Metapragmatic awareness in a third language learner’s game-related discourse

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Metalinguistic awareness and language learning experiences (e.g. through language contact) are widely understood as key factors influencing further language development. Departing from the traditional view of metalinguistic awareness as a cognitive ability, this study is concerned with a multilingual child’s situated metapragmatic discourse, i.e. metalevel signaling and language use that allow participants in interaction to position themselves vis a vis the communicative situation (see Silverstein 1993, Verschueren 1999, Overstreet 2015). More specifically, it analyses emergent metapragmatic discourse that is related to using and learning English as a third language in the child’s interactions within and around a commercially available video game. The 8 year old boy was a bilingual Finnish/Swedish speaker from birth. At the point of data collection he had not received any formal teaching of English at school, but had played English-based computer games in his spare time, been exposed to English through TV and Youtube, and had occasional real-life experiences of contact with English speakers. The data includes video- and audio-recordings of him playing and talking about the game Growtopia. This paper examines two types of situations: the child’s interactions a) with peers (in Finnish and Swedish), and b) with English-speaking adults. The analysis focuses on concrete instances of discourse and features of language that are indicative of the child’s ability to notice, comment on and use English as a third language. The results show that metapragmatic awareness is manifested in different ways and on different levels of language use in the two contexts: in peer interaction it is observable mainly at lexical level (vocabulary choice and explanations, morphological and phonological adaptations), whereas interactions with adults include metapragmatic commentary focusing on grammatical and discourse-level phenomena.

Keywords: L3 learning, game discourse, metapragmatic awareness.