

Helping young children to develop awareness of the language they are learning

What this study was about

The researchers investigated whether teaching techniques can be devised to help children as young as eight develop an awareness of their own developing use of grammar in the second language as they are learning and using it.

What the researchers did

The study involved 43 children aged 8-9 years who were learning French in two immersion classes in a Canadian school. They were guided by the teacher to notice and repair their grammatical errors; and analyse and discuss the errors they were making using appropriate grammatical terms. The aim was to help the children develop their knowledge about the language by reflecting on their own and others' use of the language.

The classes were video recorded taking part in speaking and discussion activities during which the teacher gave corrective feedback on errors, for example by asking for the correct version of an utterance (elicitation), giving hints about mistakes in an utterance (metalinguistic clues) and repeating an error back to the learner (repetition). Errors included incorrect vocabulary, pronunciation mistakes and grammatical errors, plus instances of learners incorrectly using structures from their first language (English). The videos of the speaking activities were edited to isolate examples of the sequence error–feedback–repair. Five to seven days after each speaking activity children discussed each edited video clip with the teacher in small groups of 4 to 7 learners. The children were guided to notice and repair mistakes, identify errors and thus analyse their L2 grammatical knowledge. The article presents an analysis of teacher-child discussions during this later stage which included 287 error-feedback-repair sequences from over 167 minutes of video recording.

Example: Repair of a verb phrase (p14), original sentence [translated]: 'Is scorpions ...?' ('*Est-ce que les scorpions est?*')

LA: 'Scorpions 'is'? It doesn't work?
ENF: No.
LA: Then, what should we say?
DER: 'Are' (REPAIR)
LA: Why should we say 'are'?
DER: Because it's feminine (OFF-TARGET)

LA: Do you think it's feminine?
DER: No, it's a verb (IDENTIFY)
LA: It's a verb. What verb?
KIR DER: Present? (IDENTIFY the tense, but OFF-TARGET)
LA: It's a verb in the present tense, correct, but what verb?
COL: 'Are' is 'to be' (IDENTIFY)

What they found

The children improved in their ability to identify errors and use metalinguistic terminology over the two or three months of the study. Practice clearly helped.

- (1) the young learners were able to notice and repair errors, identify language features, discuss grammatical forms and analyse grammatical errors through group discussion;
- (2) through small-group discussions of the video recorded speaking activities, the teacher was able to train the children to draw on their grammatical knowledge, and thus show them how this helps to build knowledge of their developing second language;
- (3) learning and using names of grammatical terms (metalanguage) helped the children to discuss and analyse the errors.

The level of language awareness attained by the children suggests that young learners can be trained to explore languages as explicit and dynamic systems. The researchers noticed after the study that children began to integrate metalanguage into their edited writing. The researchers also concluded that a positive attitude to the teaching of grammar was crucial, and so too was the need to present concepts explicitly in a communicative setting.

Some children were very good at identifying and correcting errors and became even better. There were also children who never became very good, although they did get a little better. This indicates that even at this young age individual differences in the children played a part in the resulting range of ability.

Things to bear in mind

Although the results of the study showed that the learners' language awareness had increased, it is not possible to say whether it also improved the learners' language use. The learners in this study were taught by the researcher which may have influenced results. There was no comparison group to see if children not engaged in this type of analysis might develop a similar level of language awareness.