion of “I” and “believed”. (Partial correct)

From the interviews, some students said that *the problem with inversion* was a relatively new term for them. It was not one of the topics that included in their Advanced Grammar Class when they were undergraduate students. Also, half of them even felt less confidence/ uncertain to state that rule as their judgment for explaining the ungrammatical sentences.

The final exam gave some advantages which did not provide by the mid exam: 1) Since the final exam was the multiple choices test, the ungrammatical features could be selected from the choices. This

advantage raised the possibility of correct answers (fully correct/ 1 points) and the score. For instance, the students selected the correct choices but they produced incorrect grammatical rules to explain the errors then it would be considered as partially correct (½ points); 2) Metalanguage which were used in the final exam were simpler/shorter (e.g. *comparative* rather than *comparative degree*) than in the mid exam. This made the students' and the lecturer's answers were quite similar. Unfortunately, according to the students' interviews, some grammatical rules such as *multiple number* and *subjunctive* have not been taught in their class.

“So when the grammar final exam turns out, there is a material that is not included in our guidebook as for example it is *subjunctive*... that's where I make a lot of mistakes”
(Tiana/ Interview02/ January 2017).

“As in the guidebook we studied, there is no *subjunctive*, but in the exam, there is *subjunctive*”
(Rini/ Interview02/ January 2017).

“But at that time, there is no subject matter about *subjunctive*”
(Uzy/ Interview06/ February 2017).

None of the students gave accurate rules to answer item number 28 and 33 (Table 5).

Providing the same grammatical rules such the lecturer's expectation was very difficult and the researchers believed that it was not the purpose of examining metalinguistic knowledge.

“I don't understand what kinds of answers that wanted by him [the lecturer]. The answer is short but ... [specific]”
(Rizuki/ Interview07/ February 2017).

As far as the rules contained the essential feature of its complete rule (e.g. *parallel* in *parallel structure*) then it should be considered as the correct answer.

In his interview, the lecturer explained some rationales why he asked the students to produce metalanguage as the answers. First, metalanguage in form of grammatical rules could be used as the representative of the error of ungrammatical sentences. Second, it saved time to be written (Berry., 2008, 2010); metalanguage can take form in word or phrase but non-metalanguage should take form in clauses or sentences. The explanation of ungrammatical sentences become less- and even un-focused if it does not involve the use of grammatical terminologies.

These entire results, on the surface, were similar with Tsang's (2011) study. The explanation task (Section II of the mid and the final exam) received lower scores than the identification task (Section I of the mid and the final exam). It implied that metalinguistic knowledge is a type of explicit knowledge which is difficult to be mastered by many language scholars; whether they are the TEFL master students or even the experienced English teachers. However, these results contradicted with Gutierrez's (2016) study where the students performed better in metalinguistic knowledge than analyzed knowledge. Possibly, it was caused by the different instrument which used to measure the analyzed knowledge. Furthermore, he argued that determining the grammaticality of a sentence and then identifying the error and correcting it in the ungrammatical sentences demanded a higher level of analyzed knowledge than identifying and correcting error when all sentences were ungrammatical and the errors have already been identified.

Table 5 Section II final-exam (explanation)

Item	Answers key	The students' answers
17	A Condition	Agreement of modal in <u>conditional</u> sentences
19	A The form of verb	Problem with form of the <u>verb</u>
20	B Parallel	<u>Parallel</u> structure agreement
21	A Noun	Should be <u>noun</u> "capability"
22	B Preposition	<u>Prepositional</u> use
24	A Repetitive/ double	<u>Double</u> adverb
28	A Subjunctive	(none)
29	B Subject/ verb agreement	<u>Agreement subject & verb</u>
30	A Relative pronoun	<u>Relative pronoun</u>
33	B Multiple number	(none)
34	B Adverb	Should be <u>adverb</u> "broadly"
36	C Comparative	<u>Comparative</u> degree
38	C To infinitive	<u>To + infinitive</u>

These findings also implied that there were several difficulties related to the students' metalinguistic knowledge. The familiarity of the exams, the complexity of rules, and the material (i.e. *subjunctive*) of the exam were some factors which closely affected their knowledge. These factors were in line with Graus & Copen (2015) which investigated the students' difficulty with grammar. This case was commonly known as *subjective* difficulty which defined as *the ratio of the rule's difficulty inherent linguistic complexity to the students' ability to handle such rule* (DeKeyser., 2003, p. 331). To be precise, it was the major impact of metalanguage in the grammar exams.

Indeed, this study contained some weaknesses. First, the definition of analyzed knowledge that the researchers used in this study required stronger notions from another expert. Unfortunately, so far, the researchers have not found related articles which provided this issue besides Ellis's serial works (Ellis., 2004, 2005, 2006; Han & Ellis., 1998). Second, the results of both exams could not be considered as the precise measurement because neither reliability nor validity has not been statistically measured by the lecturer. The purpose of these exams is purely reducing subjective judgment of the lecturer in measuring the students' LA. Third, the metalanguage which were used as the answer keys of both exams were not the *real* grammatical rules such as mentioned in grammar books. In fact, these were the subtopics' names (e.g. *be careful of appositives, invert the subject and verb after negatives, use parallel structure with comparisons, make articles agree with nouns, etc.*) of *TOEFL Book II*. The researchers labeled it as grammatical rules because these were quite similar to the real ones; in some grammar books, grammatical rules are addressed by other names such as grammatical categories, syntactic categories, syntactic rules etc. The researchers expected these weaknesses did not make any confusion for other scholars.

Conclusion

The findings of this study describe how the students' LA is and how it works. Analyzed and metalinguistic knowledge are the essential feature for the TEFL master students, nevertheless, their metalinguistic knowledge still needs much more improvement.

The lecturer should be more focus on adapting/ designing types of the short answer (*not* the multiple choices one) test which is able to explore and examine the students' metalinguistic knowledge. Also, the researchers believe that it would be much better if there are some suggested correct answers in any grammar exam to reduce the diversity of answers which possibly arise from the students (Tsang., 2011, p. 16). Moreover, in order to reduce subjective judgment and enhance precise results, such a rating scale for multilingual comments can be adapted as an alternative to the scoring method (Ellis., 2004, p. 264). The aim of test should be decided carefully before designing a test so that the students not only understand their own knowledge but also receive the benefits of the test they were taken.

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