Beck Sinar

University of York

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Promoting metalinguistic awareness in a classroom to improve reading comprehension: Examples from Roald Dahl's novel The BFG

Abstract

It is widely recognised that successful reading involves the interaction of a number of different cognitive skills and strategies in order to achieve comprehension of the text (Baker, 2002). These skills and strategies are generally considered to be controlled by a global process called 'metacognition' (Kuhn & Dean, 2004). In this paper, I suggest that a large part of metacognition when reading has a (meta)linguistic component and hence time should be devoted to raising (meta)linguistic awareness when teaching and honing reading skills and strategies.

Tasks based around a short extract from Roald Dahl's (1982[2013]) novel The BFG are presented and discussed in order to illustrate how metalinguistic awareness might be raised in a classroom. Such tasks not only help to improve reading comprehension but have a number of additional benefits: they enhance and support the metacognitive toolkit, improve vocabulary acquisition and growth, and can bring a love of language and the fun of language play into the classroom.

Keywords: metalinguistic awareness, reading comprehension, vocabulary, classroom activities, Roald Dahl

Å fremme metalingvistisk bevissthet i et klasserom for å forbedre leseforståelse: eksempler fra Roald Dahls roman The BFG

Sammendrag

Det er bred enighet om at vellykket lesing trekker veksler på flere forskjellige kognitive ferdigheter og strategier tilknyttet tekstforståelse (Baker, 2002). Disse ferdighetene og strategiene hører inn under den globale prosessen 'metakognisjon' (Kuhn & Dean, 2004). I denne artikkelen argumenterer jeg for at en stor del av metakognisjonen i lesing har en (meta)lingvistisk komponent, og følgelig

at tid bør vies til å utvikle (meta)lingvistisk bevissthet i undervisningen av leseferdigheter og strategier.

Arbeidsoppgaver basert på et kort utdrag fra Roald Dahls (1982[2013]) The BFG (The Big Friendly Giant / SVK – Store Vennlige Kjempe) presenteres og diskuteres for å illustrere hvordan metalingvistisk bevissthet kan utvikles i klasserommet. Slike arbeidsoppgaver hjelper ikke bare med å forbedre leseforståelsen, men har også flere andre fordeler: de forsterker og støtter den metakognitive verktøykassen, forbedrer både innlæring og utvidelse av ordforrådet, kan øke språkgleden og oppmuntre til lek med språk i klasserommet.

Nøkkelord: metalingvistisk bevissthet, leseforståelse, vokabular, klasseromsaktiviteter, Roald Dahl

Introduction

Metacognition is a global process that allows individuals to be able to monitor and control their thinking and learning (Anderson, 2002, p. 1; Kuhn & Dean, 2004; Lai, 2011, p. 2; Martinez, 2006; Wilson & Conyers, 2016, p. 8). It was first introduced into the field of education and literacy by Flavell (1979) and applied to reading by Brown (1980). Metacognition has two main parts (Hogan, Dwyer, Harney, Noone, & Conway, 2015, p. 75; Schraw, Crippen, & Hartley, 2006):

- (i) being aware of cognitive strategies and processes, i.e. what we know
- (ii) being able to choose and apply suitable cognitive strategies to achieve the desired outcome (when, where and how to use strategies, i.e. what we can do)

Despite decades of research into which cognitive strategies and processes are used when reading, there is little consensus over exactly which are used, when each is used and the type and nature of the relationships which exist between them, leading Perfetti and Stafura (2014, p. 22) to claim: “There is no theory of reading, because reading has too many components for a single theory”. However, it is clear that a major component of reading involves language and knowledge about that language, i.e. awareness of linguistics and metalinguistics, which are the focus of this paper. It is widely acknowledged that there is a relationship between metacognition and metalinguistics (see Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2007; Kuo & Anderson, 2008; Nagy, 2007; Yuill, 1996), with most researchers suggesting that the latter is subordinate to the former, with a structure along the lines shown in Figure 1, where I have highlighted the role of metalinguistics.

Figure 1. The Relationships between Metacognition and Metalinguistics, based on Tunmer, Pratt and Herriman (1984).

The exact relationship between metacognition and metalinguistics is uncertain, and more theoretical discussion is required to consider questions such as whether metalinguistics is completely subordinate to metacognition and in which way(s), and/or whether or not the relationship between the two is bidirectional and, if so, in what respects. The answers to these questions fall well outside the scope of this single paper, taking in issues in developmental psychology and the acquisition of language as well as philosophical questions about the constructs of meaning and the nature of the mind. However, as far as we understand the relationship thus far, it seems clear that promotion of metalinguistic awareness would be a beneficial and important aspect of an individual's metacognitive toolkit. Therefore, this paper considers how promotion of metalinguistic awareness in a classroom might be beneficial to readers, and provides examples of what teachers might do in order to develop and promote this awareness. In the first half of this paper, I consider questions of a theoretical nature:

1. What are the *linguistic* strategies and skills used in reading?
2. What is *metalinguistic awareness* and how does it relate to reading?

In the second part of the paper, I demonstrate how aspects of these theories can be brought into the classroom via discussion of a number of tasks based around Roald Dahl's fictional text *The BFG* (1982[2013]), which is an initialism for 'The Big Friendly Giant'. In doing so, I seek to answer the following questions:

3. What are some of the potential benefits of metalinguistic knowledge and awareness for readers?
4. How can metalinguistic awareness be promoted in a classroom?

Background: Theoretical Framework for Reading

Reading is a complex process; it involves a number of different strategies and skills working together (Baker, 2002; Chambers, 2011, p. 60; Grabe, 2009, p. 14). Readers start with *strategies* which require conscious effort, and when these become automated they are considered to be *skills* (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991; Williams & Atkins, 2009, p. 26).

Evidence suggests that successful and proficient readers are strategic and orchestrate the use of cognitive strategies and/or skills such as being aware of what they are reading, being motivated and knowing why they are reading, and having a set of strategies for dealing with potential problems (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; Magliano & Millis, 2011, p. 132; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Pressley & Gaskins, 2006, p. 100). Some examples of cognitive strategies/skills when reading include:

- Use of typographical aids to help identify key information
- Use of tables, figures, illustrations to help understanding
- Using existing knowledge
- Making predictions / asking questions
- Using context clues

A major role of metacognition regarding reading is in monitoring comprehension in order to ensure that it occurs and to seek repair in cases where it fails (see e.g. Baker, 2002; Pressley, 2002). Strategies for repair might be, for example, to re-read a word, sentence or passage, use any pictures or illustrations, or to adjust reading speed to a slower pace. Other metacognitive processes involved in reading are inferencing, goal setting and revising, and responding to difficult texts strategically. This means readers asking themselves questions like:

• What is the author's intention?	= inferencing
• Do I understand?	= monitoring comprehension
• Are my inferences about the text correct?	= monitoring accuracy
• How do I respond to difficulties in the text?	= responding strategically
• What are my goals?	= goal setting

However, much of reading is linguistic; it is about processing and decoding information about language (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005). Hence, in addition to the skills and strategies discussed above, any model of reading should consider (at least) phonological and orthographical awareness and decoding, word identification, meaning retrieval (semantics), sentence parsing (syntax) and text structure (genre, pragmatics).

One such model is known as the 'simple model of reading' (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). Such models take a bottom-up approach to reading (word-based) and propose that there are essentially two strands

involved: decoding and linguistic comprehension (see, e.g. Gough, Hoover, & Peterson, 1996, and Joshi & Aaron, 2000, for more recent adaptations of this model). Under such models, early readers must first learn to consciously decode that graphemes (letters) correspond to phonemes (sounds) before then recognising that phonemes combine to form morphemes (words). Morphemes carry meaning (semantics) and it is at this point that the second aspect of the simple reading model – comprehension – is required. Readers need to be able to recognise the connection between the form of the word and its meaning.

In addition, more advanced readers would want to recognise the connotations of the words and pay attention to their particular usage, including style (informal or formal), collocations (the way words occur together), and consider if words are used figuratively (take on meanings beyond the most usual ones, as is the case with similes, metaphors and idioms). Words combine to form sentences following rules of syntax (grammar / word order). Word order also affects meaning; it allows the reader to ascertain information such as who did what to whom, i.e. what is the subject and what is the object of the sentence.

Learners may have deficits in decoding, comprehension or both (see e.g. Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004) which provides evidence for these two aspects of such models. However, it is likely that other factors are involved, such as environment and psychological factors, and hence this model is too simple (Adlof, Catts, & Little, 2006; Berninger, Dunn, Lin, & Shimada, 2004; Høien-Tengesdal, 2010; Quigley, 2018; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Further, a purely bottom-up approach to reading fails to take into account top-down (knowledge-driven) approaches (Beard, 1987, p. 24), the connections between the two approaches, and the likelihood that readers employ a variety of strategies (top-down and bottom-up) when reading (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p. 37; Skaftun, 2011). Stafura and Perfetti (2017), building on work in Perfetti (1999) and subsequent studies, attempt to arrive at a wide-angle framework of reading systems taking in both top-down and bottom-up approaches, as shown in Figure 2.

This framework shows an overview of the relationships between the complex factors involved in reading, whilst also allowing the possibility for researchers to focus on individual aspects of the framework in order to provide more detailed models and empirical testing, whilst still having the framework to provide the more global picture often lacking. Hence, it seems to me to be a good starting point for discussion and empirical work.

Figure 2. Reading Systems Framework (Stafura & Perfetti, 2017, p. 11, based on Perfetti, 1999). [In the vertical text in the middle of the figure, “Meaning and From” should read “Meaning and Form”.]

There has been a fair amount of empirical testing and discussion of the role of the orthographic (written) system and how it maps to phonological skills and awareness of them as a precursor for – or as part of – the development of early reading skills (early readers: DeVries, 2015, pp.73–97; Elbro, 1996; Høien & Lundberg, 2000; Lundberg, 2002, 2009; later readers: Zipke, 2007, 2011). In comparison, the role of the lexicon seems to have been a somewhat neglected component, and hence it is this aspect which will be the focus of the second half of the paper. As I am dealing with information at the word-level, I take a broadly bottom-up approach and try to demonstrate how attention at the word level filters up towards the top where aspects such as enjoyment and context play a significant role.

The lexicon seems to sit in the centre of the framework shown in Figure 2, between the phonological and orthographical mapping, and decoding and comprehension. It seems likely therefore that the lexicon is a kind of critical “pinch point” for reading and that the higher the quality of the information in the lexicon and the control that the reader has of that information, the more successful the reader is likely to be (see for example, the discussion in Quigley, 2018, regarding the effects of a ‘vocabulary gap’). This is known as the lexical quality hypothesis, first postulated by Perfetti and Hart (2002) (see also Perfetti, 2007; Stafura & Perfetti, 2017).

In conclusion, theories of reading should acknowledge the involvement of a number of linguistic skills, which in turn interact with other cognitive skills, including memory. This means that to be successful, readers must over time develop aspects of what Nagy (2007) calls the metalinguistic hypothesis. This

means that they should become aware of their linguistic knowledge and skills and be able to monitor and control them (Koda, 2008; Kuo & Anderson, 2008; Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988). There are several aspects to this which are illustrated in the list below with respect to reading:

- Phonological or phonemic awareness – this needs to link to orthographical awareness so that readers are able to decode words on a page
- Syntactic awareness – how word order affects meaning, recognising syntactic categories for new words, using syntactic information as contextual information, disambiguating lexical meanings
- Semantic awareness – understanding that words vary in meaning, building new definitions, both of which would aid in comprehending a text
- Morphological awareness – realisation that words are made up of meaningful constituent parts which could aid a reader in word retrieval from memory or in establishing a meaning for a new word

In the next section, I illustrate how this might be achieved in a classroom.

Method and Results: The ‘Metalinguistic Giant’ in the Classroom

Teachers promote metacognitive awareness in a classroom in a number of ways; asking students to paraphrase or summarise texts, retell stories, engage in readers’ theatre, take a storyline approach or engage in “text talk” (see e.g. ideas in Ahlquist & Lugossy, 2014; Chambers, 2011; Ingemansson, 2017; Tarrant & Holt, 2016).

In addition, teachers may use tasks in the classroom which develop metalinguistic awareness: this is the background behind teaching phonics for early literacy, and also the seemingly short ‘throw-away’ tasks for more advanced readers/learners which involve exercises such as the categorisation of words into parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), finding synonyms and so on. However, far from being ‘throw away’, such tasks awaken metalinguistic awareness. In the following discussion, Roald Dahl’s *The BFG* (1982[2013]) is used to illustrate the value of the ‘metalinguistic giant’ in a classroom. Similar tasks could be applied to different texts, different genres, to readers at different levels and in both L1 and L2 classrooms, as the principles and ideas expressed are universal to reading: but the exact skills and strategies practised and used would, of course, vary. Whilst I use a small extract here, the tasks could be extended to larger extracts or whole works. I begin by providing background on Dahl and the chosen novel, before discussing how it could be used in a classroom. I then report on a small-scale pilot study conducted with L1 English speakers aged eight or nine which sought to ascertain some empirical backing for the methods proposed in this section.

Background on Dahl and The BFG

Dahl has been popular in the UK for over 30 years (see: Chilton, 2012; Hall & Coles, 1999; Topping, 2010). Topping (2017) surveyed nearly 850,000 children in primary and secondary schools in the UK to find out about their reading habits. Roald Dahl was the fourth most popular author, and maintained this position in 2016. (This was, however, a decline on the second position he obtained in 2015). The most popular author was Jeff Kinney, with David Walliams and Roderick Hunt rising in popularity and taking second and third place respectively. Dahl proved particularly popular with children between the ages of 8 and 13, getting at least two books into the top ten books for each age group. This is due in part to the popularity of the books in UK schools and amongst teachers, but there is also evidence from, for example longstanding library borrowing figures (Campon, 2013) and sales figures (BBC, 2016), that Dahl is read outside school for pleasure. There is growing evidence for the importance and value of reading for pleasure for educational purposes as well as personal development (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Holden, 2004) and for the importance of reading fiction for those obtaining high world-wide literacy scores (UK Department for Education, 2012).

There is a wealth of agreement that using authentic materials in an L2 classroom is beneficial (Birketveit & Williams, 2013) and that using strategies which work in L1 can also work in L2 (Drew, 2017). Whilst Dahl's popularity outside the UK may be less than within it, sales figures and the number of translations of his work, as well as recent global film releases, suggest that his works are still well received. In a simple survey of 83 teachers of English from Norway (grades 1–10) attending short courses at the Norwegian Study Centre, University of York, in January and February 2018, 55% (N=46) said they had used some Dahl in their English teaching, with the percentage rising to 73% (N=61) when asked if they had used Dahl in English and/or Norwegian. Mostly they had used *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda* and/or *the Witches* with students in grades 5–9 (ages 10–15).

The BFG (1982[2013]) was one of Dahl's favourite stories and charts the unlikely friendship of a young orphan girl, Sophie, and the BFG, and their adventures in Giant Country and London, in which they seek to overcome a group of man-eating giants. The story presents a major challenge to its readers as it makes use of a number of humorous neologisms (new words) which Dahl invents in order to delight and entertain his readers as well as to enhance the other-worldliness of his theme: that this is a story of giants (and humans). Whilst we are most likely to find such neologisms in fiction, they are also frequently found in written media texts, like newspapers and blogs, as well as in speech. The strategies which neologisms allow readers to focus upon (see further below), are also useful in dealing with *any* unfamiliar word, including in expository or non-fiction texts.

In using these neologisms, collectively known in the case of Dahl's works as *gobblefunk*, Dahl is arguably working in the well-established "nonsense language" tradition of British children's literature which dates back at least to Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (see Andersen, 1950; Malcolm, 1997; Stewart, 1979; Tigges, 1988 for further details of this tradition). Learners will already have some familiarity with this tradition through British nursery rhymes encountered early in their schooling, but the vocabulary will be new to all. Gobblefunk words therefore present comprehension challenges of the kinds discussed in Koda (2007) and Kuo and Anderson (2006) and hence represent a good opportunity for metacognitive and metalinguistic development and discussion in a classroom as will be illustrated below. In particular, gobblefunk presents a good opportunity for readers to be learners and practise and develop strategies for coping with gaps in word knowledge which might otherwise cause comprehension failure. This is in keeping with the idea that it is good to give students texts which require planful strategies, not just automated skills (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; Ericsson & Simon, 1993).

The Extract and the possible results in a Classroom

The following is an extract from Chapter 8 "Snozzcumbers" (Dahl, 1982[2013], p. 42). There are a number of challenging words in this extract as shown in *italics*, some of which will be discussed below.

"Here is the *repulsant snozzcumber!*" cried the BFG, waving it about. "I *squoggle* it! I *mispise* it! I *dispunge* it! But because I is refusing to *gobble up human beans* like the other giants, I must spend my life *guzzling up icky-poo snozzcumbers* instead. If I don't, I will be nothing but *skin and groans*."

Upon being presented with Chapter 8, readers are immediately challenged by its title: *snozzcumbers*. Since this is not a text aimed at either children beginning to read or beginning to learn English, it is most likely that the challenge will not be one of phonological decoding and that most will arrive at a pronunciation of /snɒzkʌmbə/. The problem is that this is a word created for this text and hence it cannot simply be retrieved from the mental lexicon. The metacognitively aware reader will firstly decide whether or not attention and resources need to be devoted to establishing the meaning of this word and if so, will make a guess (inference) about the meaning of this word using one or more of the strategies listed below. The most successful readers will likely be the ones with the ability to utilise the most strategies, and to continually monitor and review their inferences in the light of further evidence as they continue to read (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Pressley & Gaskins, 2006).

- Use any nearby illustrations. Upon seeing Quentin Blake's illustrations in this chapter, the reader might guess that it is some kind of large, knobbly, striped fruit or vegetable.
- Make a guess based upon their understanding of the text to that point.
- Skim read ahead to see if a definition is presented or if further information is given.

In addition, the reader will rely upon using (meta)linguistic knowledge:

- *Phonological*: it comprises lots of suspiciously sibilant sounds: /s/ and /z/ and based on sound symbolism (phonaesthesia) a reader might guess that this is a word which has negative connotations.
- *Syntactical*: it occurs as a word on its own to name a chapter = most likely a noun.
- *Morphological*: it ends in an <-s> so is possibly a count noun = a name of something.
- *Lexical*: it appears to be a blend of snozz+cumber. Relying on memory / existing word-knowledge, a reader might infer that *cumber* is from *cucumber* and that *snozz* is something related to the nose as it is similar to the word *snot* (in fact it is likely Dahl used US slang *schnozz* 'nose', 'nostril'). If the reader has come across blends or portmanteau words previously, they might know that these words take some of their meaning from both words and hence they could hypothesise that this is a kind of smelly and/or slimy fruit. In fact, tasks involved in making and identifying blends are quick for a teacher to make and often bring fun and enjoyment with language into a classroom. Some simple illustrative tasks of this nature are provided in Figure 3. Completing such tasks raises awareness of how words are formed and how meaning is established in such contexts, making it more likely that a reader might be able to recognise them in future texts. Furthermore, it seems likely that such awareness also feeds into the way children use words in their own writing. The relationship between good reading and good writing is discussed in, for example, Blair (2013).

A small scale pilot study of 10 eight- and nine-year old girls with L1 English, was conducted in order to test the effectiveness of the tasks in Figure 3. Following the exercises, the girls completed a short survey in which they were asked to evaluate the tasks. They reported that they "liked trying to crack the code", "found it fun to play with words" and "I feel more confident that I know what the strange words mean because I can work them out". When presented a week later with a different, previously unseen passage from *The BFG*, the girls were all able to identify several new blends, explain how they were made, and make accurate inferences about the meanings of those words. The next stage will be to try to provide further and more robust empirical backing for the effectiveness of these kinds of tasks with learners in the UK and Scandinavia.

Task 1
Some examples of blended words from Roald Dahl have been provided in the following table. In pairs, talk about what you think the meaning of each neologism might be. What did you do to guess the meaning?

Word 1	+	Word 2	=	Neologism
Horrible	+	Disgust	=	Horrigust
Wiggly	+	English	=	Wigglish
Disgusting	+	Dangerous	=	Disgusturous

Task 2
Below are some words formed via blending from recent UK newspapers. Can you:

- (1) work out which two words have been blended together to make the neologism and fill in the blanks in the table below?
- (2) guess what the meaning of the neologism might be? Which parts of meaning are kept and which parts are lost for each of the two words used in the blend?

Neologism	=	Word 1	+	Word 2	Meaning
Jeggings	=	Jeans	+	leggings	Tight trousers which look like jeans but don't have any pockets
Irritainment	=		+		
Smiggle	=		+		

Task 3
Can you make up your own blended words to share with others in the class?

Word 1	+	Word 2	=	Neologism
Zebra	+	Elephant	=	Zebphant

Figure 3. Example tasks to promote creating and understanding blended words.

All of the strategies discussed above can be modelled and practised in the classroom with the right kind of scaffolding. For example, with the given extract, students can be asked to read and underline any words which they think Dahl created. This encourages readers to monitor their reading and recognise potential problems for comprehension, without the pressure or embarrassment of acknowledging that they do not know the words and/or their meanings. Any number of follow-up tasks to this underlining task can encourage readers to then devote further resources to them. For example:

- (1) Can the reader divide unfamiliar/new words into different parts of speech?

Knowing the part of speech helps us to work out where a word fits into a sentence, which can help to begin to establish meaning. Strategic readers might use morphological and/or syntactic clues to help to work out the part of speech. For morphology: certain affixes are used more frequently with certain categories of words, and for syntax readers can look at where a word occurs in a sentence and also what other words it occurs with. For example, a student might not know the words *gobble (up)* or *guzzling (up)* even though these are not some of Dahl's

gobblefunk words and they exist in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Readers with some training/practice in being metalinguistically aware might, however, be able to recognise that these words are both verbs since *gobble* occurs after an infinitival *to* and *guzzling* ends in an <-ing> which is often (but not always) a verbal suffix. Further, both words seem to take an object [*human beans*] and [*icky poo snozzcumbers*]. Finally, *guzzling* occurs between the subject and object, making it most likely a verb on the basis of English sentence structures and hence some kind of action (in this case, both are verbs which refer to eating).

- (2) Can the reader use existing linguistic knowledge to guess some or all of the meaning of the words?

Morphology

Consider the words *mispise* and *dispunge*. The prefix <mis-> is originally a Germanic prefix with the main meaning of ‘amiss, wrong(ly), or bad(ly)’, and it is found in words like *mistake*, *miscount* and *misspell*. <dis-> is originally a Latin prefix which is now found in many English words. The main function of this prefix is to signal that something goes in the opposite direction (it reverses something), e.g. *discomfort*, *discontent*, *discontinue*, *disarm*, *disrobe*. Since <dis-> reverses something it is often associated with words which have a negative connotation, which is also true for <mis->. On the basis of this information, a reader could therefore hypothesise that *mispise* and *dispunge* are not positive words. Building on this, lesson plans in “The BFG Phizzwizzing Lesson Plans” (2017) and “The BFG Lesson Plans” (2018) suggest that readers/learners fill in a worksheet guessing whether words have positive or negative meanings. This can be further adapted so that more advanced learners fill in a sheet which also divides words up not only via broad meaning, but also via part of speech.

There is evidence that this kind of morphological training/awareness helps with reading comprehension, particularly in relation to establishing meaning of unknown words (Brinchmann, Hjetland, & Lyster, 2016; Cunningham & Carroll, 2013; Deacon & Kirby, 2004; Lee, 2011; Lyster, Lervåg, & Hulme, 2016) and that it is also linked to reading ability (Carlisle, 2000; Kirby, Deacon, Bowers, Izenberg, Wade-Woolley, & Parrila, 2012; Nunes & Bryant, 2007; Singson, Mahony, & Mann, 2000). The link between morphology and meaning (semantics) is shown diagrammatically in Figure 4. English morphology should, however, always be used with caution due to its irregular nature (compare *casual* and *casualty*) and hence readers must always be strategic and flexible in their use of potential sources of information about words.

Figure 4. The role of morphology in the identification of complex words (Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2011, p. 458)

Existing vocabulary

Whilst now obsolete, the word *dispunge* is found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with two meanings: (1) *to wipe out, blot out, delete* and (2) *to discharge or pour down as from a squeezed sponge*. The latter is used by Shakespeare and is etymologically made up of the Latin prefix *dis* and the verb *sponge* meaning *to wipe or rub with a wet sponge*.

A reader might already know the noun *sponge* and be able to recognise that in this word it is used as a verb given its position in the sentence which follows the most usual SVO order of English:

I	dispunge	it
Subject	Verb	Object

However, it seems more likely that Dahl intended to exchange prefixes from one negative one to a different negative one. Under this reading, *dispunge* is likely a play on the word *expunge* which has a closer meaning to sense (1). *Expunge* comes from the prefix <ex-> meaning 'out' and Latin *pungĕre* 'to prick' and has the modern meaning of to 'strike out, blot out, erase, omit or even to destroy or put an end to'. Swapping prefixes certainly explains *mispise*; a change of prefix from <de-> in *despise* to an alternative with a similar meaning <mis->.

Hence, we can see from these examples that readers who have greater knowledge of affixes would, in theory, be able to perform better in word-recognition and reading comprehension, evidence for which has been provided in previous studies (Carlisle, 2000, 2003; Cunningham, Perry, & Stanovich,

2001; Deacon & Kirby, 2004; Singson, Mahony, & Mann, 2000). Recent research indicates that this is true for L2 learners of English as well as L1 learners (Ginsberg, Honda, & O'Neil, 2011; Kuo & Anderson, 2006; Ramirez, Chen, Geva, & Kiefer, 2010).

In sum, to assign meaning to these two words, the metalinguistically aware reader can make use of:

- Knowledge of word formation and how this affects meaning by applying information about prefixes. Many words can be worked out on the basis of their component parts.
- Existing knowledge of words such as *despise*, *sponge*, *expunge*. In using existing knowledge, we might suppose that linguistics interacts with cognition (unless we subscribe to the idea that language is stored and used from a separate part of the brain).
- Syntactic knowledge to recognise that these words are transitive verbs and hence part of an action performed by the subject (in these cases the pronoun *I*) to the object (in these cases the pronoun *it*). By using further syntactic knowledge the reader can ascertain that *I* = *The BFG* and *it* = *the snozzcumber*.

To support this metalinguistic awareness, a reader might also make use of contextual information as an additional level of information (Perfetti, 1994, 1999; Perfetti & Hart, 2001). It is clear from the fact that the BFG is crying and waving the snozzcumber about that he is emotional, and with other words like *icky-poo* and *repulsant* close by the most likely inference is that the BFG is in some way unhappy.

(3) Do words have other possible meanings?

One of the challenges when reading is that words can have multiple meanings (polysemy) and that words can sometimes sound the same but be spelled differently (homonyms). This is also a challenge during vocabulary acquisition (e.g. see Cameron, 2001; Redman, 1997; Schmitt, 2000; Thornbury, 2002). Authors, such as Dahl, make use of this with language play. The metacognitively aware reader might consider the purpose of the author in using such language: often it is for the sake of comparison or humorous or dramatic effect. Therefore, studying language play can bring fun and humour into the classroom as well as promote metalinguistic awareness and hence metacognitive awareness.

In the provided extract, with *human beans* Dahl plays on the near homophony of two words: *being* (UK /'bi:ɪŋ/ and U.S. /'bɪŋ/) versus *bean* (UK /bi:n/ U.S. /bɪn/). The humour here lies in the fact that this is about eating and *beans* are something which can be eaten whilst *being* expresses that something exists.

In the case of the malapropism, *skin and groans*, Dahl presents an opportunity for readers/learners to think of words which sound similar to each other: here *groans* is misused in place of the similar sounding noun *bones*.

Figurative language, such as malapropisms, but also idioms, spoonerisms, similes, metaphors, hyperbole and personification involve a word or phrase which does not have its normal, everyday, literal meaning, meaning it can be tricky to comprehend.

Discussion

The provided extract provides a dramatic example of the metalinguistic giant in action because of the large amount of the unfamiliar, but the same strategies and skills can be practised with different texts at different stages in a learner's/reader's life. To support metalinguistic awareness, a teacher therefore might use a passage such as the one presented and ask learners/readers to perform seemingly simple tasks:

- Underline/identify difficult words.
- Think about other known words which are similar to the difficult words.
- Break the words down to try to recognise bits of morphology / identify word formation techniques. Elsewhere in the BFG, there are opportunities to look at other word formation techniques such as reduplication *ucky-mucky*, infixation *scrumdiddlyumptious*, spoonerisms *catasterous disastrophe*, compounding *butcherboy*, and the effects of alliteration *maidmasher*.
- Work out the part of speech.
- Consider whether there are other possible meanings of that word.
- Ask readers to think about phonaesthesia. This can be done via tasks such as those in “Using the BFG in the Classroom” (2017) where students are asked to divide sounds into glorious sounds and terrible sounds and explain their thinking.

Research provides evidence of a connection for improved reading comprehension as metalinguistic awareness develops (Cain, 2007; Kuo & Anderson, 2006; Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006; Tong, Deacon, Kirby, Cain, & Parrila, 2011; Zipke, 2007, 2011; Zipke, Ehri, & Cairns, 2009), but there is scope for further research in this direction, particularly in L2 English settings or with languages other than English.

In addition, focus on the language in this fashion will help with word-recognition skills and vocabulary growth (Berninger, Abbott, Nagy, & Carlisle, 2010; Bowers & Kirby, 2010; Brinchmann, Hjetland, & Lyster, 2016; DeVries, 2015; Nagy, 2007; Wagner, Muse, & Tannenbaum, 2007). This reciprocal relationship between reading comprehension and the knowledge and acquisition of vocabulary has been recognised in L1 contexts by, for example, Carver (2003) and Wagner, Muse and Tannenbaum (2007), and in L2 contexts by, for example, Laufer (1997) and Verhoeven (2000). Other researchers have shown other effects, including on spelling accuracy (Lee, 2011; Nunes, Bryant, &

Bindman, 2006), with second language learning (Birketveit & Rimmereide, 2012), and that learning the orthographic features of morphemes may also support the development of decoding abilities (Carlisle & Goodwin, 2013).

Conclusion

Metalinguistic awareness is like a big friendly giant. It includes increased awareness of phonemes, syllables, and rhymes, of meaning-bearing morphemes, words, and phrases, of syntax, and of denotations, connotations, and lexical ambiguities, of homonyms, synonyms, and antonyms, of slang, dialect, and jargon, of academic language and figurative devices like metaphor, idioms, and hyperbole, and more. Awareness of all these things helps to ensure comprehension when reading, and provides the reader with options for repair or for making predictions and inferences when comprehension breaks down or is not fully realised. For example, when a reader encounters a new word, they are able to rely on morphological knowledge and awareness in order to attempt to establish meaning by breaking a word down into different morphemes (Brinchman, Hjetland, & Lyster, 2015).

There can be little doubt that raising metalinguistic awareness also feeds and develops a crucial part of a reader's metacognitive reading strategy toolbox (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1993) since there is a link between metalinguistics and metacognition (Koda, 2007) and much of reading concerns linguistic knowledge and skills (Nagy, 2007; Perfetti, 1999). Whilst further empirical evidence is required in English L1 and L2 contexts, as well as in languages other than English, it would seem that effective teaching practices should make use of instruction which promotes metalinguistic awareness as part of a metacognitive toolkit to help with word recognition, vocabulary growth and perhaps most importantly, as *The BFG* helps us, to get (borrowing from *BFG*), "kicksy" comprehension.

About the author

Dr. Beck Sinar is a lecturer at The Norwegian Study Centre, University of York. Her research interests include the socio-cultural history of the English languages and literatures, inter-cultural communication and education, and didactics.

Institutional affiliation: The Norwegian Study Centre, Quantum House, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, UK.

E-mail: beck.sinar@york.ac.uk

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