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Explicit language knowledge and focus on form: options and obstacles for TESOL teacher trainees¹

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RESEARCH ON form-focused instruction (FFI) suggests a role for grammar instruction within a communicative approach (R. Ellis 1994b, 1995, 1997a, 1998; Long 1996, 2000; Spada 1997; Doughty and Williams 1998a; Long and Robinson 1998; Norris and Ortega 2000; Nassaji and Fotos 2004). This recommendation derives from three sources: long-term outcomes of meaning-focused instruction and non-instructed (naturalistic) language learning, theoretical work on processes of language acquisition, and evidence from experimental and classroom-based research on focus on form (FoF), as set out in Chapter 1.

Much research in second language (L2) classrooms has reported on the relative frequency and effectiveness of reactive, incidental feedback, particularly recasts, provided to learners in response to non-target like utterances across both second and foreign language (FL) contexts. (For review, see Nicholas, Lightbown, and Spada 2001; Long 2006b.) As noted in Chapter 1, while some researchers note the benefits of such feedback for acquisition (for example, Doughty 2001), others (Lyster 1998b, 2004) maintain that more explicit, less ambiguous corrective feedback is preferable in certain classroom contexts where learners may not perceive implicit feedback as corrective.

Implicit feedback may however be the preferred option for many teachers both in terms of classroom management and continuity of interaction (Doughty 1994; Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen 2001a; Loewen and Philp 2006; Long 2006b), but also because it allows teachers to fall back on their implicit knowledge of the L2. Errors corrected through explicit feedback, on the other hand, require metalinguistic knowledge and, in some instances, a command of metalanguage (the technical or semi-technical words for grammatical categories and functions), which teachers may not possess.

While metalinguistic knowledge is clearly not the same as language proficiency, and a number of studies have shown only moderate positive correlations between the two (Alderson, Clapham, and Steel 1997; Elder, Warren *et al.* 1999; Renou 2000), both are regarded as critical for effective language teaching. Andrews (2003), citing Wright and Bolitho's (1997) model of classroom language content and use, emphasizes the interconnection between proficiency and language awareness and argues that a teacher's language awareness (TLA) incorporates both knowledge *about* the language and knowledge *of* the language. Particular to TLA is a metacognitive aspect, drawing from both types of knowledge, which enables the teacher to plan learning activities, modify and mediate input from other sources, and respond to learner production and questions in the context of such activities. As Wright (2002: 115) notes, 'a linguistically aware teacher not only understands how language works, but understands the student's struggle with language and is sensitive to errors and other interlanguage features'.

Similarly, Elder (1994, 2001), exploring the construct of teacher language proficiency for testing purposes, proposes that language teachers need to (a) be proficient enough in the target language (TL) to provide rich and well formed models for their learners, (b) tailor their input to make it comprehensible to learners, and, most importantly for the current study, (c) have sufficient metalinguistic knowledge both to explain grammatical rules and to respond to learner error (using whatever strategies are appropriate to the particular learning context).

Work on TLA, however, suggests that not all teachers are well equipped to offer such explanations or to exploit the potential of different options within FFI (Bolitho 1988; Wright 1991; Wright and Bolitho 1997; Andrews 1999, 2003; Mitchell 2000). Bolitho (1988) and Andrews (1994, 2003) report a perceived inadequate grammatical knowledge or awareness among teacher trainees in the English speaking West, but Andrews (2003), citing Wright (1991), suggests this is less true of 'non-native' L2 teacher trainees from 'periphery' contexts (Canagarajah 1993) because of the inclusion of explicit grammar pedagogy in their prior education, and as part of teacher training programmes.

This latter claim has not been tested, however, and is based on the assumption that learning the explicit rules of TL grammar will result in the ability to produce acceptable TL explanations for L2 learners. Such an assumption would seem highly questionable given that grammar instruction in FL teaching contexts (even those espousing the communicative approach) is typically delivered to L2 learners in their mother tongue rather than through the medium of the TL (Mitchell 1988; Duff and Polio 1990; Polio and Duff 1994; Kim and Elder 2005). Also worth noting are the results

of previous research assessing learners' levels of metalinguistic knowledge (Green and Hecht 1992; Alderson, Clapham, and Steel 1997; Elder *et al.* 1999; Renou 2000; Elder and Manwaring 2004). These show that the ability to verbalize grammatical rules in the TL is often quite limited, even amongst advanced undergraduate learners of the FL with many years of prior formal instruction. Whether this is due to conceptual confusion about the workings of the language, limited language proficiency, a lack of appropriate metalanguage, or a combination of these is not entirely clear, but it is a matter for concern given that university language departments are usually the recruiting ground for language teachers.

The present study

In the present study, both a Metalinguistic Knowledge test (MKT) and a Grammaticality Judgement test (GJT) were used to test the explicit language knowledge of a group of advanced English language learners from Malaysia who were trainee English language teachers. The research questions which the study addressed are as follows:

- 1 What level of metalinguistic knowledge do advanced English learners from Malaysia have?
- 2 What kinds of rules/metalinguistic terms present particular difficulties for advanced learners?
- 3 Is metalinguistic knowledge associated with the ability to recognize error?
- 4 What are the implications of these findings for the teaching of focus on form (FoF) in L2 classrooms?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 61 students enrolled in a one-and-a-half year foundation programme at an international languages teacher training institute in Malaysia.

At the time of the study, the students were nearing completion of their foundation programme and preparing to embark on a four-year BEd degree, the middle two years of which were to be completed at universities in either New Zealand, Australia, or the United Kingdom. On completion of this 'sandwich' degree, students would be expected to take up positions as English language teachers in primary or secondary schools in Malaysia.

All students had studied English as a second language (ESL) from the age of seven, at primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. They had been selected for admission to the institute on the basis of their high school

grades, in particular their English language marks. Their results on the diagnostic English language needs assessment (DELNA), a test used to identify their language support needs in reading, listening, and writing, confirmed that the vast majority of them performed above the threshold deemed to be necessary to cope with the academic language demands of an English-medium university. All students were between 19 and 21 years of age. During the one-and-a-half years of foundation studies, students attended a variety of English classes, namely English studies (literature), language description (grammar), and language development (proficiency). A social studies class was also conducted in English. The language description classes were of approximately three hours duration per week and were taught over a period of 18 months (120 contact hours in total). The content of the course dealt with such areas as word classes, phrases and clauses, sentences patterns, sentence types, cohesive devices, words and meanings, and lexical relationships.

Test

Two tests of explicit knowledge were used in the present study, a MKT and an unspeeeded GJT. The MKT was an adaptation of an earlier test of metalanguage devised by Alderson, Clapham, and Steel (1997). The first part of the test (Part 1), which is the focus of the current study,² presented students with 15 ungrammatical sentences, each of which contained a typical learner error in relation to a specific language structure.³ The part of the sentence containing the error was, in each case, underlined. Participants were asked to write an explanatory rule for the identified error. (A sample item is provided in Appendix A.)

The GJT consisted of 68 sentences, evenly divided between grammatical and ungrammatical. There were four sentences to be judged for each of 17 grammatical structures, the 15 that were targeted in the MKT, plus two more (3rd person 's', dative alternation).⁴

Test administration

Participants completed the two tests during a period in which one of the researchers was visiting Malaysia along with another colleague to administer DELNA to these and other students from the institute. The present test was administered as a pen and paper test with no time limit. It was completed along with and subsequent to a Grammaticality Judgment test (see below).

Scoring

Responses to Part 1 of the MKT were scored according to two criteria. The first was the formulation of a rule to account for the underlined error (rule score). For each item, criteria were established that would determine whether a given explanation was an *adequate* formulation of the appropriate rule or not. It is important to note here that the criteria for adequate formulation of a rule did not require the use of metalinguistic terminology, but simply the ability to articulate the concept/s deemed to be central in each case. We were, in other words, attempting to avoid, in so far as possible, any confusion between what was being assessed (knowledge of language) and the means used to express this knowledge (metalanguage) (Berry 2005). The judgements of two expert applied linguists were used as a basis for deciding the criteria for each item, with reference to relevant pedagogic or descriptive grammar texts as required. Participants scored one mark for an adequately formulated rule and a maximum of 15 for this part of the test.

For each item, participants were also given a score for their use of metalinguistic terminology (metalang. score). While, as already noted, the test rubric did not *require* them to use metalanguage, the two examples provided before starting the test (see Appendix A) did demonstrate the use of metalinguistic terminology (which is extremely hard to avoid in some cases). For each item, a list of acceptable metalinguistic terms was generated. Participants had only to use one of the specified terms to score one mark for each item in this category. The maximum score possible in this section was 15.

For each item, the scoring criteria (see Appendix B for examples) were first 'tried' with a selection of 'sample' answers taken from participants' scripts. The marking key was then reworked (where necessary) by the researchers and an additional rater was 'trained' with respect to the criteria and given the sample items to rate independently. Any differences were discussed and in the few cases where discussion did not resolve differences, the ratings of the researcher were taken as the final scores.

The GJT items were objectively scored as either correct (1 point) or incorrect (0 points). The maximum score for this test was 68.

Test reliability

The internal consistency of Part 1 of the MKT was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding $\alpha = .81$. Inter-rater reliability was also established for the Rule item. The correlation between *initial* scores (i.e. before joint discussion of differences in ratings) given by the two raters for participants' attempts at rule formulation was: $r = .96$. For the GJT for each item,

participants were required to indicate whether the sentence was (a) grammatical or (b) ungrammatical. Internal consistency of the judgement accuracy scores was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding $\alpha = .66$.

Results

Descriptive statistics for participants' performance on Part 1 of the MKT are presented in Table 15.1. Results show that participants scored a mean of 7.41 (out of a maximum total score of 15) for their ability to formulate an acceptable rule in relation to the 15 targeted grammatical structures. They scored a mean of 5.07 (out of a maximum total score of 15) for their ability to use appropriate metalinguistic terminology in their rule explanations. Performance ranged widely on both these components as evidenced by the relatively large standard deviations, however no candidate achieved a perfect score.

A correlation was carried out between the two sets of scores on Part 1 of the test to see to what extent participants' ability to formulate a rule was related to their ability to use metalinguistic terms. There was a significant correlation, $r = .66$, $p = .01$.

Table 15.2 presents the percentage correct of rule formulation scores for each of the 15 items of Part 1 of the MKT, in order of increasing difficulty. It also presents information for each item that shows the percentage of responses that were marked incorrect because of poor rule formation and the percentage of non-suppliance of response. The structures for which the participants performed best in terms of formulating an adequate rule were (in order of increasing difficulty) regular past tense, plural 's', possessive 's', and comparatives. The structures that were most difficult for students (from most to least difficult) were ergatives, verb complements, and unreal conditional.

Descriptive statistics for participants' performance on the GJT are presented in Table 15.3. Participants scored highly on this test, $M = 60.21$ out of a possible maximum score of 68, showing that they were able to perform to a high level when required to judge the grammatical accept-

	M	SD	N	Max score	Range	Percentage mean
Part 1: rule	7.41	2.91	61	15	1-14	49.40
Part 1: metalang.	5.07	2.93	61	15	0-14	33.80
Part 1: total	12.48	5.33	61	30	3-28	41.60

TABLE 15.1 *Descriptive statistics for Part 1 of the MKT*

ability of sentences containing the targeted structures. In fact there was a ceiling effect on this test, with a number of participants obtaining perfect or near perfect scores.⁵ It is interesting to note that they performed at a similar level when judging both the grammatical ($M = 29.66$) and ungrammatical sentences ($M = 30.56$), given that results from a larger study in which the same test was used have suggested that the two types of item are tapping different types of knowledge—implicit knowledge in the case of the grammatical items and explicit knowledge in the case of the ungrammatical. (For further discussion of the implicit/explicit knowledge distinction in relation to these different kinds of items see R. Ellis 2005b.)

Item no.	Grammatical structure	Percentage correct	Percentage incorrect	Percentage missing answers
8	Regular past tense	78.69	18.03	3.28
5	Plural 's'	73.77	16.39	9.84
7	Possessive 's'	73.77	18.03	8.20
4	Comparatives	70.49	21.31	8.20
9	Indefinite article	63.93	24.59	11.48
13	Question tags	63.93	24.59	11.48
12	Adverb placement	60.66	27.87	11.48
15	Relative clauses	45.90	31.15	22.95
11	Yes/no questions	42.62	24.59	32.79
14	Since and for	42.62	29.51	27.87
1	Modal verbs	37.70	50.82	11.48
10	Embedded questions	29.51	50.82	19.67
3	Unreal conditional	21.31	37.70	40.98
2	Verb complements	19.67	63.93	16.39
6	Ergatives	16.39	52.46	31.15

TABLE 15.2 *Percentage correct, percentage incorrect and percentage missing answers for rule formulation scores, Part 1 MKT*

GJT	M	SD	N	Max score	Range	Percentage mean
Ungrammatical sentences	30.56	2.89	61	34	22–34	89.88
Grammatical sentences	29.66	2.72	61	34	23–34	87.24
Total	60.21	4.24	61	68	51–68	88.54

TABLE 15.3 *Descriptive statistics for GJT*

Grammatical structure	Percentage correct
Modal verbs	95.49
Indefinite article	95.08
Adverb placement	95.08
Indefinite article	95.08
Possessive 's'	93.85
Verb complements	93.44
Question tags	93.44
Regular past tense	89.34
<i>Since and for</i>	88.52
Dative alternation	88.52
Yes/no questions	86.48
Ergatives	84.84
Relative clauses	83.61
<i>Embedded questions</i>	82.38
Plural 's'	81.97
Unreal conditional	80.74
Comparatives	77.46

TABLE 15.4 *Percentage correct for items in GJT*

Table 15.4 presents the percentage correct for items in the GJT according to each grammatical structure tested (there were four items testing for participants' ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences in relation to each target structure). It is interesting to note that the three structures for which participants scored highly when required to formulate a rule, that is, regular past tense, plural 's', and possessive 's', were not among the three structures that they found easiest in terms of making a grammaticality judgement. Accuracy rates were nevertheless high on these items (89, 82 and 94 per cent respectively), far higher than for the corresponding items on the rule explanation section of the MKT.

Table 15.5 presents correlations between performances on all parts of the MKT and performances on the GJT (grammatical items, ungrammatical items, total score). Results show that there were significant correlations between scores on the rule and metalanguage components of the MKT and both total scores and scores for ungrammatical items on the GJT. Interestingly, the correlation between metalanguage scores (based on use of relevant terminology) and the ungrammatical items on the GJT was consistently higher than that for Part 1 rule scores (indicating the appropriateness of the explanations provided).

Test	GJT total	GJT-gram.	GJT-ungram.
Part 1 rule score	.30*	.11	.34**
Part 1 metalang. Score	.35**	.07	.45**
Part 1 total	.36**	.10	.43**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 15.5 *Correlational matrix for performance on Part 1 of MKT and performance on GJT*

Discussion

The discussion will be organized around the research questions set out above.

1 What level of metalinguistic knowledge do English teacher trainees from Malaysia have?

Results of the MKT show that, in spite of their extensive English training which includes an explicit focus on the formal features of English, these trainee teachers vary widely in their level of metalinguistic knowledge and as a group perform rather poorly on this test. Even with a scoring system which accepts approximate explanations of errors, the participants achieve less than 50 per cent of acceptable responses on the rule explanation task. Their command of metalinguistic terminology (which correlates moderately with the ability to verbalize rules) is even weaker, although we must concede that participants may have deliberately chosen *not* to use technical language in this section of the test.

The poor results on the rule formulation task correspond to the findings of previous research (Sorace 1985; Green and Hecht 1992), which indicate that learners, even those with considerable experience of traditional instruction with an FoF orientation, do not necessarily learn the rules about language that they have been taught. However, as Bialystok (1979), Green and Hecht (1992), and Renou (2000) also found, the participants in the current study appear to have understood some grammatical rules better than others. We will speculate further about the reasons for this below.

2 What kinds of rules/metalinguistic terms present particular difficulties for advanced learners?

It is interesting to see that the rule explanations which these advanced Malaysian learners of English found easiest to formulate (plural 's', possessive 's', and comparative) all appear frequently in elementary English text books, whereas the more difficult ones—ergatives, verb complement, and

unreal conditional—are not generally introduced until later in the pedagogical sequence. There may therefore be some relationship between pedagogical exposure (to English grammar) and item difficulty. Structures which are taught early are likely to be recycled and consolidated at later stages of learning with the result that learners achieve a stronger grasp of them. But there are also likely to be other factors involved in determining difficulty, for example processing constraints (Pienemann 1998) and the transparency of form-meaning links (DeKeyser 2005b). In the case of plural and possessive 's', the link between the morphemes and their respective pluralizing and ownership functions seems reasonably transparent and the relevant rule may for this reason be more readily verbalizable (N. Ellis 1996, 1999). Other forms are less frequent in the input and do not regularly appear as a focus of instruction, such as the need to use the active verb form with ergative verbs like 'improve'. Rules for such forms are also more complex and hence less amenable to explanation. To explain why 'His grades *were improved* last year' is an erroneous sentence; candidates would require knowledge of the class of ergative verbs and its specific exemplars, as well as an understanding of the distinction between the active and passive mode, including the concept of (hidden) agency. N. Ellis (1999) argues that such structures are more likely to be learnt implicitly on an item-by-item basis, initially as formulaic utterances. It is therefore feasible that the participants in this study may never have encountered or needed to articulate the relevant rule and this may explain why over 30 per cent of them failed even to attempt an explanation for this item. The rule for the formulation of the unreal conditional is similarly complex, involving an understanding of complex verb forms and some notion of syntactic interdependency between clauses. Perhaps for this reason there was a 41 per cent non-suppliance rate on this item and only 21 per cent of correct responses.

As for metalinguistic terms, it is clear from some of the garbled explanations supplied by the participants that many are confused about both their meaning and application. Take the following example produced as an explanation of the wrong verb form in the question:

Does Liao *has* a Chinese wife?

In this context, 'has' should be written in past 'had'. It is universally acknowledged that 'had' refers to possessive nouns, and referring to the sentence, which means Liao had a Chinese wife.

In the following example, the testee has confused metalinguistic terms in explaining the overuse of modals:

I *must have* to wash my hands.

You do not have to put 'must' there because you cannot put a noun before a noun.

These examples, and there are many others besides, suggest that many of the participants, for a range of reasons, have poor understanding of both the explicit rules of English and the terms in which such rules are traditionally couched. Although space precludes an extensive discussion of the nature of learner misunderstandings, it is clear from the language of the examples presented above that they are in many cases attempting to mimic the discourse of pedagogical grammars making reference to notions of generality (for example, 'it is universally acknowledged') and constraint (for example, 'you cannot put') or obligation (for example, 'should be written') which are characteristic of pedagogical rules, without having a clear conceptual understanding. Some participants, perhaps more aware of their limited understanding, confined themselves to correcting the targeted error with no attempt at generalization beyond the particular instance, for example:

The cake *that you baked it* tastes very nice.

You should omit 'it'.

Such a response, while it was not deemed acceptable on our test, is arguably more useful as feedback for a learner than the confused explanations exemplified above.

3 *Is metalinguistic knowledge associated with the ability to recognize error?*

Results reported in Table 15.5 above show a moderate (and statistically significant) correlation ($r = .43$) between scores on the MTK and those derived from the ungrammatical GJT sentences which measure different exemplars of the same set of structures. Both the rule and metalinguistic terminology sections contribute significantly to this relationship suggesting that detection and explanation go hand in hand at least to some extent, probably because explicit knowledge contributes to the resolution of both types of item (N. Ellis 2005). However, given the substantial difference in the difficulty of the two tests, as indicated by the difference in means (42 per cent on MTK and 89 per cent on the GJT), we cannot take for granted that if a L2 learner can recognize an error in a sentence s/he will be able to explain why the item is wrong or invoke the relevant TL rule. (See also Brumfit, Mitchell,

and Hooper 1996; Alderson, Clapham, and Steel 1997; Elder *et al.* 1999 for a similar conclusion.)

At the item level there were also some notable differences in difficulty across the tests (and see Clapham 2001 and Hu 2002 who report a similar variation in performance on particular items according to task demands). Whereas errors in the use of a modal verb, adverb placement, and an indefinite article were the easiest to recognize, these were not, as we have seen above, the easiest items to explain. Conversely, there are some items, such as the comparative, which were harder on the GJT than the MKT. It seems then that an incorrect answer on an error detection item does not always imply absence of metalinguistic knowledge.

4 What are the implications of these findings for the teaching of FoF in L2 classrooms?

Findings of the study suggest that this particular group of teacher trainees, in spite of being handpicked to participate in the off-shore Bachelor of Education course on the basis of a strong prior academic record and a high level of English proficiency, have a disturbing lack of knowledge about the rules of English grammar as well as, in many cases, a limited command of the technical terms required to explain these rules to L2 learners, if or when the need arises. This conforms with the findings of other investigations of metalinguistic knowledge involving advanced FL learners (Alderson, Clapham, and Steel 1997; Elder *et al.* 1999; Renou 2000; Elder and Manwaring 2004). Although Wright (1991: 69), in relation to non-native teacher trainees from Malaysia, describes them as ‘metalinguistically well equipped at the outset—i.e. they knew basic grammatical terminology’, he notes that they nevertheless had difficulty in applying that metalanguage and lacked confidence. If non-native teacher trainees have such gaps in their knowledge, it is likely to be all the more the case for native speakers who have often not had any formal experience of language study in their classrooms (Bolitho 1988; Andrews 1994, 2003). A poor command of metalinguistic knowledge is likely to impact negatively on the quality of FFI, both in traditional grammar-based classrooms and in other meaning-focused teaching where FoF instruction is incidental rather than systematic. Although reactive FoF feedback which is accompanied by some kind of metalinguistic explanation has been found to account for a proportion of teacher feedback moves (Lyster and Ranta 1997; Havranek 2002; Loewen and Philp 2006), little attention has been paid in FoF studies to the quality of this feedback or, more precisely, to the accuracy and intelligibility of the metalinguistic information imparted to learners and its possible effect on learner uptake. This is clearly an area where further research is needed.

In the meantime it seems reasonable to propose that where there are gaps in teachers' metalinguistic knowledge, it may be better to adopt alternatives to FoF teaching strategies which draw less heavily on command of technical terminology and the ability to verbalize grammatical rules. As far as pre-emptive FoF is concerned, the generally poor explanations offered for certain structures (such as ergatives) by this group of participants suggest that such structures may be better avoided altogether as the target for explicit instruction and left for learners to acquire implicitly via positive evidence alone (N. Ellis 1999). As for reactive strategies, since the participants in this study appear to have had little difficulty with detecting grammatical errors (as indicated by their high level of performance on the GJT and their tendency to correct errors rather than explain the relevant rules), they might be advised to resort where possible to prompts and recasts, rather than metalinguistic explanations, as an alternative means of drawing learners' attention to errors in their production.

Ideally, however, a teacher should have the necessary knowledge and skill to draw on the full range of FoF options, including the provision of explicit grammatical information when learners signal the need for it. As N. Ellis (1999: 30) maintains, 'Learning the patterns, regularities or underlying concepts in a complex domain with advance organizers and instruction is always better than learning without cues' and explicit language knowledge has a clear role to play in planning and implementing FFI, whether of the FoF or FoFs variety.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued the case for FFI in L2 classrooms, drawing on evidence from a range of different sources, and has considered the kinds of knowledge and skill which teachers need to deliver such instruction effectively. We have argued that language teachers need not only high levels of language proficiency to be able to provide rich and well-formed input for learners but also sufficient explicit knowledge about language to be able to plan FFI and respond appropriately to learner needs through judicious use of a range of FoF options. Responding to claims that many language teachers are ill-equipped for this task, we have explored the levels of explicit language knowledge and language proficiency among a group of Malaysian TESOL teacher trainees especially selected to participate in an off-shore teacher education course.

To do so we have drawn on a range of custom-built instruments which allow us to explore performance across different task types, including grammaticality judgement and rule explanation tasks targeting parallel sets of

structures. While the English language proficiency of these teacher trainees was found to be quite high, our investigation revealed significant lacunae in their knowledge about language and a highly uneven performance across the different task types. We believe that these lacunae need to be addressed in teacher education programmes to ensure that any FoF activity in which such teachers engage will be conducive to L2 learning.

The findings of this study signal the need for diagnostic testing of trainee teachers' metalinguistic knowledge (not just their ability to use the TL, which, as noted above, may be an unreliable predictor of such knowledge), using an instrument similar to the MKT described in this paper. The advantage of both the MKT and the GJT is their systematic sampling of a range of grammatical structures (although others could certainly be added) and, in the case of the MKT, the careful attention paid to establishing criteria which (a) identify critical 'bottom line' indicators of grammatical understanding rather than insisting on perfect rule formulations, and (b) attempt to assess grammatical understanding independently of the use of metalinguistic terminology. Separating the two is clearly important given the debates about the utility (or otherwise) of such terminology for teaching purposes (Berry 2005).

Diagnostic testing could provide a basis for individualized strategic advice about alternatives to explicit FoF instruction in the communicative classroom and about the range of options available when teachers wish to draw their learners' attention to an error in learner production which they feel ill-equipped to explain. Such testing could also identify priorities for formal teaching intervention or for self-instruction in relation to particular TL structures in order to strengthen L2 teachers' explicit knowledge base. Future research will, however, need to monitor the effectiveness of such intervention, given the apparent failure of formal instruction to produce high levels of understanding about the workings of English and other target languages. There are also dangers in an undue focus on the testing and development of metalinguistic knowledge independently of pedagogical skill. The cognitive sophistication involved in the former may sometimes be in conflict with the simplification skills required for the latter, as Elder (2001) and others have pointed out. Teacher trainees need to be mindful of the distinction between displaying what they know for testing purposes and using what they know to plan and deliver FoF instruction in ways that will be sensitive to learner needs. Teacher education programmes have an important role here as discussed in the other papers in this volume.

Notes

- 1 The research involving the development and trialling of the test described in this paper was funded by a Marsden Fund grant awarded by the Royal Society of Arts of New Zealand to Rod Ellis and Cathie Elder. Other researchers who contributed to the research are, along with Rosemary Erlam and Jenefer Philp, Shawn Loewen, Satomi Mizutani and Shuhei Hidaka. The authors wish to thank Susan McKenna for her hard work and consistent help with the analysis of data for this paper.
- 2 The second part of the test tested the ability to match grammatical features to their linguistic realizations in written texts. We have excluded any discussion of this section due to space constraints.
- 3 See R. Ellis (2005b) for a rationale for selection of the 15 structures and a detailed analysis of the tests as measures of explicit knowledge.
- 4 The structure 3rd person 's' was unintentionally omitted from the MKT and the item testing for dative alternation had to be eliminated from the data set because there were difficulties in deciding on appropriate criteria for scoring it.
- 5 This may explain the relatively low reliability index of this test for the population in question.

Appendix A

Instructions and sample items from the MKT (Part 1)

In this part, there are 15 sentences. They are all ungrammatical. The part of the sentence containing the error is underlined. For each sentence, if you know a rule which explains why the sentence is ungrammatical, write it in English in the space provided. If you do not know a rule, leave it blank and go on to the next sentence.

Here is an example.

Example 1

I have lost mine ring.

Before a noun, you have to use the possessive adjective, not the pronoun.

Appendix B

Sample scoring criteria for individual test items

Question 1

I *must have to* wash my hands.

Rule: (1 mark) 'must' and 'have to' both express same meaning/obligation—you don't need both

OR 'must' and 'have to' are both modal verbs/or a semi modal and a modal—you don't need both

Metalinguage: modal/semi modal/auxiliary
(1 mark)

Question 3

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

Rule: (1 mark) answer must contain some reference to the relationship (syntactic interdependency) between the two parts of the sentence

Metalinguage: past perfect/conditional/present perfect
(1 mark)



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