Metalinguistic awareness as a key to learning, and how to research it

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What learning outcomes could grammar teaching have in multilingual Norwegian L1-classrooms? Today the traditionally monolingual classroom, consists of a more heterogeneous group of students where L1-users and L2-users of Norwegian should have the same learning possibilities. In the Norwegian subject curriculum (L1) there are general statements promoting the value of language diversity and multiple language use. In particular there is one objective after first class of Upper Secondary School which states that the students ”should be able to explain grammatical characteristics of Norwegian in comparison with other languages”. This is clearly an objective which requires a multilingual pedagogy. On the other hand literacy has the main focus in the curriculum, and due to this, grammar teaching is often reduced to a purely text linguistic level. Nevertheless, it has been claimed that ”the legitimization of the grammar discipline in the L1 curriculum has moved from language skills to language awareness” (Hertzberg 2008). This ability to think abstractly about language (Bialystok 2001) can support students in analyzing linguistic knowledge and in controlling language processing. Such cognitive benefits can be a valuable skill to perform well in school.

In this presentation I will focus on how metalinguistic awareness as a possible result of grammar teaching, can be a key to language learning and maybe learning in general. There is a potential of meta-knowledge lying at the ground of the mentioned objective of contrastive grammar teaching. It requires a dialectic form of teaching focusing on the insight in others. Metalinguistic awareness is often researched quantitatively, but as I will argue, a qualitative procedure with a following discourse analysis can give an alternative interesting insight to the student’s metalinguistic knowledge. The way they express themselves reveal the level of reflection in a continuum of what Gee (2000/2001, 2011) calls primary Discourses and secondary Discourses.

Keywords: metalinguistic awareness, grammar teaching, multilingualism.