# A Pilot Study of Language Awareness at the New Zealand Tertiary Level

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on a preliminary investigation of the language awareness of first year students at Massey University. The study was motivated by a desire to construct a profile of the abilities of students in describing and analysing English and other languages. A questionnaire was designed which explores students' language awareness at various levels of language. Findings are presented according to the specific categories of language awareness including syllable structure, stress placement, "parts of speech", and the ability to cite a rule of English. Where appropriate, differences in language awareness between New Zealand educated and Japanese educated students, the two main cohorts, are also presented and discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The impetus for the study was an expressed concern on the part of teachers of language-based courses (foreign languages, writing programmes, linguistics courses) about students' seemingly scant knowledge of language structure on entry to university courses. Apart from the concern which we, the authors, have felt about these matters, identical or similar concerns have been expressed to us by colleagues from a variety of programmes in our university. The issues have also found their way into the media. In a recent series of articles in the *New Zealand Education Review*, for example, it was argued by tertiary teachers that students do not know the structure of their mother tongue and that the absence of this important educational building block detracts from their progress in language-based courses (McLaughlan, 1997; Pilott, 1997). The concerns expressed by tertiary teachers in New Zealand are real and recurring and are too consistent to be dismissed as idiosyncratic ramblings. At the same time, one should not simply accept these expressions at their face value as proof that their students are actually lacking in the knowledge. It may be, after all, that students have the required knowledge, but the teachers are expressing concern as part of a persistent 'complaint tradition' which has accompanied the demise of traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar in schools (cf. Milroy and Milroy, 1985). That is to say, the expressions of concern may reflect nostalgia for past practice in the teaching of language and may be intended more as a public disavowal of current practice, rather than reflecting any serious gap in students' knowledge of language structure or any real gap between teacher expectations and learner knowledge.

A much needed contribution to the debate about such issues would be empirical evidence on student language knowledge. No such baseline data is available in the New Zealand context, though empirically based studies have been carried out elsewhere. In Britain, Bloor (1986) carried out a survey which revealed low levels of metalinguistic knowledge among tertiary students, even for "linguists". Steel and Alderson's (1994) study of learners of French and linguistics concluded that "any instruction that assumed that first year undergraduates knew not much more than 'verb' and 'noun' and possibly 'adjective' would cause students difficulties" (p. 96). At the University of Melbourne's School of Languages, the language awareness of students of Italian, Chinese and French was assessed through a series of tests: a Metalinguistic Assessment Test, a sample from the Modern Language Aptitude Test and an Inductive Language Learning Test. The researchers conclude from their findings that "students have a serious lacunae in their knowledge about language, whether explicit (in the sense of their ability to name or recognise parts of speech or formulate rules about grammar) or implicit (i.e. in terms of their sensitivity to grammatical patterns and their ability to draw inferences)" (Davies, Elder, Hajek, Manwaring and Warren, 1997, p. 12).

This paper extends these studies by focusing attention on the New Zealand context. It addresses the question: What do students understand about language as they enter tertiary study in New Zealand? It aims to provide some initial insights into the nature and scope of language awareness of such students through a pilot study at one tertiary institution. Note that our paper does not address the polemic surrounding the study of language within education, a polemic relating usually to the question of how effective formal grammar instruction is with respect to development of speaking and writing skills. Our interest in students' language awareness arises more immediately out of a desire to better understand the abilities of our students, rather than to defend or attack formal grammar instruction.

### THE STUDY
The subjects for the study of language awareness were students in a first year linguistics paper at Massey University. Almost all students in this paper are in their first semester of university studies. The total number of students who participated in the study was 87. Of these, 61 are New Zealand educated and 11 are Japanese educated. The remaining overseas educated students indicated a variety of backgrounds (Singapore, Thailand, Great Britain, Australia, Canada). Seven students chose not to participate in the study.

Language awareness encompasses many aspects of language: discourse, genre, pragmatics, lexis, phonology etc. For the purposes of this study, language awareness is sampled at the level of word- and sentence-structure, rule knowledge and knowledge of a language other than English. More specifically it is operationalised as a knowledge of syllable structure, stress

placement, "parts of speech", and the ability to cite a rule, all relating to English. In addition, language awareness of another language is operationalised as the ability to cite a rule and to give a sentence, identifying subject and object.

We would like to emphasise that the way in which language awareness is investigated in this study does not correspond to the paradigms generally used in an introductory linguistic analysis course. Furthermore the kinds of questions which are asked of students should not be interpreted as the sum and substance of essential language awareness. Instead the approach is one means of assessing language awareness according to commonly used terminology in the public domain, terminology which is relevant to foreign language courses, introductory writing courses and so on at the tertiary level. We leave aside here the whole issue of whether all the terms and concepts of "school grammar" are really defensible from a contemporary linguistic viewpoint.

It should be acknowledged that there is some controversy within linguistics about the definitional basis and validity of some of these terms. Of particular concern to linguists is the cross-linguistic relevance and validity of the traditional parts of speech and whether they are justified for languages other than Latin and Greek (cf. Schachter, 1985 and Anward, Moravcsik, and Stassen, 1997 for recent statements from a linguistic perspective concerning the parts of speech). Scholarly linguistic discussions of these terms, however, have not dissuaded non-linguists (nor even linguists!) from continuing to make use of such terms, and such terms continue to play an important part in publications about language and languages.

The tools of enquiry used to investigate language awareness of university students have been various and include tests of language aptitude (Steel and Alderson, 1994), metalinguistic knowledge (Bloor, 1986), grammatical accuracy in a foreign language (Steel and Alderson, 1994), an inductive language learning test (Davies *et al.*, 1997) and variations on these. To investigate language awareness among tertiary students in the context of the present study a "Questionnaire about Language" was constructed. Six questions probed the language awareness of students by asking them to analyse data, to formulate rules and cite and analyse a non-English sentence. In the final section students were asked to provide background information on themselves (e.g. educational background). It was emphasised that the survey was not a test for the course and that completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. Students were given 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

## RESULTS OF QUESTIONNAIRE
This section presents findings relating to language awareness according to the categories of: knowledge of syllable structure, stress placement, "parts of speech", and the ability to cite a rule of English, to give a sentence in

another language identifying subject and object, and finally the ability to cite a rule of another language. Where appropriate, differences in language awareness between New Zealand educated and Japanese educated students, the two main cohorts, are also presented.

### Syllable counting

Students were asked to identify the number of syllables in: *meeting* (2 syllables); *kite* (1 syllable); *kites* (1 syllable); *indicative* (4 syllables). The items *kite* and *kites* require students to distinguish between spoken and written forms of English, since the letter *e* in these words is a 'silent' letter and does not contribute to the syllable count. In addition, *kites* requires students to distinguish between phonological structure (= 1 syllable) and morphological structure (= 2 morphemes, i.e. noun + plural suffix). Table 1 summarises the results. Total correct response for both NZ and Japanese students are shown and are expressed also as a percentage of correct response with respect to the total number in the NZ or Japanese group. Both NZ and Japanese groups performed best on the simplest of the test items, *meeting*. Even so, three NZ students were unable to calculate the number of syllables in this word correctly. Note that the NZ students performed in a relatively consistent way, with at least 84% of the group answering the syllable-counting questions correctly. The performance of the Japanese students, on the other hand, deteriorates sharply in the case of the potentially more confusing items *kite*, *kites*, and *indicative*. It is particularly interesting to note that only about one third of the Japanese group were able

Table 1. Results for NZ and Japanese groups on syllable-counting tasks for four words.

|  | *meeting* | *kite* | *kites* | *indicative* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| NZ | 58 | 53 | 51 | 53 |
| (n = 61) | **95%** | **87%** | **84%** | **87%** |
| Japanese | 11 | 8 | 4 | 3 |
| (n = 11) | **100%** | **73%** | **36%** | **27%** |

to appreciate that *kites* had just one syllable, even though all the Japanese students correctly identified the two syllables of *meeting*.

### Placement of stress

Students were asked to underline the syllable which has the main stress in: *actor*; *believe*; *accomplish*; *caravan*. Here, we are mainly interested in whether a student could identify which vowel carries the main stress, rather than whether or not the student knows the exact boundaries of the syllables. In marking the answers for this question, therefore, we accepted an underlining as correct if it included the stressed vowel letter regardless of which flanking consonants were also included in the syllable. But we

Table 2. Results for NZ and Japanese groups on stress-placement tasks for four words

|  | actor | believe | accomplish | caravan |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| NZ (n = 61) | 48 **79%** | 46 **75%** | 43 **70%** | 29 **48%** |
| Japanese (n = 11) | 11 **100%** | 9 **82%** | 8 **73%** | 9 **82%** |

marked as incorrect underlinings which extended across more than one syllable or included silent vowel letters. The results are given in Table 2.

As with the preceding question, both NZ and Japanese groups performed best on the same item, here the placement of stress in *actor*. Both groups drop in performance on the remaining items. Note that only 48% of the NZ students were able to correctly identify initial syllable stress in *caravan*, whereas a full 82% of the Japanese students were able to do this. The difficulty in identifying primary stress for *caravan* may be due to the fact that the spelling offers no clue to stress; each vowel is spelled with the same letter *a* and each *a* has exactly one preceding consonant and one preceding vowel. Thus, identifying the stressed vowel in this word is a more exacting task and better discriminates between those guessing what the word *stress* in the question might mean and those who have been taught explicitly about stress.

### Parts of speech
Students were asked to identify examples of parts of speech in the following passage:

> *After the war some nations had rewritten their political constitutions to make them more democratic. Politically speaking, this had become necessary. Some thought governments were acting wisely, but everyone feared a violent revolution.*

The parts of speech tested and model answers to this question are given in Table 3. "Subject" and "object" have a somewhat different status to the other terms and assume a particular grammatical analysis of the whole clause. For this reason, they are not usually referred to as "parts of speech", but were so labelled for the sake of convenience in this study. A breakdown of results is given in Table 4. For the NZ group, the noun category stands out as the best known, with 75% of the group answering this question correctly. The noun category is, in fact, the only parts-of-speech category which could be correctly identified by a majority of the NZ group.

The other categories could not be identified by more than 31% of the NZ group, and five of the categories, including subject and object, could only be identified by less than 20% of the NZ group. The Japanese group consistently outperforms the NZ group in identifying every part of speech, eg 100% of the Japanese students were able to identify the subject of a clause,

TABLE 3 Parts of speech and examples

| | |
|---|---|
| noun | *war, nations, constitutions, governments, revolution* |
| preposition | *after, to* (strictly speaking an infinitival marker in this passage, but allowed as a preposition here) |
| article | *the, a* |
| auxiliary verb | *had, were* |
| adverb | *politically, wisely* |
| adjective | *political, democratic, violent* |
| past participle | *rewritten, become* |
| subject | *(some) nations, this, some, governments, everyone* |
| object | *(their political) constitutions, them, (a violent) revolution* |

TABLE 4 Results for NZ and Japanese groups on parts-of-speech tasks

| | NZ (n = 61) | | Japanese (n = 11) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Noun | 46 | 75% | 10 | 91% |
| Adjective | 19 | 31% | 9 | 82% |
| Preposition | 12 | 20% | 11 | 100% |
| Adverb | 12 | 20% | 8 | 73% |
| Subject | 10 | 16% | 10 | 91% |
| Object | 7 | 11% | 8 | 73% |
| Article | 7 | 11% | 10 | 91% |
| Auxiliary verb | 6 | 10% | 5 | 45% |
| Past participle | 6 | 10% | 3 | 27% |

whereas only 16% of the NZ students were able to do so. A majority of Japanese students gave correct answers for all the categories except two: auxiliary verb and past participle. Precisely these two categories created

the most difficulty for the NZ students as well.

### Rule of English grammar

This question explores the ability of students to formulate a rule of English grammar, whether it be prescriptive ("Never end a sentence with a preposition") or descriptive ("The verb agrees with the subject in number and person"). Forty NZ students (out of 61) offered what they considered a rule of English grammar. All the responses are given in Table 5, subgrouped according to topic. The most striking fact about these responses is that a majority of them (29 out of 40) quoted a rule of English spelling or punctuation, rather than a rule of grammar as such. Nineteen of the NZ students (almost half of the NZ students who attempted this question) cited the *same* rule, or some variant of it: "*i* before *e*, except after *c*". The syntax/

Table 5. 'Rules of English grammar', as given by NZ students

| | |
|---|---|
| (a) Spelling/ Punctuation: | *i* before *e* except after *c*. (17) |
| | *i* before *e* except after *c* in most cases. (2) |
| | *i* after *e*, except before *c*; when the sound is ei, try *i*. (sic) |
| | Commas are used when there is a natural pause. |
| | Put an ' where a letter has been left out, eg *don't -> do not*. |
| | A new sentence begins with a capital letter. (4) |
| | Always have a capital letter when you start a new sentence. |
| | Capital letter at the start of a sentence and for peoples' names. |
| | To illustrate someone speaking use " " to illustrate the beginning and ending of the spoken passage. |
| (b) Syntax/ Morphology: | Verb comes before adverb? My best guess. |
| | You should never start a sentence with the word *because*. |
| | S+V+O+C |
| | Use complete sentences. |
| | Never say *Joe and me*, say *Joe and I*. |
| | When speaking about oneself along with others, *I* is used, rather than *me*, and always at the end of the list of people eg. *Tom, Dick and I*. |
| | In speaking about a plural, one should not say *there's*. |
| | Noun phrases can be substituted by an adverb (sic) ie *it* in place of *a cow* |
| (c) Definitions: | A verb is a doing word. |
| | An adjective describes a noun. |
| ??? | Remember if a word is past, present, future tense. |

morphology responses, 8 (13%) in all, included a variety of statements. A couple of students offered semantically based definitions of parts of speech and one student cautioned that one must remember if a word (verb?) is past, present, or future tense. The seven Japanese students' responses are shown in Table 6. Note that, unlike the NZ responses, there are no state-

Table 6. 'Rules of English grammar', as given by Japanese students

| Word order: | S+V+O (3) |
| --- | --- |
| | S->V->O->C; S->V->C->O; prepositions are put in front of nouns. |
| | SV; SVO; SVOC; SVC |
| | S+V; S+V+C, S+V+O, S+V+O+O, S+V+O+C |
| | SV; SVC; SVO; SV IO DO; SVOC |
| | SVOC |
| | A verb comes after a noun. |

ments about spelling or punctuation; nor are there any definitions of parts of speech. Indeed, there is considerable agreement on the grammatical topic described, namely the relative order of subject, verb, object etc. Even the abbreviatory conventions (S, V, O etc) are uniformly adhered to.

### Non-English sentence

Students were asked to write a grammatically correct sentence in a language other than English. The question was phrased to elicit (a) a whole sentence, (b) a grammatically correct expression, and (c) a structure including both a subject and object. Short sentences such as

> *I patu ia i te kurii*. 'She/he hit the dog.' (Maori)
> *Je t'aime*. 'I love you.' (French)
> *Wo kan ni*. 'I see you.' (Mandarin, tones omitted)

would be judged as acceptable but not stock phrases such as *Kia ora, Bonjour, Auf Wiedersehen* etc. This question produced few grammatical sentences. Some students gave sentences containing a copula or equative kind of structure, corresponding to sentences such as *I am sad, She is pretty, My name is Jane* etc. which did not fill the requirement of containing a subject and object. We have included in Table 8 all grammatically correct responses containing a subject and object. Of the group of 61 NZ students, only three students (5%) were able to answer the question in a fully correct way. There were varying degrees of approximation to a correct answer, as shown in Table 7. The Japanese students can be safely assumed to be able to produce the kinds of sentences asked for, but in fact, of the 11 Japanese students, only four wrote anything in answer to this question. One wrote a string of English words (*I yesterday with my sister by train to Tokyo went*); one wrote a Chinese equative sentence meaning "I am a Japanese"; one wrote a Japanese equative sentence meaning "This is a pen"; and only one

Table 7. NZ students' (correct) examples of a transitive sentence in a language other than English.

| | |
|---|---|
| Transitive, grammatically correct, and parsed: | Ich sehe ihn. 'I see him.' (German)<br>Je déteste le roi. 'I hate the king.' (French)<br>Juan corre el perro. 'Juan runs the dog.' (Spanish) |
| Transitive, grammatically correct, but not fully parsed: | Wo meiyou dai yusan. 'I didn't bring an umbrella.' (Mandarin) |
| Transitive, grammatically correct, but not parsed: | E takaro ana a Jessica i te netiparo. 'Jessica is playing netball.' (Maori) |
| Transitive, grammatically correct, wrongly parsed: | Watashi wa Nihongo $o_{OBJ}$ benkyoo shite$_{SUBJ}$ imasu. 'I am studying Japanese.' (Japanese) |

wrote a Japanese transitive sentence with subject and object indicated, meaning "I did not take breakfast this morning".

### Non-English grammar rule
The question here was the foreign language counterpart to the question about an English grammar rule given earlier. The complete set of responses is shown in Table 8, subgrouped according to the language being described. The corresponding responses from the Japanese group are given in Table 9.

Table 8. 'Rules of grammar for a language other than English', as given by NZ students.

| | |
|---|---|
| Japanese: | The verb come (sic) at the end of the sentence followed by tence (sic).<br>S(ubject) T(ime) P(lace) O(bject) V(erb)<br>Japanese has no feminine or masculine forms to a verb.<br>The object belonging to the subject goes after the subject in the sentence.<br>'masu' form of verbs is used in formal sentences in Japanese. |
| German: | The verb goes to the end of the clause.<br>In German I think one must write a comma between clauses.<br>Most plurals end in '-en'. |
| French: | Use 'les' when referring to plural objects in French. |
| Spanish: | In spanish (sic) punctuate only what is rqd, whereas english (sic) would punctuate at end of sentence. |

Table 9. 'Rules of grammar for a language other than English', as given by Japanese students.

| Japanese: | A verb comes in (sic) the end of a sentence. |
|---|---|
| | Modifier comes before the verb in Japanese. |
| | Subject Time Place Object Verb |
| | SOV |

## DISCUSSION

The main part of this questionnaire concerned English grammar and English parts of speech - the kind of subject matter which is traditionally understood as constituting "school grammar". The NZ educated group was clearly unequipped to deal with this subject matter. Of the nine specific parts of speech tested in Question 3, only one part of speech was identified correctly by a majority of this group, namely the noun category; a minority of the NZ group was able to identify the other parts of speech and sometimes this was a small minority, eg only 11% were able to identify a syntactic object. Many of the questions relating to parts of speech were not attempted by the NZ group. It should be noted that the category of verb was omitted from the parts of speech tested here and it may be that, like noun, the verb category would have been identified correctly by a majority. Similar results were obtained from Question 4, where students were asked to state a rule of English grammar. Only 13% of the NZ group were able to state anything like a rule of English grammar. Of the NZ educated students who attempted to answer this question, the majority could do no better than state a rule of spelling or punctuation. As far as knowledge and understanding of grammatical terms and rules are concerned, then, the overwhelming majority of the NZ group present a picture of scant knowledge beyond the category of noun. A parallel in, say, numeracy skills would be if students in a first year mathematics class at university could understand the word *number* and be able to give an example of a number, but ignorant of odd versus even numbers, fractions, decimals, percentages etc.

No great differences in terms of gender and age were noted, though the under 20's in our study slightly outperformed the other age group considered, the 20-30 year olds. This suggests that the performance may be related to how recently one has been to school and whatever knowledge one has of parts of speech quickly disappears after one has left school. Note, though, that we did not have a large enough sample of older age students and one might have obtained quite different results from, say, the over 60's and over 70's.

The NZ group performed more successfully on the syllable counting and stress placement tasks. In particular, the NZ educated students were not unduly distracted by silent letters or additional vowel-less suffixes. Being able to count syllables and identify stress would seem to require less for-

mal learning than the parts of speech and so the better performance of the NZ students here may reflect just their native speaker feel for the language rather than the result of formal learning. The result relating to *caravan* would seem to support the view that the identification of stress is not an activity that these students have really been exposed to.

Given the results of the parts of speech questions for English, it would be expected that Question 5, asking students to write a grammatically correct transitive sentence in a language other than English, with subject and object indicated, would present severe problems. Indeed, only 5% of the NZ group were able to do this. Since the very notions of subject and object pose such problems for the NZ group, such a question could not be seriously attempted except by a very small minority. Although the sample of correct responses is extremely small, one might note that the three correct responses were from the major European languages (French, German, Spanish) suggesting that the clausal structure of these languages is easier for NZ educated students to comprehend and analyse, compared with non-Indo-European languages. Interestingly, though, when it comes to stating rules of grammar for a language other than English more students stated a rule of Japanese grammar than for any other language.

Obviously, the Japanese educated students prepare for English higher education in a very different way, compared with the NZ educated group. All the Japanese students showed clear evidence of having learned about English grammar with impressive skills in identifying most parts of speech. The cross-group comparisons also reveal some consistency in performance, despite some of the dramatic differences between the two groups studied. With respect to the parts of speech, the noun category is a relatively easily identified part of speech, whereas auxiliary verb and past participle cause the most problems for both groups. Most of the Japanese group were also able to state a rule of English grammar. It was noticeable that every statement concerned word order and that most of these statements employed similar abbreviatory conventions in stating the rules, suggesting a uniformity in the way the students had been taught English grammar. The performance of the Japanese group with respect to syllable counting is interesting. 100% of the group correctly identified the 2 syllables of the easiest word (thereby performing even better than the NZ group), but on the trickier words the Japanese group was outperformed by the NZ group. The placement of stress, on the other hand, did not cause any serious problems for the Japanese group.

When it comes to illustrating points with a language other than English, one might expect that the Japanese educated group, who were all native speakers of Japanese would excel. However, this is not the case. Most of the Japanese students chose not to write anything at all when asked to write a sentence, in a language other than English, containing a subject and object. This is interesting in itself and, although the sample is small, could

suggest a reticence and shyness about writing their own language in the context of an English-language questionnaire, class, or course. In fact, only one Japanese student correctly answered this question. The Japanese group was more forthcoming with a rule of Japanese grammar, but still fewer Japanese were prepared to give a rule of Japanese grammar compared with English grammar. As with English grammar rules, so too with Japanese grammar rules, the content relates to word order. What it may reflect is a lack of consciousness of mother tongue structure.

## CONCLUSION

This study takes place within a prevailing climate of controversy regarding what students know about language, and what it is felt they should know. It contributes something to the current debate by presenting a sample of the language awareness of tertiary students. This has been a pilot study and reveals a need to refine the instrument: for example, the omissions of the category 'verb' meant a gap in our profile of basic language categories. Also, some of the tasks proved far too difficult for the New Zealand educated students, e.g. writing a sentence in a language other than English containing a subject and object. Asking students to translate a sentence with a simple structure such as *The girl saw a cat* or *The woman likes the boy* into another language may produce results which show that students are able to do this kind of translation, even though they lack knowledge of terms like "subject" and "object". In addition, questions can be raised about the representativeness of the Massey pilot study results. A further study should include groups of students at other institutions and in other language-based programmes (e.g. foreign language courses, writing courses).

The data from this pilot study suggests that student language awareness is indeed very minimal and falls far short of the common expectations that tertiary teachers have of their students. The findings are therefore consistent with the Australian and British studies alluded to in the Introduction. A conclusion from the Australian study of Davies *et al.* (1997, p. 12) applies equally well to the New Zealand students surveyed here: "lecturers can take little for granted with regard to their learners' level of grammatical awareness". The concerns expressed by tertiary teachers, in other words, are warranted in so far as the students really do lack the required knowledge. By relying upon terms like "subject", "object", "preposition" etc. as part of explanations about language use, tertiary teachers in New Zealand would appear to be using terminology which is simply not understood by a large proportion of the class or readership. The consequences of this for language-related courses and the instructional material used in such courses are significant since language-related activities at the tertiary level invariably rely upon such terms.

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