

WORD AWARENESS AND EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

Summary

The present review sets out to synthesize the existing research on word awareness at different stages of development and its association with early foreign language acquisition. Word awareness is an important, but less studied component of metalinguistic awareness, particularly in terms of a foreign language acquisition. The paper presents and analyses not only the theoretical underpinnings of this phenomenon, but also the experimental research of all three aspects of its development: development of awareness of word as a unit of language, development of awareness of the arbitrary nature of the lexical sign, and development of understanding of the “word” as a metalinguistic concept. Special attention is paid to the study of the nature of relationship between the development of the word awareness and early foreign language acquisition.

Keywords: metalinguistic competences, word awareness development, early foreign language acquisition.

1. Introduction

Word awareness is a constituent part of the metalinguistic awareness which can be generally defined as “the ability to objectify language and to reflect on formal properties of language” (Valtin 2014, 100), and further as “the ability to analyse, think about, or manipulate language as an object” (Roth et al. 1996, 258). Owing to metalinguistic awareness, attention can be redirected from the meaning or the content of the message to the for-

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mal form of its manifestation, that is, the linguistic expression (Lundberg 1978; Owens 1996). According to Edwards and Kirkpatrick, speakers of a language rely on such knowledge for correcting slips of the tongue (Fromkin 1980), deciphering an atypical form of speech or dialect (Kemper and Vernooy 1993), making puns or word jokes (Horgan 1981), resolving linguistic ambiguities, judging grammaticality or appropriateness, and deciding on deeper meanings or intentions from word choices or paralinguistic cues (Edwards and Kirkpatrick 1999, 313-314).

Apart from the word awareness, other components of the metalinguistic awareness include phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic awareness. *Phonological awareness* is defined by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) as the general ability to attend to the sounds of language—for example, that /cat/ and /hat/ begin with different sounds. *Morphological* awareness is considered to be “explicit awareness and ability to manipulate and reflect upon the morphemic structure of words” (Law and Ghesquière 2017, 47). *Syntactical awareness* is the ability “to reflect upon the internal grammatical structure of sentences” and it subsumes “awareness of the syntactic and semantic properties of sentences”, as well as “children’s awareness of structural synonymy (the property that two superficially different sentences share the same underlying structural representation) and children’s awareness of structural ambiguity (the property that a given surface string has associated with it two or more underlying structural representations” (Tunmer and Grieve 1984, 92). These three types of metalinguistic awareness (i.e., phonological, morphological, and syntactic awareness) are first present at an implicit level (“epilinguistic level”), then they gradually become conscious (“metalinguistic level”) (Reder et al. 2013, 687). Unlike other forms of metalinguistic awareness which are primarily related to language itself, *pragmatic awareness* is defined as an awareness of the correlations between a language system and the outside world—“it corresponds to the subject’s conscious awareness of the social rules of the language (words and expressions which are suitable for use in particular situations, ways of speaking, ways of conducting a conversation, etc.) as they are reflected in his or her own explicit comments” (Bates 1976, cited in Gombert 1997, 44). Some authors add *metatextual awareness* to this list, claiming that it is “involved in the intentional control of the ordering of utterances in larger linguistic units” (Gombert 1997, 45).

The development of the metalinguistic abilities is commonly considered to be linked to the more general changes in cognitive competences that occur during middle childhood, and it has been assumed that the presence of at least some metalinguistic abilities is a key prerequisite for a successful acquisition of literacy. In addition, there seems to be a strong correlation between the development of metalinguistic awareness and bilingualism. However, while the nature of the connection between the development of the metalinguistic awareness and early acquisition of reading and writing in mother tongue is well-known and well researched, the nature of the correlation between the development of different dimensions of metalinguistic awareness and foreign language acquisition remains much less explored. The main goal of this paper is to offer an overview and synthesis of the existing research on word awareness at different stages of development and to establish its association with early foreign language acquisition.

2. On the Development of Word Awareness

Word awareness is not a unique phenomenon and it includes (at least) three components: (1) awareness of a word as a unit of language, i.e. awareness that speech can be reduced to smaller units; (2) awareness of the arbitrary nature of a lexical sign, i.e. that a signifier and a signified are separate entities; (3) understanding of the metalinguistic term “word”. As these three aspects are not acquired at the same time and they have different development lines, the rate of development of each of the three aspects of word awareness varies considerably. For instance, the accomplishment of the awareness of the word as a unit of language and of the arbitrariness of the word (word-referent distinction) logically precedes the comprehension of the metalinguistic term “word” (Bowey and Tunmer 1984, 74).

2.1. Awareness of word as a unit of language.

In the majority of studies dealing with the development of the awareness of a word as a unit of language the children were required to identify and select words from an auditory stimulus, the nature of which varied, i.e.

to select “the small parts” of what they heard. In this manner it was ensured that even the children who did not know the meaning of the term “word”, or understood it in a way different from the way in which the adults use it, could understand and fulfill the task—“a child might be able to segment a speech sequence into words, thereby demonstrating an awareness of the word as a unit of language, without knowing what is meant by the term ‘word’” (Bowey and Tunmer 1984, 74). The results of the research conducted in the 70s of the previous century indicated that children below the age of six or seven are not very skilled at identifying and isolating words in spoken language (e.g., Berthoud-Papandropoulou 1978; Holden and McGinity 1972; Papandropoulou and Sinclair 1974). The results of the tasks involving the identification and selection of functional words were particularly poor. Thus, children of 5 to 7 years of age often only accepted contentives (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives) as words. Functors (e.g., articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs) were not accepted as words (Papandropoulou and Sinclair 1974). The results of the more recent research on the ability to access word boundaries of pre-school children by using an on-line methodology have been quite controversial: while the results of the research conducted by Karmiloff-Smith et al. (1996) on children acquiring English language showed that four- and five-year-olds were successful in 75% of the cases (for younger children) and in 96% of the cases (for older children), in a repeated cross-linguistic study in the Netherlands and Norway the success rate was much lower—children were able to isolate words in only about 26% of the cases (Kurvers and Uri 2006), while no difference was established between four-year-olds and five-year olds. The authors of the study explain such big differences in the obtained results by the fact that children in the UK are included in various literacy activities much earlier than children in Norway and the Netherlands. It seems that further research of this phenomenon in as many languages as possible and involving children of different age is indeed necessary. For the time being, the majority of the results obtained so far indicate that the awareness of the word as a unit of language and the competence for isolating individual words from spoken language cannot be fully developed before the age of eight, that is, when children have finished with the early stages of literacy acquisition.

2.2. *Awareness of the arbitrary nature of the word (the word-referent distinction)*

The early research on the word-referent distinction dates back to the 20s and 30s of the 20th century and includes the research conducted by Piaget and Vygotsky. In an attempt to determine at what age children can distinguish the word which designates it from the thing itself, Piaget proposed three distinct phases of development:

In the first stage (up to the age 7-8), the children made no distinctions between the word and the thing, and failed to understand the problem. In the second stage (7-11) the children understood the problem, but were unable to solve it systematically. During the third stage (after 10 or 11) the correct solution is given. (Piaget 1951, 56)

He illustrated the phases by using the children's responses to the question "Can words have strength?". Typical answers for the first stage included: "Bourg (6): *Can a word have strength? —No... yes. —Tell me a word which has strength. —Daddy, because he's a daddy and he's strong.*" The second phase, which Piaget defines as paradoxical because a child understands the problem and distinguishes the word from the thing named, but the distinction is not clear enough to save the child from the trap, is illustrated by the following example: "Aud (8;8): *Are words strong? —No, words are nothing at all. They aren't strong, you can't put anything on them. —Tell me a word. —Curtains. It isn't strong, because if you put anything on it, it tears.*" Aud's contradictory answers show that he still struggles to distinguish the sign from the thing signified, or thought from the thing thought of. It is only in the third phase that a child is capable of making the word-referent distinction and avoiding the trap in the question: "Tie (10;10): *Have words got strength? —Depends on the word. —Which ones have strength? —The word 'boxing'... oh, no, they haven't any strength (laughing). —Why did you think they had first? —I was wrong. I was thinking it was the word that hit.*" (Piaget 1951, 57-59). Piaget has found this inability to dissociate names from things to be very interesting and worth further investigation, and he has introduced the term *nominal realism* to identify it. According to Piaget, the nominal realism is so firmly rooted in children's minds up to the age of 9 or 10 that the existence of things before they have names is regarded as impossible (Piaget 1951, 66-67).

After a series of experiments, Vygotsky also concluded that children cannot distinguish between the name of an object and the object itself and that they

explain the names of objects by referring to their characteristics even at preschool age: A cow is called “cow” because it has horns, a calf “calf” because his horns are still small, a horse “horse” because it has no horns, a dog “dog” because it has no horns and is small, and an automobile “automobile” because it is not alive at all. When asked if one could substitute the name of one object for another (e.g., calling a cow “ink” and ink “cow”) children answer that this is impossible because you write with ink and a cow gives milk. The characteristics of the thing are so closely connected with its name that to transfer the name means to transfer the characteristics. (Vygotsky 1934, Sect. 2, Para. 27)

The more recent research has confirmed, expanded and deepened the earlier findings about the word-referent distinction. Papandropoulou and Sinclair (1974) asked their subjects to give examples for long, short and difficult words. The examples provided by the youngest children (4;6-5;6) included the names of longer objects (e.g. *train*) or the words signifying the actions of long duration (e.g. *to sleep*). Similarly, the subjects until the age of 7-8 explained that “a strawberry is a word because it grows in the garden” and “a pencil is a word because you use it to write with” (Papandropoulou and Sinclair 1974, 244). Lundberg and Torneus (1978) conducted the research where they first uttered pairs of words and then showed their subjects the same words written on a piece of paper. The results showed that children even up to the age of seven years do not understand the arbitrary relationship between a word and what it signifies. As a rule, the subjects selected the written word which seemed appropriate according to some semantic, not formal criterion. When presented with written words such as “tree” and “tennis racket”, the children would point at “tennis racket” as signifying “tree” and explain their choice by saying that a tree is big, much bigger than a “tennis racket”, therefore it must be bigger, i.e. longer in written form as well (Lundberg and Torneus 1978, 410).

In the past fifteen or so years children’s handling of words as representations has been linked to their performance on tasks that assess their handling of knowledge and beliefs as representations. This link introduces a

new set of questions about the nature of children's developing understanding of representations in different domains, including the linguistic one, and on the related practical problems of literacy and oral communication.

2.3. *Comprehension of the metalinguistic term "word"*

This aspect of word awareness develops the last. Francis (1973) asked children "tell me a word—any word you know". At the age of 5;9, only 44% of her 50 subjects could do so, and a further 26% provided either a name or a number, which are also words and, as Francis notes, are "within the area of the concept and indicated at least a partial understanding" (Francis 1973, 20). The frequency of children offering words that were neither names nor numbers increased with age, reaching 92% by the age 7;3. Despite this general improvement in naming the words, children still do not acquire a clear understanding of the term "word" for some time. According to Berthoud-Papandropoulou (1978) and Papandropoulou and Sinclair (1974) who asked children of different ages to define "word" by posing the questions "What is a word, really?" and "How do you know whether something is a word?", the ability to define the term "word" develops over many years. Children aged four and five offered "definitions" which suggested that words were not seen as having an autonomous existence, but somehow were the objects or actions themselves—the signifier and the signified were equated and inseparable (Papandropoulou and Sinclair 1974, 244). At the age between eight and ten, when they were already at school, children offered definitions which reflected a strong influence of the educational system—the answers given by children were "remarkably uniform, [and] most children use exactly the same expressions to define words" (Papandropoulou and Sinclair 1974, 247). All in all, the results of the research conducted to this day indicate that full comprehension of the metalinguistic term "word", as well as the ability to define it, develops until the period of early adolescence. At a first glance this conclusion may appear strange and counter-intuitive, given that even very young children use the term "word" and partly understand its meaning. However, it should be kept in mind that there is no consensus even among the linguists regarding the definition of the term, and that the ability to define something in

general, including defining metalinguistic terms, does not develop before children reach the stage of formal operations in the development of thinking, which occurs between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

2.4. *Word awareness development in Serbian children*

The only experimental research conducted so far of word awareness development among children acquiring Serbian language as their mother tongue¹ included a simultaneous analysis of two dimensions of word awareness development: (1) awareness of a word as a unit of language and (2) awareness of the arbitrary nature of the lexical sign. The second dimension was analysed from two different aspects and in two different tasks: presence *vs.* absence of nominal realism and presence *vs.* absence of ability to distinguish between formal characteristics of a word (its form) and its meaning. The sample included one hundred children of older preschool age (mean age 6;10), from urban areas and from middle socioeconomic status homes (Kodžopeljić 1997).² The research results indicate that though both forms of word awareness emerge before the acquisition of the written language, their occurrence rate is not the same. The awareness of a word as a unit of language was present in 77% of the tested children, 81% of children were able to distinguish between the formal characteristics of a word (its auditory representation) and its meaning, whereas the absence of nominal realism was identified in only 17% of children (Kodžopeljić 1997, 235). Furthermore, only 8% of the children in this age group were able to distinguish functional words and to identify them as words (Kodžopeljić 1997, 235). The significance of these findings lies not only in the fact that they are indicative of the same trend in the development of word aware-

1 For more information on the development of word awareness in the context of L1 acquisition, see Moskovljević Popović (2017).

2 Kodžopeljić (1997, 234) claims that the presence/absence of nominal realism and the distinction between the signifier and the signified are two different dimensions of the word awareness. In her opinion, only the former can be considered as “the awareness of the arbitrariness of the connection between the name and the object”. This claim is not valid—the arbitrary nature of linguistic sign (that is, the distinction between the signifier and the signified) is established by Saussure as “the first principle of linguistics” (de Sosir 1989).

ness in children acquiring different languages, but also because they show that different aspects of the dimension of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign have different rates of development.

3. On the Development of the Word Awareness in the Context of Early Foreign Language Acquisition

Despite the fact that in the past two decades or so the interest for studying the correlation between metalinguistic awareness and bilingualism has considerably increased, the number of research projects on this topic is still far lower than the number of studies dealing with the impact of the development of metalinguistic awareness on L1 acquisition, particularly on the acquisition of literacy in L1. However, several studies have reported a bilingual advantage in some dimensions of metalinguistic awareness. For example, Campbell and Sais (1995) showed that English/Italian bilingual pre-schoolers obtained better results on a phonological manipulation task than their English monolingual peers. Therefore, their results indicated that the exposure to the second language at a pre-literate stage improved phonological awareness. However, these results are not applicable to all types of bilingualism—they have been confirmed only for children who reach the threshold proficiency level in both languages (Cummins 1979).

As far as the relationship between bilingualism and other types of metalinguistic awareness is concerned, the majority of studies were devoted to syntactic awareness. The studies have led to contradictory findings as well. In a study conducted by Galambos and Goldin-Meadow (1990) among bilingual children aged 4-8 years who speak English and Spanish, the authors compared the ability to detect, correct, and explain grammatical errors in several sentences with one of their English or Spanish monolingual peers. Their results showed that bilinguals were much better than monolinguals in detecting and correction of grammatical errors, but not in terms of offering explanations for the mistakes. These results are quite expected—they serve as evidence of an indisputable advantage of bilinguals regarding implicit syntactical awareness, and they are also indicative of the expected lack of ability of both bilinguals and monolinguals of that particular age to offer explicit explanations for errors in the grammatical structure of an utterance.

Reder et al. (2013) also conducted the research in which they were studying the effect of early second-language learning on the development of the first-language metalinguistic abilities. Their study focused on young second-language learners' skills in phonological, morphological and syntactic awareness, and the sample consisted of the primary school first graders of age 6;2-7;2. The experimental group consisted of children who are native speakers of French and learning German (L2) in a partial immersion programme, while the control group consisted of French monolingual children of the same age. The results of this research are particularly interesting in terms of morphological awareness. Namely, both groups achieved similar results when they had to produce a derived word by adding an affix, or when they had to extract the base of a derived word by deleting an affix. In other words, both groups were equally successful when it comes to processes of similar nature in both languages. However, SLLs performed much better than their monolingual peers in tasks requiring them to produce or to explain compound neologisms, as well as in tasks requiring them to correct non-grammatical and asemanic sentences (Reder et al. 2013, 698-699). In other words, the subjects showed better performance on linguistic aspects that are dissimilar in French and German, which contradicts the findings of the previous studies based on the assumption that a bilingual advantage was more susceptible to appear on shared linguistic dimensions because of the possibility of the cross-linguistic transfer. Nevertheless, these findings can be explained from the perspective of the structural sensitivity theory (Kuo and Anderson 2010). Kuo and Anderson (2010) hypothesise that a simultaneous experience of two languages enables the bilinguals to better develop their metalinguistic awareness owing to the comparisons they must make between their two languages. Though such claims need to be substantiated by extensive research in the future, it seems that, at least when the development of general metalinguistic awareness skills is concerned, Kuo and Anderson are right.

Unlike other dimensions considered so far, word awareness is the dimension of metalinguistic awareness that has been least researched in the context of early foreign language acquisition. On the other hand, early development of word awareness, or of some of its aspects, is one of the effects that are most easily and very quickly observed when a child gets in

contact with another language in everyday life. A case study conducted by Dan Slobin (1978) is quite illustrative of this phenomenon. While observing the linguistic development of his daughter Heida, Slobin noticed that when she reached the age of 3;4 the following metalinguistic vocabulary items were attested in her speech: *mean*, *be called*, *name*, *word*, *say*, *speak*, *voice*, and *look like* (meaning *sound like*). He attributed the unusual presence of quite a number of metalinguistic terms at this early age to the fact that Heida had lived abroad between the ages of 2;9 and 3;11, mainly in Turkey, but travelled to a number of other countries as well. In this manner, she came in contact with many languages very early, which “may have stimulated particularly early attention to various linguistic phenomena” (Slobin 1978, 46). Slobin’s and other similar experiences unequivocally reflect the significance of the encouraging environment for the development of word awareness and the undeniable benefits of early and frequent contacts with other languages.

The above considerations of the correlation between word awareness and early foreign language acquisition draw upon the research of this issue. However, the development of metalinguistic awareness in general, and word awareness in particular, have very direct implications on the successful arranging of foreign language teaching, especially in terms of organising foreign language teaching at preschool and early primary levels. For instance, it is quite clear that it is pointless to give tasks to children, before they reach the age of 8±1, in which they are expected to select individual words from a speech flow. They should particularly not be expected to identify functors successfully (auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions), regardless of the way in which the tasks are formulated. Moreover, it would be unrealistic to expect that children under the age of 12 will be capable of self-correction of grammatical errors, or of a successful self-evaluation of the level of comprehension of given texts or instructions. If teachers want to be sure that their pupils have understood them, simply asking them about it will be fruitless—in most cases children would say that they have understood everything. On the other hand, only a successful response to a set task, or performing a specific activity, will truly show the level of pupils’ comprehension.³ Apart from the fact supported by a

3 For more information on the development of the self-evaluation of the level of text comprehension, see Moskovljević Popović and Plut (2011).

body of research that traditional forms of foreign language teaching are not suitable for work with preschool and early primary children, it should also be noted that different types of language games and other alternative forms of teaching must be strictly “calibrated” and adapted to suit the age of children—everything else may be counterproductive.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the research on word awareness indicates that different dimensions of this ability have different developmental rates: while some aspects are acquired relatively early, the acquisition of other aspects spans the entire period before early adolescence. Despite the fact that the association between some dimensions has not been fully explored theoretically or empirically, there is evidence suggesting that awareness of word as a unit of language is formed first and that it constitutes a basis for acquiring other word awareness dimensions.

Early second language acquisition favours the transition from an epilinguistic to a metalinguistic process, while the development of the explicit linguistic knowledge and the progress in the second language acquisition reinforce one another. There is a growing body of evidence which shows that young SLLs outperform monolinguals on at least some measures of metalinguistic awareness, and that early learning of L2, especially within partial immersion programme, promotes the level of various aspects of metalinguistic awareness, including the word awareness. This is due to the fact that learning a new language requires specific attention to the formal features of the both languages in use.

To make foreign language teaching purposeful, efficient and effective, it is necessary to adapt it to suit the given level of metalinguistic awareness of pupils, especially the preschool and early primary school children. More research on this topic is needed, not only for scientific reasons, but also because the results obtained in the studies of metalinguistic awareness in general, and of word awareness in particular, have serious implications for educational practice in early foreign language teaching and learning.

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SVEST O REČI I RANO USVAJANJE STRANOG JEZIKA

Sažetak

Osnovni cilj ovog rada jeste da pruži pregled i sintezu postojećih istraživanja razvoja svesti o reči, kao i da ukaže na veze koje postoje između razvoja svesti o reči i ranog usvajanja stranog jezika. Svest o reči je jedna od bitnih mada nedovoljno istraženih komponenti metalingvističke svesti. Posebno je nerazjašnjena priroda odnosa između postojanja svesti o reči i procesa usvajanja stranog jezika. U radu su predstavljene ne samo različite teorijske pretpostavke na kojima počiva pristup ovom problemu, već i rezultati eksperimentalnih istraživanja koja su se bavila razvojem sva tri aspekta svesti o reči: razvojem svesti o reči kao jedinici jezika, razvojem svesti o arbitrarnoj prirodi jezičkog znaka i razvojem razumevanja termina „reč” kao koncepta metalingvističkog nivoa. Posebno su izdvojeni i prikazani rezultati istraživanja koji ukazuju na pozitivne efekte ranog bilingvizma na usvajanje različitih komponenti metalingvističke svesti, uključujući i svest o reči.

Ključne reči: metalingvističke kompetencije, razvoj svesti o reči, faze razvoja svesti o reči, rano usvajanje stranog jezika.