

ICLEI 2015-119 Anita Roshan

## **The Effect of Teachers' Metalanguage on Learners' Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners across Proficiency Levels**

Anita Roshan

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Garmsar Azad University  
Marzadaran St., Tehran, Iran  
a.roshan.anita@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Metalanguage did not receive a lot of attention in communicative language teaching (CLT), which greatly focused on fluency and communicative competence. Metalanguage has remained an untouched area in second language studies. This research examined the effect of teachers' metalanguage on learners' of grammatical points. This research was conducted on Iranian EFL learners in a language Institute in Tehran at two proficiency levels of elementary and intermediate. In each level of elementary and intermediate, two groups were chosen, an experimental and a control group. In the experimental group, the teachers used metalanguage to teach grammar points. However, in control group the teachers used examples to teach grammar points. A questionnaire was administered to the two groups to collect data. The result indicated that the metalanguage had impacted the learners' comprehension of grammatical points.

*Keywords:* Metalanguage, Teacher talk, Grammar

### **Introduction**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which was based on fluency and communicative competence, did not attach any significance to metalanguage. Not a lot of significance is attached to accuracy and linguistic competence in CLT, and teachers of this method merely try to enable students to communicate with other people. However, learning a language is not just the ability to communicate with the language.

By using metalanguage, not only do the students learn how to communicate but also they can explain and analyze the language that helps them to have more accuracy, self-correction and proficiency. Recently there are some studies indicating the importance of metalanguage in language learning and students' proficiency. Wach (2007) points out that nowadays "more and more teachers and researchers notice that the practice of communicative language teaching may not contribute significantly to the development of the linguistic competence" (p. 1).

There are several definitions for the term of metalanguage. Ellis (2012) states that, "metalanguage is the language used to talk about language" (p. 131). Johnson and Johnson (1998) define it "language about language", and also Borg (1998) calls it as "meta-talk or explicit talk about grammar" (Cited in Wach, 2007). Furthermore, Hu (2010) believes that Metalanguage uses to analyze, verbalize or even describe language. Hu (2002) points out that, "metalanguage can play in facilitating the development of metalinguistic knowledge, namely analyzed, often verbalisable, knowledge about the L2" (cited in Hu, 2010, p. 63).

The knowledge that students acquire by the use of metalanguage is called metalinguistic knowledge. Hu (2010) claims that there are some studies that show the positive relationship

between metalinguistic knowledge and L2 proficiency of the students (p. 63). The students who scored higher in a proficiency test, also scored higher in a metalinguistic knowledge test.

This study focused on the impact of teachers' metalanguage on learners' comprehension of Iranian EFL learners across two different levels of proficiency, such as elementary and intermediate. The researcher intended to examine whether teachers' metalanguage had any impact on the learner's comprehension.

### **Objectives**

This research was an attempt to make a connection between metalanguage and learners' comprehension of grammar. In other words, the researcher intended to examine whether teachers' metalanguage had any impact on the learner's comprehension of the grammar points. It should be born in mind that this research aimed at investigating this impact in two different levels.

### **Research Question**

On the basis of the purpose of this study, the research question of the present study can be stated as follow:

1. Does metalanguage have any impact on grammar comprehension of Iranian EFL learners of different levels?

### **Literature Review**

In most of the second language classrooms, teacher talk plays an important role in learners' comprehension and learning. Yanfen and Yuqin (2010) claim that "during the past 20 years, teacher talk has become a focus in the research area of second language acquisition. Pioneered by Gaies (1977, 1979) and Henzle (1979), the research on teachers talk began in 1970s, followed by Long (1981, 1983), Long and Sato (1983), Welche & Ready (1985), Ellis (1985) and Chaudron (1988), who did studies on teacher talk types in college classrooms" (p. 77).

### **Teacher Talk Definitions**

There are different definitions for teacher talk in second language teaching. Sinclair and Brazil (1982, cited in Yanfen and Yuqin, 2010) define teacher talk as "the language in the classroom that takes up a major portion of class time employed to give directions, explain activities and check students' understanding" (p. 77). They also point out that teacher talk is used for organizing activities in the class and asking questions. Furthermore, they believe that most of the learners prefer directions more than questions (P. 76-77).

In addition, teacher talk is used to manage the class and control the activities in the class. Teachers modify their language to an understandable speech that is conformed to their students. Ellis (2012, based on Chaudon's research, 1988) claims that "teachers modify their speech when addressing L2 learners in the classroom in a number of ways and also that they are sensitive to their learners' general proficiency level" (p. 117).

### **Characteristics of Teacher Talk**

Teacher talk is a skill that teachers need to learn if they want to have an excellent rapport with their students. To access to an effective teacher talk, it is necessary to know its characteristics in advance. Yanfen and Yuqin (2010) point out that "appropriate teacher talk can

create harmonious atmosphere and at the same time promotes a more friendly relationship between teachers and students, and consequently creates more opportunities for interactions between teachers and students” (p. 77).

Teacher talk has several key characteristics that are mentioned in Ellis (2012) as below:

The first characteristic is about the time of speaking that teachers usually take in the classroom that is around two-thirds of the time of classrooms. Second, teachers perhaps prefer to ask questions and want students to answer them and in some cases command and explain. However, teachers differ based on their differences and programs. Then, teachers tend to change their speech and talk more slowly and clearly in low proficiency level classes. In addition, they try to have longer pauses and talk loudly as they use the most frequency words in short simple structures. Finally, teachers are likely to repeat their utterances in lower level of proficiency. (p. 117)

### **The Role of Teacher Talk in L2 Learning**

Teacher talk has an important role in interactions between teachers and learners. Yanfen and Yuqin (2010) believe that “The success of teaching depends to a large extent on the way teachers talk and interactions that occur between teachers and students. And the happening of interaction is affected directly by ways of teacher talk” (p. 76).

In addition, they point out that “teacher talk plays a very important role in the teaching process as an interactive device. For teachers would employ a lot of interactive devices such as repetition, prompting, prodding, and expansions, which would be evoking more interactions between teachers and student” (p. 77).

### **Metalinguage**

Metalinguage and teacher talk are related to each other and metalinguage is a sub-variety of teacher talk. Effective teacher talk helps students to learn English and comprehend grammar; therefore, the use of metalinguage by the teacher may be beneficial for learners' comprehension and learning. According to Berry (2010, cited in Schleppegrell, 2012) “metalinguage can be conceived of as both *thing* (terminology) and *process* (talk about language)” (p. 156).

### **Metalinguage Definitions**

Metalinguage is a language that teachers need in the class for explaining, giving instruction and so on. It assists teachers to convey their message and simplify grammar structures. There are several definitions for metalinguage from different point of view. Ellis (2012) points out that there are two definitions for metalinguage. The first one that is called narrow definition is the use of terminology to talk about language. The second definition is broad and means any language that is used to talk about language.

There are other definitions for metalinguage from different perspectives. Ellis (2012) states that, “metalinguage is the language used to talk about language” (p. 131). Johnson and Johnson (1998) define it “language about language”, and also Borg (1998) calls it as “meta-talk or explicit talk about grammar” (Cited in Wach, 2007). Furthermore, Hu (2010) believes that Metalinguage uses to analyze, verbalize or even describe language. Hu (2002) points out that, “metalinguage can play in facilitating the development of metalinguistic knowledge, namely analyzed, often verbalisable, knowledge about the L2” (cited in Hu, 2010, p. 63).

However, this study is based on Ellis's definition (2012) that is equal to broad definition, the use of language to talk about the language. He points out that "for me, metalanguage is the language used to talk about language" (p. 131).

### **Importance of Metalanguage**

By using teachers' metalanguage not only do the students learn how to communicate but also they can explain and analyze the language that helps them to have more accuracy, self-correction and proficiency. Recently there are some studies indicating the importance of metalanguage in language learning and students' proficiency. Wach (2007) points out that nowadays "more and more teachers and researchers notice that the practice of communicative language teaching may not contribute significantly to the development of the linguistic competence" (p. 1).

The ability to use metalanguage is an important skill that teachers need to learn. Hu (2010, cited in Ellis, 2012) points out four reasons for the importance of knowing and using metalanguage by the teachers:

- 1) many learners possess a rich metalinguistic knowledge and teachers need to be able to tap into this,
- 2) explicit discussion of language is advantageous at times, even incommunicative lessons,
- 3) the use of metalanguage allows for 'explanatory precision', and
- 4) metalanguage can help learners make the link between what they already know and new knowledge. (p. 132)

Teachers can use metalanguage for teaching grammar, vocabulary or writing. However, the focus of the present study is on the use of metalanguage for teaching grammar. Ellis (2012) claims that "teachers can make effective use of metalanguage in communicative-type lessons as well as more traditional, form-focused lessons" (p. 132).

### **Metalanguage and L2 Learning**

Metalanguage is a useful technique for teaching that most of the teachers use it in the class. Shakoor, Rehman and Raees (2013) claim that "the use of metalanguage in teaching English as a second language is like a toolkit. Teachers use this toolkit in teaching L2 to make the lesson easy and understandable for the learners. The importance of metalanguage in L2 cannot be denied" (p. 63).

Metalanguage has an important role in grammar instruction. It helps learners to have a conscious attention to the language, explore and discover it. Ellis (2004, cited in Shakoor, Rehman and Raees, 2013) argues that "Access to metalanguage can sharpen a learner's understanding of the structure of the target language and lead to verbalizable, analyzed knowledge, which according to Bialystok (1990) and Schmidt (1990) constitutes the highest level of consciousness of language." So he believes that metalanguage has a crucial role in L2 foundation and students may achieve their aims in L2 learning. Moreover, for improving students' confidence, the use of metalanguage is essential. (p. 64)

## **Methodology**

### Design

The present research had posttest-only experimental design (Mackey & Gass, 2005). It did not have last more than one session, so no pretest was used in order not for the learners to remember anything from the posttest. As Mackey and Gass believe, the role of such a design is not development rather than performance. In this research, the researcher aimed to know what learners had achieved as a result of metalanguage. She did not intend to know what the learners had learned over some period of time.

### Participants

The participants of this study were selected from Tehran Institute of Technology (The West Branch). They were learning English in two levels: Elementary and intermediate. Prior to their registration, they had taken the institute placement test, but the researcher administered the Oxford Placement Test to four intact classes of elementary and the intermediate to guarantee their homogeneity with regard to their proficiency levels. The experimental group and the control group of the elementary level each included twelve learners, that came to 24 participants altogether. On the other hand, the experimental and the control group of the intermediate level was each composed of thirteen participants that came to 26 participants. Due to restrictions posed by the institute, randomization was not possible. Therefore, the participants of this research were selected by the Oxford Placement Test administered to learners in four classes already organized by the institute officials.

### Instruments

The following instruments were used in order to collect the required data for this research:

**Oxford Quick Placement Test.** The current research was conducted on two levels: Elementary and intermediate. Although the learners are required to take the institute placement test, the Oxford Placement Test was administered to further guarantee that the learners were homogeneously selected. It is a placement test constructed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The test include two part. The first part is composed of 40 items which all the students in the two groups, that is the elementary and intermediate groups, were asked to answer. However, only the learners in the intermediate level were required to answer the next twenty questions which were from 41 to 60.

**Voice Recording.** The teacher's voice was recorded not as a tool to collect data, but to make sure that he used metalanguage.

**Questionnaire.** A questionnaire were used to collect data in order to tap the learners' comprehension of the grammar points. It was composed of four questions made on the basis of the Likert scale. The researcher used these scales to find out to what extent the learners comprehended the grammar structure. In addition, Prusak, Vincent and Pangrazi (2005) and Shakoor, Rehman and Raees (2013) used questionnaire in their study to gather quantitative data.

### Procedure

As already mentioned, there were two groups, one experimental and one control group in the current research. The first step was to administer the Oxford Quick Placement test in order to guarantee the homogeneity of the learners with regard to their proficiency levels. Two levels of elementary and intermediate were selected for the present research. In each level, there were one control and one experimental group. The teacher in elementary level to taught 'articles' (a/an vs the) using only metalanguage in the experimental group and only examples in the control group.

All the students in this level had already learned the articles 'a' and 'an'; however, they were going to learn the article 'the' and distinguish it from 'a/an'.

In the intermediate group, the teacher was requested to teach 'so and such' using only metalanguage in the experimental group and only examples in the control group. Next, the researcher handed the questionnaires to check the learners' comprehension of grammatical points.

Furthermore, a voice recorder was used in each class to record the teachers' voice while teaching grammar structure. This was used to make sure whether the teacher did what he was expected to do.

## Findings

### Homogeneity Test Results

The convenient sampling was used in the current study. So the OPT was administered to both target and control groups in both intermediate and elementary levels to prove that the both groups are homogeneous regarding language proficiency. The mean, standard deviation and standard error mean of both groups in each level are set forth in Table 1. A quick look at Table 1 reveals that the performance of the target group ( $\bar{x} = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ) is not noticeably different from the control group ( $\bar{x} = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 2.37$ ) in elementary level regarding language proficiency. Similarly, in intermediate level, the performance of the target group ( $\bar{x} = 33.08$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ) is not remarkably different from the control group ( $\bar{x} = 32.77$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ).

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Target and Control Groups' OPT Scores in Elementary and Intermediate Levels*

Level	Group	N	Mean	SD
Elementary	Target	12	3.17	2.406
	Control	12	2.75	2.379
Intermediate	Target	13	33.08	2.499
	Control	13	32.77	2.088

Table 2 below represents the results of independent samples *t*-test that was conducted to compare the target and control groups' proficiency scores. Table 2 shows that the hypothesis of equal of variances for the two groups was met because the Sig. value for Levene's test was .87 and .34 in elementary and intermediate levels, which are both more than .05. Independent samples *t*-test results, as appeared in Table 2, indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the means between the two groups on the OPT in elementary level,  $t(22) = .42$ ,  $p = .67$ ,  $p > .05$ , and intermediate level,  $t(2) = .34$ ,  $p = .73$ ,  $p > .05$ , in which the *t* observed was below the *t* critical (2.00) for both proficiency levels.

Table 2  
*Independent Samples T-test to Compare Two Groups' Proficiency Scores in Intermediate and Intermediate Levels*

Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
Level	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean Diff.
Elementary	.027	.871	.427	22	.674	.417
Intermediate	.936	.343	.341	24	.736	.308

The graphical representation of the OPT results for intermediate level is illustrated in Figure 1 below. As obvious from the Figure 1, in elementary level, the students in the target and control groups have performed almost the same on the OPT.

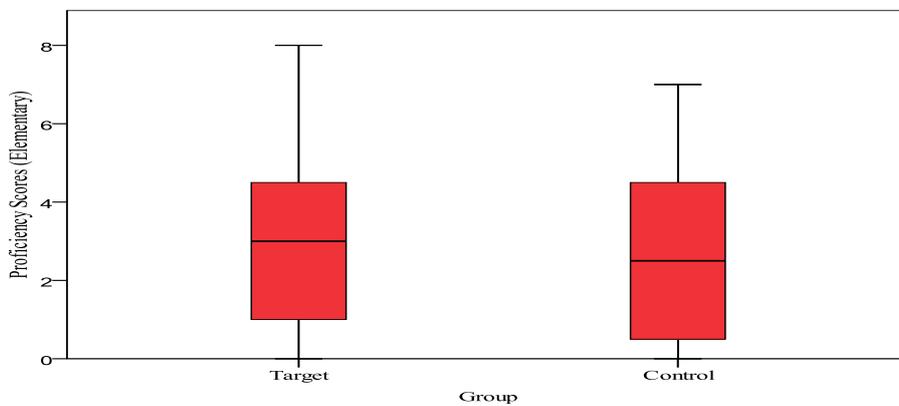


Figure 1. Target and control groups' OPT scores in elementary level

Figure 2 below displays the OPT results for intermediate level. A Figure 2 shows clearly, in intermediate level, the students in the target and control groups have gained almost similar scores (30 to 37) on the OPT.

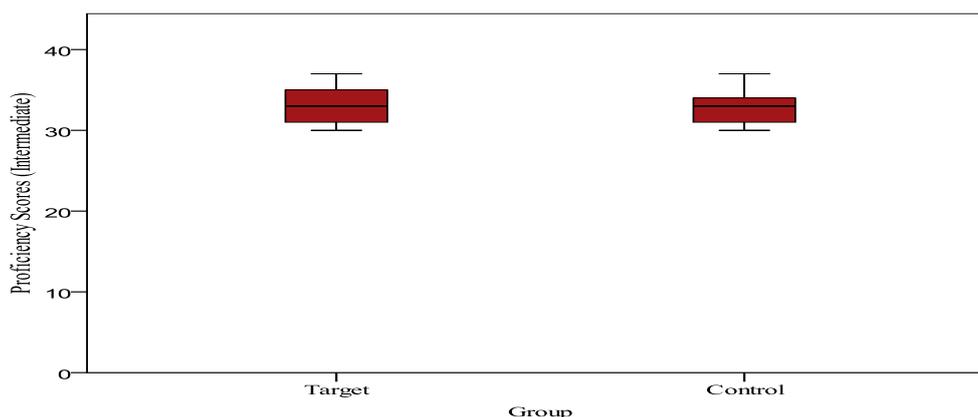


Figure 2. Target and control groups' OPT scores in intermediate level

### Investigating the Research Question

The research question of this study asked whether metalanguage has any impact on comprehension of Iranian EFL learners of different levels. In order to answer these research questions, independent samples *t*-test was used. Before discussing the results of independent samples *t*-test, the descriptive statistics of the target and control comprehension scores were computed in both levels (Table 3). As can be seen in Table 3, in elementary level, mean of comprehension for target group ( $\bar{x} = 13.00$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ) is considerably greater than control group ( $\bar{x} = 10.75$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ). In addition, Table 3 shows that, in intermediate level, mean of comprehension for target group ( $\bar{x} = 12.54$ ,  $SD = 3.47$ ) is not very far from control group ( $\bar{x} = 11.15$ ,  $SD = 3.28$ ).

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics of Target and Control Groups' Comprehension Scores in Elementary and Intermediate Levels*

Level	Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Std. Error Mean
Elementary	Target	12	13.00	2.256	.651
	Control	12	10.75	2.301	.664
Intermediate	Target	13	12.54	3.479	.965
	Control	13	11.15	3.288	.912

Table 4 below shows the results of independent samples *t*-test that was used to compare the target and control groups' comprehension scores in both levels of English proficiency.

According to Table 4, the hypothesis of equal of variances was met since Sig. of Levene's test was higher than .05 for both levels.

Table 4

*Independent Samples T-test to Compare Two Groups' Comprehension Scores in Elementary and Intermediate Levels*

Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
Level	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean Diff.
Elementary	.049	.827	2.418	22	.024	2.250
Intermediate	.065	.800	1.043	24	.307	1.385

Table 4 shows that *t*-test detected a statistically significant difference in comprehension scores between the two target and control groups in elementary level, ( $t(22) = 2.41, p = .02, p < .05$ ), in which the *t* value, 2.41 was greater than the *t* critical, 2.02; therefore, with 95% confidence, it could be claimed that metalanguage affects comprehension of Iranian elementary EFL learners.

In addition, independent samples *t*-test results (Table 4) revealed that there was not any statistically significant difference in comprehension means between the two groups in intermediate level,  $t(24) = 1.04, p = .30, p > .05$ , in which the *t*-observed, 1.04 was lower the *t* critical, 2.02; accordingly, we concluded that metalanguage does not significantly affect comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Figure 3 below is a bar graph that graphically illustrates the results. A quick look at Figure 3 reveals that in elementary level, the students in the target group have performed significantly better than those in the control group, however in intermediate level, the students of the two groups have not acted very different from each other though mean score for target group is larger than control group in value.

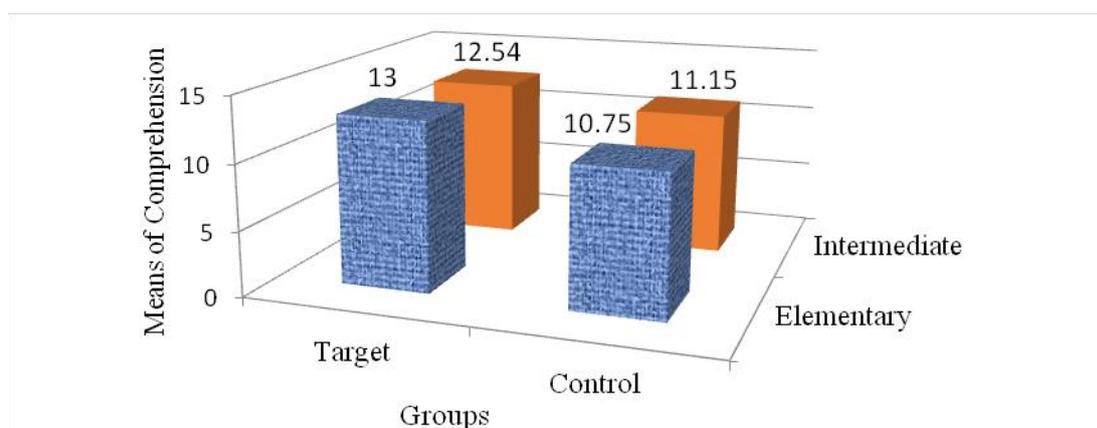


Figure 3. Bar graph of two groups' comprehension means in elementary and intermediate levels

### Discussion

Not a lot of studies have been done on the relationship between teachers' metalanguage and learner's comprehension of grammar points. The findings of this research are in contrast with those of the research done by Arghamiri and Sadighi (2013) claim that "as the students' proficiency level increases, their understanding of the knowledge about language also increases". In their study, they investigated learners' metalanguage, but in the current research teacher's metalanguage was the focus of research.

### Limitations

Doing the present study, the researcher could not control some factors. First of all, although she briefed each teacher on using metalanguage in the class, but the way he used it was not under the researcher's control. For instance, a teacher may or may not have used examples to explain a grammar point. Another limitation was the teacher's experience and expertise in teaching English. A teacher might have two or more years' experience teaching English. In fact, this can affect how a teacher can effectively use metalanguage. Finally, to have adequate number of subjects, the researcher had to include both male and female EFL learners.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find a relationship between teachers' use of metalanguage and learners' comprehension of grammatical points across proficiency levels. Therefore, the independent samples *t*-test was used to answer this research question. The result showed that there is a significant difference between learners' comprehension of target and control group in elementary level. However, in intermediate level there is not a significant difference between learners' comprehension of target and control group.

### References

- Arghamiri, A. & Sadighi, F. (2013). The Impact of Metalinguistic Knowledge and Proficiency Level on Pragmatic Competence of Iranian EFL Learners. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)*, Volume 4(1). P.181-192
- Ellis, R. (2012). *Language teaching research & language pedagogy*. UK: library of congress.
- Hu, G. (2010). Revisiting the role of metalanguage in L2 teaching and learning. *EA Journal*, Volume 26 no.1. P.61-66.
- Hu, G. (2010). Metalinguistic Knowledge, Metalanguage, and their relationship in L2 learners. *Elsevier, system 39*. P. 63-77
- Mackey, A. & Gass, S.M. (2005). *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Schleppegrell, M.J. (2012). The role of metalanguage in supporting academic language development. *Language learning*,
- Shakoor, T. & Rehman, A. & Raees, M. (2013). English (L2) can be taught effectively by using Metalanguage at secondary level in Pakistan. *Vol, 2. No. 2*. P. 63-66.
- Wach, A. (2007). Using metalinguistic terminology in teaching grammar to older children. *PLM*.
- Yanfen, L. & Yuqin, Z. (2010). A study of teacher talk in interactions in English classes. *Chinese journal of applied linguistics (Bimonthly)*, Volume 33, no2