

## **2 TESTING THE NOTION OF CONCEPTUALIZATION IN THE ACQUISITION OF LINGUISTICS TERMINOLOGY**

### **2.1 Introduction to the experiment design**

In the professional usage of a foreign language, a command of linguistics metalanguage is necessary. As a matter of fact, linguistics metalanguage mirrors the distinctiveness of that particular language. This is so because languages may well differ not only in lexical-semantic counterparts but also, we dare venture primarily, due to differing associated declarative knowledge, multimodal mental representation, and culturally based schemas (cf Kecskes, Papp, 2000). When a person is exposed to a different world's view of a foreign language or culture, what used to be self-evident or almost trivial is not necessarily so anymore. We are forced to learn new social reality. The mind of a multilingual speaker is set to a new way of thinking, evaluating, or conceptualizing. Moreover, this is so in both directions (SL/FL to L1 and L1 to SL/FL). Once triggered, this quality is ever changing, never ceasing to evolve.

Assigning meaning to the segmented extralinguistic reality means being able to conceptualize it and being endowed with the competence that can be tagged as conceptual fluency (on the term, see Danesi 1992). It is defined "... as the ease of processing the meaning of a stimulus, or the fluency of conceptually driven processing" (Lee, Yoon, Mitchell 2005, p. 6). In order to achieve conceptual fluency via understanding a linguistics term and its content, scope, and function in academic English, it is necessary to explore the hermeneutic process of understanding in terms of non-conscious pre-understanding (on the term see Ricoeur 2004; Gadamer 1994, 1999) of a linguistics term either in a percipient's mother tongue or through the exposure to the term usage in EFL classes. Hence, our starting point is that the basis of metalinguistic competence is conceptual fluency.

The anecdotal evidence shows that mastering metalinguistic vocabulary of a foreign language by pre-service EFL professionals undergoes several stages. The first stage is unconscious interrelating of a mother tongue and a foreign language – terms representing particular concepts in the mother tongue are automatically applied to a foreign language as they are thought to represent the same concepts. The intuitive

knowledge is foregrounded and serves as a blocking factor during the necessary stage of reconstructing the conceptual system of an L1. In the later stages, two systems merge and a learner possesses unique knowledge, neither the knowledge identical with that of a monolingual nor the sum of two separate systems (Kecskes, Papp 2000). The nature of that unique knowledge can be explained by adopting a socio-cognitive approach, i.e. through interrelating social and cognitive properties.

Considering this, the following questions arise: What metalanguage causes an interlingual problem and why? In what form does the metalanguage become stored information in the target users? Is linguistic pre-understanding present (and hopefully prevalent) in students of EFL (future professionals); for instance, in the case of polysemous words, are the salient meanings related to linguistics? It follows that the underlying question is what degree of linguistics awareness of target metalanguage resides in the students' minds. For this reason a research study has been conducted. The method of experimental questionnaire provides the data on what meanings are processed first when students come across the terminology that is (not) identical in their first language (Slovak) and a foreign language (English). The aim is to test the amount and type of stored information and the respondents' ability to activate relevant knowledge.

## **2.2 Methodology of the study**

### *Theoretical underpinning*

In order to test the metalanguage awareness and the presence of salience in English majors, we conducted a needs analysis in the form of an experimental questionnaire. In examining the aspects influencing the learning process of metalanguage, it is important to consider how the terminology concerned becomes stored information in the target users. This can be done through learning about the outcomes of hermeneutic non-conscious experience of the object of cognition and understanding. Consistent with the stated aim, it was necessary to select terms that students "had been and had not been familiar with" in the target foreign language. In this case, the quotation marks are used purposely, because being and not being familiar with linguistics terminology stands for the prior hermeneutic non-conscious experience

of selected linguistics terms. Hermeneutic non-conscious experience means that students had come across the terminology before without having been exposed to their explicit conceptual and terminological explanation.

### *Respondents*

The subjects were 53 freshmen at a college, majoring in EFL, understood as multilinguals from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective with no prior formal introduction to English metalinguistics terminology. Their background is approximately 10 years of EFL studies since their first encounter with English as a foreign language. The respondents come from the culture, in which formal learning of metalinguistic vocabulary of the mother tongue is part of elementary and secondary schooling; however, the predominant part of introducing the grammar system happens during the elementary stage. Before secondary schooling takes place the majority of linguistics terminology should be mastered by students. In the initial phases of the formal foreign language instruction, the emphasis is placed on the practical aspect of a language.

### *The questionnaire design*

The questionnaire comprised 15 terms representing linguistic concepts belonging into the field of phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicology. The terms were excerpted from New English File upper-intermediate (Oxenden, Latham-Koenig 2008), the book intended for language skills development commonly used at Slovak secondary schools. The selected terms were formerly the part of the activity assignments in the student's book and workbook; hence their passive rather than active knowledge is presupposed. The respondents were asked to provide the explanation, translation, or exemplification of the terms. They were instructed to use the language of their preference (L1 or L2) as the present research is targeted at their conceptual awareness, not language proficiency; for the time being, the language of expression is beyond the scope of our interest.

The questionnaire should hint answers to what degree of linguistics meaning awareness resides in the minds of the respondents. The evaluation of the answers was done through binary oppositions: 1) answer provided vs. answer not provided; 2) the

answer provided was appropriate vs. was inappropriate (in the sense of metalanguage); 3) the inappropriate answer was related to language vs. was not related to language. The answers were coded as follows: no answer [1], appropriate answer [2a], inappropriate answer related to language [2bL], inappropriate answer not related to language [2bNL]. The answers varied from providing a Slovak equivalent through explanation in either language. For the time being, if an answer was not supplied, the reasons were not sought after. The answers were triple checked by assessors who are professional linguists.

### *Processing the data*

In order to process the questionnaire data, we adopted the notion of interlingual equivalence (on the term see Kvetko, 2009). The results are reported within three subgroups of the tested metalanguage: absolute equivalence, relative equivalence, and zero equivalence (on the terms, see *ibid*). From the perspective of interlingual equivalence, the selected terms represent several metalinguistic problems due to the difference in the degree of compatibility between English and Slovak metalanguage. In the questionnaire, absolute equivalence is represented by the terms ‘stress’, ‘intonation’, ‘syllable’, ‘subject’, and ‘object’; relative equivalence by the terms voiced consonant, tense, countability, sentence, phrase, collocation, colloquial vocabulary; zero equivalence by the terms: zero article, clause, and false friends. The etic (top-down) perspective advocates that the salient meaning of the selected terms be defined within the field of linguistics.

In the two languages, through the etic perspective, the terms falling in the group absolute equivalence are understood to be monosemantic, which is to say, they represent identical concepts. In both languages, for instance, stress is understood as giving prominence to a syllable, intonation is tone modulation over (pragmatically-speaking) longer stretches of speech; contentwise, the others are alike.

In general, relative equivalence embodies partial overlap of meanings. In the present research study, we adopted this notion to refer to cases when a) the mere term exists in both languages, however with a different scope, function, or significance; b) the mere term has more senses, one of them being identical in both languages, the other(s) being either different or missing altogether. The terms used in the questionnaire

were used intentionally. The relationship between the English and Slovak counterparts illustrates a particular metalinguistic problem.

1. *voiced consonant*: the metalinguistic problem – different function and significance  
English: weak, lenis, can be accompanied with vocal cords activity  
Slovak: always accompanied by vocal cords activity
  
2. *tense*: the metalinguistic problem derives from a different scope of the term  
English: a grammatical category expressed through inflections (which is why, grammatically speaking, English has only two tenses – present and past)  
Slovak: identical word for a grammatical category and a philosophical category
  
3. *countability*: the metalinguistic problem – different function and significance  
English: the underlying feature of a noun providing the reasoning behind the usage of articles  
Slovak: non-existent as an autonomous feature, it is understood as an inherent feature of some nouns, yet not grammatically approached as a separate category
  
4. *sentence*: the metalinguistic problem – different scope of the term  
English: a hyperonym encompassing all different types (simple, compound, complex)  
Slovak: linguistically salient meaning is that of a simple sentence
  
5. *phrase*: the metalinguistic problem – different function of the term  
English: a monosemantic term referring to syntactic structures combined to create a sentence  
Slovak: a colloquial stretch of words
  
6. *collocation*: the metalinguistic problem – different function and significance of the term

English: the underlying feature of generating idiomatic (native-like) utterances, justly omnipresent in English structures because it is part of the vocabulary core

Slovak: it is attributed to much less frequent lexical units, occupying the peripheral position in the lexis

7. *colloquial vocabulary*: the metalinguistic problem – different scope and function

English: vocabulary understood to be standard in everyday neutral style due to the general tolerance of less rigorous way of speaking; not necessarily avoided in public performance

Slovak: vocabulary understood as part of everyday informal conversation; that is why to be avoided in public performance

Zero equivalence implies that Slovak linguistics lacks equivalents for these terms. The awareness of these terms results from the students' undertaking EFL classes. If such terms exist, they are mere translations only used to denote English grammar phenomena; no such phenomena make part of the Slovak grammar system.

### 2.3 Findings and Discussion

The data on *absolute equivalence* yielded by the questionnaire are given in Table 1 below. As there were 53 respondents and 5 terms, the overall number of “potential answers” was 265. Out of these, 2.64% answers were not supplied; the number of appropriate answers was 140 (52.83%); the number of inappropriate answers was 118 (44.53%). Out of 118 inappropriate answers, 68 (57.63%) were due to confusion with a different linguistics term and 20 (42.37%) were not language related. The data show the emic (bottom-up) perspective as follows: the term ‘stress’ is stored information (code 1 has zero occurrence), however, only half of the supplied answers were appropriate (54.72%); out of the inappropriate answers, in exactly two thirds of the answers, the salient meaning was not of linguistics nature. The reason is obvious – the lexeme stress belongs into the general vocabulary. The term ‘intonation’ seems to be a stored piece of information in terms of both form and content in both languages as the

number of appropriate answers was 73.58%. In our data, the term syllable is stored information in 56.60% of respondents. In the rest of them, the conceptual image either missed or was confused with the object of extra-linguistic reality ‘syllabus’ – assumingly due to the graphological resemblance. The questionnaire data pointed out a very similar understanding of the terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’: approximately one third of the answers was appropriate; almost two thirds were inappropriate in that half of the inappropriate answers were linguistically motivated (confusing one term for the other), and half of them had extra-linguistic referents.

	stress	intonation	syllable	subject	object	Σ	%
<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2.64</b>
<b>2a</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>52.83</b>
<b>2b</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>44.53</b>
2bL	8	10	17	16	17	68	57.63
2bNL	16	1	3	14	16	50	42.37

Table 1 Absolute equivalence

The data on *relative equivalence* yielded by the questionnaire are given in Table 2 below. As there were 53 respondents and 7 terms, the overall number of “potential answers” was 371. Out of these, 66 (17.79 %) answers were not supplied; the number of appropriate answers was 152 (40.97%); the number of inappropriate answers was 153 (41.24%). Out of 153 inappropriate answers, 132 (86.27%) were due to confusion with a different linguistics term, and 21 (13.73%) were not language related. As assumed by the authors, the most problematic was the term ‘phrase’. None of the answers was appropriate; one quarter of the answers was missing, three quarters were inappropriate, yet linguistically motivated. The respondents unanimously considered the two terms to be identical in content; however, it is an example of a linguistic malapropism, a kind of a false friend in the two languages. The prevalence of inappropriate answers occurred in the terms ‘collocation’ and ‘colloquial vocabulary’; the confusion was motivated by students’ being unaware of their different conceptualization in the two languages. In the terms ‘tense’ and ‘countability’, a balanced proportion of appropriate and inappropriate answers occurred. This can be explained, as it were, by the respondents’ prior frequent exposure to these terms; this is

to say the form and usage in the English language is stored, the metalanguage content is not stored, though. The least problematic proved to be the terms ‘voiced consonant’ and ‘sentence’. In the former, assumingly, the prevalence of satisfactory answers is due to the respondents’ very recent exposure to its concept in the currently ongoing course on Phonetics and Phonology; in the latter, the number of appropriate answers mirrors, in its very basic sense, the conceptual closeness of the language counterparts concerned.

	voiced consonant	tense	counta- bility	sentence	phrase	collocation	colloq. vocab.	Σ	%
<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>17.79</b>
<b>2a</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>40.97</b>
<b>2b</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>41.24</b>
2bL	10	11	4	16	51	25	15	132	86.27
2bNL	1	6	9	1	0	4	0	21	13.73

Table 2 Relative equivalence

The data on *zero equivalence* yielded by the questionnaire are given in Table 3 below. As there were 53 respondents and 3 terms, the overall number of “potential answers” was 159. Out of these, 48 (30.19%) answers were not supplied; the number of appropriate answers was 49 (30.82%); the number of inappropriate answers was 62 (38.99%). Out of 62 inappropriate answers, 31 (50.00%) were due to confusion with a different linguistics term, and 31 (50.00%) were not language related. The etic approach assumed two possible outcomes: a) the term represents a problem because it is not part of the linguistics system of the Slovak language; b) the term represents no problem because its conceptual underpinning is non-existent in Slovak, it is typical of English, hence more easily stored. The overall results show that the a) assumption proved right. With regard to all of the three terms, about one third of the answers was appropriate; about one third of the answers was not supplied (with varying percentage for the three terms), and one third of the answers was inappropriate – either confused with a different linguistics term or the salient meaning was not linguistics-related (the latter is most obvious in the term ‘false friend’; one answer even amused the authors in that the respondent provided ‘Santa’ in the interpretation of the term ‘clause’).

	Zero article	Clause	False friend	Σ	%
<b>1</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>30.19</b>
<b>2a</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>30.82</b>

<b>2b</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>38.99</b>
2bL	17	10	4	31	50.00
2bNL	6	9	16	31	50.00

Table 3 Zero equivalence

## 2.4 Summary

In the conducted study, the high percentage of linguistics-related answers in the questionnaire indicates that linguistics pre-understanding of the selected terms is present in our respondents. In other words, the salient meaning is of linguistics nature, hence salience and pre-understanding can hint applicable strategies during the learning process. The implications of the present study are such that 1) specialized terminology cannot be acquired non-consciously, it has to undergo a formal and systematic treatment; 2) specialized terminology becomes stored information only if it is facilitated by both explanation and supplying counterparts in both languages involved; 3) deliberate involvement of the mother tongue (since the pre-understanding of intelligible internal structures of the mother tongue is deemed essential in understanding linguistics concepts and terms of the target language). Even so, it has to be admitted that the mother tongue involvement can become both an asset and an obstacle. To avoid confusion or misconceptualization, an instructor has to intervene and bring refiguration and interpretation into play.