

Metalinguistic activity in higher education: thinking about words

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This study investigates the metalinguistic activity of students attending the second year of the Bachelor's degree in Basic Education, which provides the credits required to apply to masters on Pre-school Education (3 to 5 years) and Teaching in 1st and 2nd Cycles of Basic Education (6 to 10 years and 10 to 12 years, respectively). Students were engaged in a multiple-choice quiz which involved the identification of the syntactic categories of words (20 questions, each with 3 possible answers). On the basis of the content analysis of students' collaborative talk, the study aims at: (i) identifying students' conceptions about syntactic categories; (ii) analysing the strategies used to identify the syntactic category of words (morphological, syntactic, semantic criteria); (iii) suggesting instruction guidelines to promote the development of students' syntactic awareness in higher education. Data collected includes audio recording of 30 groups peer-to-peer interaction and quiz scores. The results show that metalinguistic activity emerges at different levels (see Fontich 2016; Camps et al. 2000): *declarative knowledge* is involved, for instance, in the memorization of the intensive and extensive properties of the syntactic categories (see Excerpt (1)), whereas *procedural knowledge* arises in the strategies used to identify the syntactic category of words (see Excerpt (2)). Other variables will be explored in the triangulation of data, such as the quality of the talk (Mercer, 1996; Fernández, Wegerif, Mercer & Rojas-Drummond 2001) and group dynamics (Corcelles & Castelló, 2015).

(1)

S1. In the sequence “*The Fountain of Youth* that I will send you”, the word *that* [...]

S1. The word *that*... wait... do you remember the list [*of Portuguese prepositions*]: a, ante, após, até, com, contra, de, ... *that* is not on that list, right?

S2. No... I think the word *that* is a conjugation ... a demonstrative pronoun...

S1. Wait, just a moment.

S2. I do not think so... because the demonstrative, ... no ... the demonstrative is a word like *ali* [English *there*], isn't it? No... or is it a relative pronoun? Pronoun...

S1. I think it's a conjunction.

(2)

S1. In the sequence “I hope this note can arrive...”, the word *this* is... *I hope this note* ...

S2. It's... a demonstrative determiner.

S1. Ha... wait...

S2. Is it not?

S1. I don't know, wait... haaaa... Yes, I think so.

S2. Yes, because it cannot replace... the noun is *note*...

S1. Yes.

S2. And it is demonstrating, therefore, it is a demonstrative determiner.
S1. Hmmm ... right, OK.

Keywords: metalinguistic activity; higher education; linguistic awareness; collaborative talk

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