

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH GRAMMAR: NATIVE VS. NON-NATIVE FIRST-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES. A CONTRASTIVE APPLICATION OF THE KAL TEST

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores Spanish first-year undergraduates' explicit knowledge of L2 English. It uses a short two-part questionnaire, the Knowledge About Language (KAL) test, which was first applied in 1986 by Bloor, then again in 1997 by Alderson, Clapham and Steel and in 2009 by Alderson and Hudson, always at British universities. Our contribution to this on-going project consists of the contrastive analysis of metalinguistic knowledge of English between native and non-native (Spanish) first-year university students. The questionnaire was administered to a total of 148 Spanish 'linguist' students (i.e. entering English degree courses) and 'non linguist' students (i.e. entering Engineering and Nursing degrees at the Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain)). The results of the audit reveal that overall Spanish first-year undergraduates show a sound knowledge of word classes and grammatical functions of English as a second language. They display significant higher grammar awareness than British students, possibly as a consequence of the traditionally deeply-rooted grammar-based teaching methodologies in the Spanish EFL classroom.

Keywords: Knowledge About Language (KAL), grammar teaching, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), metalanguage.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el conocimiento explícito por parte de estudiantes españoles en su primer año de estudios universitarios del inglés como segunda lengua. Para ello se utilizó un cuestionario de dos partes, denominado test sobre conocimiento del lenguaje (Knowledge About Language). Este cuestionario fue utilizado en primer lugar en 1986 por Bloor, en 1997 por

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Alderson, Clapham y Steel y finalmente en 2009 por Alderson y Hudson en universidades británicas. Nuestra contribución a este proyecto consiste en aportar una perspectiva contrastiva al conocimiento metalingüístico del inglés. El cuestionario fue rellenado por un total de 148 estudiantes, lingüistas (aquellos que comienzan Filología Inglesa o Magisterio de Lengua Extranjera (inglés)) y no-lingüistas (aquellos que comienzan estudios de Ingeniería y Enfermería) en la Universidad de Zaragoza. Los resultados revelan que los estudiantes españoles tienen un buen conocimiento de las clases de palabras y de las funciones gramaticales en inglés como segunda lengua. Muestran incluso un conocimiento mayor de estas cuestiones que los estudiantes británicos, posiblemente como consecuencia de las metodologías con una fuerte base gramatical que tradicionalmente se han aplicado en las aulas españolas de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Conocimiento del Lenguaje, enseñanza de la gramática, inglés como segunda lengua, metalenguaje.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much grammar research in the last few decades has mainly focused on determining whether grammar should be taught at all (Nassaji and Fotos 2004). The importance of Knowledge about Language (henceforth KAL) in the mother tongue education was a movement in the UK that became popular in the 1980s in the midst of some controversy surrounding the status of grammar teaching in British modern languages classrooms. According to Hudson and Walmsley (2005: 594) “for several decades up to about 2000, most state schools in England taught little or no grammar, and it is still normal for school leavers to know virtually nothing about grammar”. Nowadays there is still much debate over the issue with arguments against and in support of grammar teaching in the mother tongue as well as in foreign language education, where the debate has concentrated on the role of implicit versus explicit knowledge, terms which refer, respectively, to knowledge of or about language, or, as Ellis (2008a) explains, to knowledge considered as product, or as process. Their interface has been an object of high controversy in L2 teaching and learning with three main positions: *no* interface, that is, no connection between the two (Krashen 1987), *strong* interface, where explicit knowledge can convert into implicit knowledge, and

weak interface where explicit knowledge is seen as a ‘facilitator’ (Ellis 2008b).

Although there is some terminological and conceptual dispersion in the notion of KAL,¹ we apply the notion of KAL here as explicit knowledge that directs learners attention to specific formal properties of language. The present paper addresses the issue of metalinguistic knowledge from a contrastive perspective as it applies a KAL test, previously administered to native speakers of English, to Spanish students of L2 English. In other words, our purpose is to compare metalinguistic knowledge of English as a mother tongue to that same knowledge of English as a second language. Metalanguage is understood here as the ability to reflect in an analytical fashion on what we are aware of, that is, a structured understanding of grammatical patterns (Sharwood Smith 2008).

The KAL test is a short two-part questionnaire. The first part deals with terms of parts of speech and the second part tests basic grammatical functions. Students are asked to read one sentence in the first part and four shorter sentences in the second, and identify parts of speech and functions respectively. The KAL test was first applied by Bloor in 1986 (although it was then termed SPAM, Students’ Prior Awareness of Metalinguistics). Bloor’s (1986: 157) claim was that, with the promotion of communicative teaching and the success of notional-functional syllabuses, explicit treatment of grammar in British schools had been “shifted into a more peripheral position and severely knocked about in the process”, and, consequently, school leavers were “less informed in this area than their forebears” (1986: 158), which Bloor considered to be “a bad thing”. The SPAM test was administered to 238 students at the universities of Aston and UCL, 63 of them entering Modern Languages or Linguistics degree courses, referred to as ‘linguists’ and 175 students from other departments, referred to as ‘non-linguists’. Overall, the results showed that first year undergraduates had a low level of metalinguistic knowledge.

In 1992, the same test was administered to 202 undergraduates at Lancaster University and extended in 1994 to six other British universities, with a sample of 682 British students of French and of Linguistics and English Language (Alderson *et al.* 1997). The KAL test (termed here Metalinguistic Assessment Test) was part of a larger

test battery whose main purpose was to explore the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency and aptitude. The most significant finding of the 1992 and 1994 tests is that students varied greatly in their metalinguistic knowledge, but overall the results showed a decline in metalinguistic knowledge since 1986 and confirmed the suspicions of British university lecturers that claimed that incoming undergraduates had increasing little knowledge about language. Alderson *et al.* (1997: 108) concluded that “any instruction which assumes that students know more than ‘noun’ or ‘verb’ will cause problems for many students”. The authors found no evidence in their study of a direct relationship between explicit knowledge and language proficiency, considering both two separate factors (thus supporting Krashen’s 1987 positioning of no interface).

Starting in 2009, Dick Hudson (UCL) and Charles Alderson (Lancaster University) are currently conducting the same grammar audit to answer the question “How much do school-leavers know about language?”. Thirteen departments from British universities have already participated in this third application of Bloor’s questionnaire with the purpose of obtaining information about how much incoming undergraduates know about grammatical terms and concepts and thus observe new developments and trends in aspects of language awareness in L1 learning, in mother tongue education. This ongoing study shows great variation but overall seems to confirm a steady decline in knowledge about grammar.

Our contribution to this ongoing project consists of the contrastive analysis of metalinguistic knowledge of English between native and non-native (Spanish) first-year university students. In line with the project, the Spanish contrast group comprises two sets of students: i) those entering English degree courses in the *Universidad de Zaragoza*, referred to as ‘linguists’, and ii) those entering two other degrees, Engineering and Nursing, in the same university, referred to here as ‘non-linguists’. The total test population was 161, but once non-Spanish (mainly Erasmus) students had been removed from the sample and spoilt papers had been omitted, the sample was reduced to 148, 73 linguists and 75 non-linguists. The test was optional and anonymous. Students had to recognise several parts of speech in the following sentence: “Materials are delivered to the factory by a

supplier, who usually has no technical knowledge, but who happens to have the right contacts” and different functions in each of these four sentences: “Poor little Jose stood out in the snow”, “Joe had nowhere to shelter”, “The policeman chased Joe down the street” and “The woman gave him some money”.

2. SPANISH STUDENTS’ KAL RESULTS

As shown in Table 1 below, certain parts of speech have been more easily identified than others by first-year Spanish undergraduates. Whereas the verb and noun were correctly categorised by almost all Spanish students and the countable noun, passive verb and adjectives were correctly signalled by most of them, less than half (52.7 % of errors) could identify the finite verb or, slightly less remarkably, the auxiliary verb, the past participle and the conjunction. As regards functions, Spanish students handled well the identification of subject and predicate, but they found more difficulties with direct and indirect object.

Parts of speech	linguists		non-linguists		TOTAL	
	raw	(%)	raw	(%)	raw	(%)
verb	1	1.4	2	2.7	3	2.0
noun	1	1.4	0	0.0	1	0.7
countable noun	1	1.4	9	12.0	10	6.8
passive verb	5	6.8	5	6.7	10	6.8
adjective	0	0.0	8	10.7	8	5.4
adverb	11	15.1	15	20.0	26	17.6
definite article	8	11.0	22	29.3	30	20.3
indefinite article	8	11.0	24	32.0	32	21.6
preposition	9	12.3	6	8.0	15	10.1
relative pronoun	4	5.5	14	18.7	18	12.2
auxiliary verb	16	21.9	33	44.0	49	33.1
past participle	16	21.9	26	34.7	42	28.4
conjunction	21	28.8	26	34.7	78	31.8

finite verb	38	52.1	40	53.3	12	52.7
infinitive	6	8.2	6	8.0	12	8.1
Functions						
subject	5	6.8	5	6.7	10	6.8
predicate	4	5.5	10	13.3	14	9.5
direct object	9	12.3	19	25.3	28	18.9
indirect object	14	19.2	13	17.3	27	18.2

Table 1. Total number and percentage of errors by Spanish students in the KAL test.

In general our results show that error rate was higher by non-linguist than linguist Spanish students, the part of speech mean error being 3.1 for non- linguists, and 2.0 for linguists. Similarly, the function mean error was 0.6 for non-linguists and 0.4 for linguists. Spanish linguist students were better than non-linguists at identifying most functions, except for subject and verb, which both groups correctly handled, and for conjunction and finite verb, which both groups had problems with.

3. NATIVE VS. NON-NATIVE STUDENTS' KAL RESULTS

In Table 2 below the overall results from our study are compared with the most recent results from British students. The native mean errors on the table correspond to the average calculated on the basis of the results of the 13 departments involved in the 2009 ongoing British KAL test project (<http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/ec/ba-kal/ba-kal.htm#2009>).

	Native students (2009)	Non-native Spanish students (2009)
Mean per question – Part of speech	7.9	2.6
Mean per question – Function	2.3	0.5
Mean per question – Total	10.2	3.1

Table 2. Part of speech and function mean errors in native and non-native KAL tests.

The results show that Spanish students are surprisingly better at identifying both parts of speech and functions in English. In the British results a great difference is reported between the performance of native students at different departments. The parts of speech mean errors range from 3.5 to 10.3; the same could be said of the functions mean errors, which range from 1.8 to 2.6. This means that even those native students who did better at the KAL test in the UK obtained poorer results than the Spanish students in the very same test. Spanish ‘linguists’ did remarkably better at recognising parts of speech (2.0 mean error) and functions (0.4 mean error), but even Spanish ‘non-linguists’ (3.1 and 0.6 mean errors respectively) did better than native students.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It has been our purpose in this paper to report and explore the results obtained from a KAL questionnaire, which has been applied repeatedly to students who have English as a mother tongue, and which we administered to students who have English as a second language. The results have shown significant differences in the metalinguistic knowledge of English in both groups, and also, though less significantly, between non-native Spanish linguist students (i.e. entering English degrees) and ‘non linguist’ students (i.e. entering other degrees).

We are aware that there are different types of knowledge of and about language (Ellis 2008b: 119) and consequently KAL has a different role in the mother tongue and in the foreign language curriculum. As Cots (2008: 25) explains, in the mother tongue classroom “KAL contribution involves the explication of intuitive knowledge”, while in L2, “KAL work consists of noticing and understanding the difference” between what they know and what they need, “in terms of capacity to manipulate and understand language”. This has to do with the role of explicit knowledge in non-native students. Language skill is different from knowledge about language. According to the results, probably Spanish students of English as a second language can tell more about English grammar than a native

student, yet this technical knowledge does not guarantee their competence in producing the language (Krashen 1987).

Spanish school-leavers have undergone formal language teaching for many years, and have been required to reflect on the formal properties of their L1, becoming aware of language properties and rules. They have both implicit and explicit knowledge of the mother tongue and find it 'natural' to transfer this explicit knowledge to the L2 learning process. That would explain, for instance, why many of them have failed to recognise 'finite verb' as such, as this grammatical term is not used in Spanish grammar. Furthermore, English second language teaching practices tend to follow the three-stage 'PPP' model (presentation, practice, performance (Cots 2008: 21)), with more emphasis on the first two stages. Traditional English teaching methodology has focused on making students aware of grammatical rules or problems and then making them practise on them by doing specific exercises. Spanish students are able to apply rules in practice exercises after grammar inputs and do it consciously.

It does not ensue from this that Krashen's (1987) position of no-interface between implicit and explicit knowledge has to be assumed, that is, that explicit knowledge is of little use for the L2 learner when confronted with real communication or language production. Rather, we would like to stress the idea that there is a 'gap' between technically learned knowledge and 'acquired' or implicit knowledge, but it should be possible to bridge the gap by a process of automatisisation and elaboration. Linguistic performance is first 'controlled' to gradually become an automatic process where rules are applied without conscious reflection. KAL has positive effects especially on the learner's noticing and is seen as a 'facilitator' of implicit L2 knowledge (Ellis 2008a). We contend that awareness of grammar patterns in L2 is a necessary step in the learning process, but we also endorse Sharwood Smith's (2008: 180) argument that "noticing is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for linguistic performance". Both make important contributions, and both are needed in a balanced learning curriculum.

NOTES

¹ For a clarifying overview of the different strands –educational and psycholinguistic– in KAL, see Cots (2008).

² <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/ec/ba-kal/ba-kal.htm#2009>.

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