Article

How Much Metalanguage Do Turkish EFL Learners Know?

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Abstract
Given the crucial role of metalanguage in explicit instruction and its widespread use by L2 teachers and textbooks, it is essential to examine the extent of L2 learners' metalinguistic knowledge. Accordingly, the present study aimed to investigate how familiar intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners are with the terminology used in their textbook to describe language, as well as with the processes employed to discuss and analyse language. The study involved 105 Turkish EFL learners. Data were collected through a terminology test consisting of 40 grammar terms drawn from the participants' textbook and a matching test including 30 grammatical structures paired with corresponding meaning-oriented language items also taken from the textbook. The findings indicate that intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners have limited familiarity with the grammatical terminology used in their textbook while showing comparatively greater ability to interpret meaning-oriented descriptions and functional explanations of language use. The results are discussed in light of previous research.

Keywords
Grammatical terminology, meaning-oriented descriptions, explicit instruction, EFL learners

Introduction

A second/foreign language (L2) instructional approach is considered explicit when it involves rule explanations as part of instruction, in which case explicitness is associated with deductive and metalinguistic approaches (e.g., Ellis, 2008), or when learners are encouraged to attend to specific forms and derive metalinguistic generalizations independently, in which case explicitness is associated with explicit induction (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2000; N íDhiorbh áin, 2022). In contrast, instruction is regarded as implicit when it does not involve overt rule explanation or directed attention to specific linguistic forms (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Explicit instruction has been shown to facilitate L2 development by directing learners' attention to relevant form–meaning relationships in input. Since the 1980s, research has increasingly demonstrated that instructional interventions can positively influence L2 development, often indirectly, by enhancing learners' awareness of form, meaning, and use (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Leow, 2018; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). From a cognitive perspective, this line of research has examined the relationship between explicit, declarative knowledge and the procedural knowledge required for real-time language use (DeKeyser, 2015; Ullman, 2015). From a sociocultural perspective, it has also highlighted the role of collaborative engagement with language in facilitating the internalization of linguistic knowledge through interaction among teachers and learners (Duff & Anderson, 2015; Majlesi, 2021; Poehner et al., 2018). In addition, various cognitive and social approaches have

examined the effects of explicit instruction within their respective theoretical frameworks. Cognitive perspectives include usage-based and input-driven approaches (Ellis, 2002) and the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), whereas social perspectives include Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and interactionist approaches (Long, 1996; Mackey, 2012). Although these perspectives differ in their theoretical explanations of how instruction supports L2 learning, a substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated positive effects of explicit instruction. In line with this general tendency in the literature, Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis found that explicit instruction tends to be more effective than implicit instruction, a finding supported by subsequent research (e.g., Ahmadian, 2020; Goo et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2022; Spada & Tomita, 2010). A key distinction in the present study lies between learners' knowledge of grammatical terminology and their functional understanding of language, that is, their ability to interpret and use meaning-oriented explanations of linguistic features.

A central component of explicit instruction is the use of metalanguage, which refers to the technical terminology used to describe linguistic forms and structures. Metalanguage enables instructors to make grammatical features explicit and to guide learners' attention to relevant aspects of language (Basturkmen et al., 2002). It is widely assumed that learners' familiarity with metalanguage may support their understanding of grammatical explanations and contribute to language learning processes (Alderson et al., 1997; Hu, 2010). Consequently, metalinguistic knowledge has been widely investigated in relation to various dimensions of language learning, including grammar development, writing, and reading (Akbulut, 2019; Aydın, 2023; Daffern, 2017; Dong et al., 2020; Gutiérrez, 2013; Tokunaga, 2014). However, existing research has not always clearly differentiated between learners' knowledge of formal grammatical terminology and their ability to engage with functional, meaning-oriented explanations embedded in instructional input.

Metalanguage is also a key component of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which refers to the knowledge required to transform subject matter into forms that are accessible to learners (Shulman, 1987). In language classrooms, teachers use metalanguage both to highlight linguistic forms and to facilitate classroom interaction and explanation (Andrews, 1997; Basturkmen et al., 2002). This includes not only the use of technical terminology but also the ability to discuss language through functional, meaning-oriented explanations. As such, metalanguage knowledge encompasses both the terminology used to describe language and the ways in which language is analyzed and explained in instructional contexts (Gordon & Arias, 2024). Prior research has emphasized the importance of teachers' metalanguage knowledge in supporting students' understanding of content (Schoonmaker, 2015) and in helping English language learners grasp how language functions (Schleppegrell, 2020). However, studies have also shown that pre-service teachers may have limited mastery of grammatical terminology despite recognizing its pedagogical value (Dikici, 2012). Given that learners also encounter metalanguage not only through teachers but also through textbooks, assessment tasks, and instructional materials, the extent to which they can engage with such input becomes an empirical question rather than an assumption. Consequently, learners' own knowledge of grammatical metalanguage remains an important factor in their ability to understand explicit explanations of language and engage effectively with instructional materials.

In addition to teachers, metalanguage is embedded in L2 textbooks, which constitute a major source of instructional input. Baleghizadeh and Yousefpoori-naeim (2013) note that the use of metalanguage in textbooks reflects broader shifts in language teaching approaches over time,

including cycles of emphasis on and de-emphasis of grammar instruction. Nonetheless, grammar continues to play a central role in EFL contexts, particularly for adult learners, and is rarely excluded from instructional materials entirely. Given this sustained presence of metalanguage in instructional materials, textbook-based explanations represent a particularly important yet underexplored site for examining learners' engagement with metalinguistic knowledge in authentic instructional contexts.

Terminological knowledge is therefore an important aspect of learners' ability to engage with explicit instruction. Familiarity with metalanguage enables learners to understand grammatical explanations, attend to form, and develop language awareness, all of which are associated with improved language learning outcomes (Ellis, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2013). In addition, the use of metalanguage can facilitate noticing and uptake, helping learners recognize and internalize target forms during instruction (Basturkmen, 2002). However, the use of grammatical terminology may also place an additional learning burden on learners, particularly when the terms are unfamiliar or when they are used extensively in instruction (Borg, 1999; Mohammed, 1996). From a cognitive load perspective, instructional information that exceeds learners' available processing capacity may also hinder learning (Sweller et al., 1998). For this reason, it is important for teachers and materials developers to align the use of metalanguage with learners' proficiency levels while acknowledging that the extent of learners' ability to access such terminology is not yet fully understood (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Investigating how learners understand and respond to metalanguage in instructional contexts can therefore provide valuable insights into how terminological knowledge shapes learning processes and outcomes (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Despite the established importance of metalanguage in explicit instruction, relatively little research has examined how learners at intermediate proficiency levels engage with different types of linguistic explanation, particularly in contexts where both formal grammatical terminology and meaning-oriented descriptions are present in instructional materials. Moreover, existing studies have not sufficiently distinguished between these two dimensions of metalinguistic knowledge in relation to textbook-based input. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the metalinguistic knowledge of intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners by examining their familiarity with the grammatical terminology and the functional, meaning-based language used in their textbook. By distinguishing between learners' knowledge of formal metalanguage and their ability to interpret functional descriptions of language, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of metalinguistic awareness in EFL contexts. In doing so, it offers empirical evidence on how these two dimensions of metalinguistic knowledge are distributed among learners in a textbook-based instructional context.

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent are intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners familiar with the terminology used in their textbook to describe language?
2. To what extent are intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners familiar with the functional and meaning-oriented explanations used to describe and discuss language?

Literature Review

English grammar is crucial for EFL learners, as grammar plays a key role in effectively conveying accurate messages when communicating in an L2 (Alzahrani, 2024). Grammar consists of two knowledge bases, namely explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge (Webb, 2022). Implicit knowledge refers to the acquisition of language usage that remains unconscious

and cannot be consciously articulated or intentionally recalled (Isbell & Rogers, 2021). Alternatively, explicit knowledge of language is described as the conscious, declarative understanding of L2 features that can be learned, expressed verbally, and primarily accessed through controlled processing (Gutiérrez, 2016). From the perspective of instructed EFL learners, grammar may be viewed as encompassing two interrelated knowledge systems: explicit knowledge, characterized by conscious rule awareness and the ability to articulate grammatical forms, and implicit knowledge, which enables fluent, automatic language processing without conscious reflection (Webb, 2022). Ellis (2004) states that explicit knowledge is comprised of analysed knowledge and metalanguage knowledge. Analysed knowledge pertains to learners' awareness of grammatical rules and features. This type of knowledge is accessible to consciousness but may not always be available for verbal expression. It is typically demonstrated in linguistic problem-solving, such as identifying issues in L2 production and correcting errors. In contrast, metalanguage refers to the language used to describe language itself, involving the ability to verbalize analysed knowledge and the knowledge of technical terminology to discuss language (Gutiérrez, 2016).

Findings from previous studies indicate that analysed knowledge plays a more significant role in L2 proficiency than metalanguage knowledge. For instance, Han and Ellis (1998) investigated the link between explicit and implicit knowledge and general language proficiency in a group of adult English learners from various L1 backgrounds. Their results showed moderate correlations between learners' judgment tasks (representing analysed knowledge) and proficiency measures, but no correlation with metalanguage knowledge. Similarly, Elder and Manwaring (2004) used an error-correction task as a measure of analysed knowledge and found that performance on this task was generally more strongly associated with L2 proficiency than other knowledge measures. Although this advantage was less pronounced for the ab initio university group, analysed knowledge remained positively related to proficiency across participant groups. Gutiérrez (2016) also explored the relationship between the two aspects of explicit knowledge and various language skills and dimensions of L2 proficiency. The study found statistically significant differences, with analysed knowledge showing stronger correlations with more areas of L2 proficiency compared to metalanguage knowledge. Finally, Aydın (2023) investigated the relationship between L2 explicit knowledge and reading and writing performances of first- and fourth-year English Language Teaching (ELT) majors studying at a large-scale state university in Turkey. Stronger correlations were found between analysed knowledge and L2 proficiency than between metalanguage knowledge and L2 proficiency.

Despite the secondary role of metalanguage knowledge in explicit knowledge (as compared to analysed knowledge), metalanguage is an integral part of explicit L2 instruction, and it is a fact that teachers and textbooks are bound to use it. Furthermore, metalanguage provides several benefits in L2 teaching (Hu, 2010). First, it can boost learners' metalinguistic awareness, which refers to a deeper understanding of language forms and functions, ultimately improving language development. By focusing on language itself, metalanguage helps learners reflect on how linguistic structures work in the target language and how language relates to culture and ideology. Additionally, as Ellis (2004) notes, metalanguage enhances learners' comprehension of the target language's structure, enabling them to analyse and verbalize their knowledge, which represents the highest level of linguistic awareness according to Bialystok (1990) and Schmidt (1990). Second, in societies where metalanguage is emphasized in first language (L1) education, it can be a valuable tool in L2 instruction. In some countries, children learn metalanguage in their primary school L1 education, which prepares them for easier L2 learning in secondary school. Teachers can leverage learners' existing metalinguistic knowledge to help

them understand L2 structures, especially when linguistic concepts like nouns and verbs overlap between L1 and L2. For example, a study by Elder and Manwaring (2004) shows that learners perform better on L2 tasks that involve grammatical features present in their L1. A third advantage of using metalanguage in grammar instruction is that it allows for clear discussions of complex structures, something that can be challenging without it. In communicative language teaching (CLT) classrooms, metalanguage can be useful for raising learners' awareness of target structures and for helping them confirm or modify their understanding of grammatical rules (Hu, 2010; Basturkmen et al., 2002). For example, explaining unreal conditionals or relative clauses requires terms like "main clause" or "modal verb," which are part of metalanguage. As Crystal (1985) puts it, metalanguage is essential for breaking down and understanding the components of language. Still another potential advantage of using metalanguage in teaching grammar is that using metalanguage in grammar teaching ensures precise explanations of rules and their contexts, preventing under- and over-generalization. For example, when teaching the simple present in future clauses, metalanguage like "temporal" or "conditional clause" helps clarify where the rule applies and avoids misunderstandings. Finally, Metalanguage can help teachers connect new grammatical structures with previously learned concepts. By using terms like "subordinating conjunctions" or "conditional clauses," teachers can guide learners in comparing new and old structures, making it easier to assimilate new knowledge. In summary, while it is possible to teach without metalanguage, it is a more efficient tool for enhancing L2 learning (Hu, 2010).

Methods

Participants

A total of 105 Turkish EFL learners participated in the present study. At the time of data collection, they were enrolled in the School of Foreign Languages at a large state university in Turkey. Based on a placement test (aligned with the learning outcomes of the Global Scale of English (GSE)) administered by the university, the participants were classified at the intermediate (B1) level.

The GSE expands the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by providing a more detailed set of learning objectives (also known as Can Do statements) that support English language learning across all proficiency levels, skills, and communicative purposes. These objectives specify what a learner should be able to do at each point on the Global Scale of English in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 and were enrolled in various departments, including Business Administration, Cinema and Television, and Public Relations, among others. All participants were native speakers of Turkish, and none had an extended stay in an English-speaking country. Prior to participation, all individuals were informed about the study and gave their written informed consent.

The textbook

The textbook used in the current study is Roadmap B1 by Pearson. Upon completion of this book, learners are expected to demonstrate English language proficiency and competence at the CEFR B1 level, corresponding to a GSE range of 43-55. At the time the present study was conducted, the participants had already completed Roadmap B1 and were studying Roadmap B1+.

The researcher reviewed the entire Roadmap B1 textbook and compiled a list of terminology used to describe language (e.g., irregular verb, agent, conditional). A second list was created

to capture meaning-oriented language used to describe the process of talking about language, including phrases such as *nouns already mentioned* and *possible future result of an action*.

As the majority of the metalanguage in the textbook appeared in sections related to grammar teaching, the limited metalanguage found in other parts (e.g., stress) was excluded from the present study.

Instruments

Based on the two lists prepared by the researcher, two data collection instruments were developed. The first is a terminology test consisting of 40 grammar terms taken from the participants' textbook. Each term is followed by three response options: *I have never heard of this before*, *I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function*, and *I know its meaning/function, and I can show it*. Participants are instructed to select the option that best reflects their familiarity with each term. If they choose the third option, they are asked to provide the meaning, function, explanation, or an example of the term in question. The purpose of this test is to determine whether participants are familiar with the terminology used in their textbook to describe language. In this test, the first and the second options received no score. See Appendix A for test 1.

The second instrument is a matching test. It includes 30 grammatical structures from the participants' textbook, which are to be matched with corresponding meaning-oriented language also found in the textbook. The aim of this test is to assess whether participants are familiar with the descriptive language used to discuss grammatical structures. See Appendix B for Test 2. There was no time limit for either test. The instruments were reviewed by two experts in applied linguistics for content validity.

It is worth noting that the two instruments differed not only in content but also in task format. While the first test required productive responses (definitions, explanations, examples), the second test employed a matching format targeting receptive recognition. These differences were taken into consideration in interpreting the results.

Data collection

The participants studied the first four units of Roadmap B1 during the fall term and completed the remaining six units in the first four weeks of the spring term. Data were collected in Week 11 of the spring term, at which point the participants were studying Roadmap B1+. Both tests were administered to the participants on the same day, with the terminology test conducted first, followed by the matching test.

Data analysis

Scoring procedures

For both tests, an answer key was prepared in advance. For Test 1, each item was awarded one point if the student selected option C and provided the correct meaning, function, or an appropriate example of the grammar term in question. Minor grammar mistakes that did not affect the target structure, as well as errors in other parts of the example, were disregarded. Examples of accepted responses include:

- She said she *will* do this. (Reporting verb)
- He asked me if I was *on* Italy. (Reported question)
- *Cat* is killed by car. (Passive voice)
- Tom is a student, isn't *it*? (Tag question)

Lexical errors were also overlooked. For example, the following sentence was accepted as an appropriate example of non-defining relative clauses:

- Sazova, where you can have fun, is *popularity* in Eskişehir.

However, vague or incomplete answers were not accepted. For Test 2, each item was worth one point. Unlike Test 1, students were not required to provide examples or explanations. As a result, the maximum possible scores were 40 points for Test 1 and 30 points for Test 2. After applying these scoring criteria, the tests were evaluated and the scores were computed for further data analysis.

Further data analysis

After scoring, the test results were subjected to descriptive and inferential analyses. Descriptive statistics, including the mean, median, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores, were calculated to provide an overview of the participants' performance. Item difficulty was determined by calculating the mean score as a proportion of the maximum possible score. Reliability of the tests was estimated using Cronbach's alpha model to assess internal consistency. In addition, the participants were classified into achievement groups using percentage rates. Finally, participants' scores from the two tests were compared to evaluate differences in student performance and test characteristics.

Results

Both tests demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha > 0.80$), indicating that the results are consistent. Analysis of the mean scores, expressed as a proportion of the maximum possible score, revealed that both tests were of moderate difficulty, although Test 1 was slightly more challenging than Test 2. Examination of the standard deviations suggests substantial variability in participants' performance across both tests. Descriptive statistics for each test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Statistic	**Test 1 (40 items)**	**Test 2 (30 items)**
Mean (SD)	13.43 (7.3)	14.56 (6.6)
Median	12	14
Range (Min-Max)	0-32	1-28
Difficulty Index (%)	0.34	0.49
Cronbach's Alpha	0.89	0.88

The participants were categorized into low-, medium-, and high-achievement groups according to predefined percentage cut-offs. Individual performance was operationalized as a percentage of the maximum attainable score, calculated by dividing each student's raw score by the total possible score and multiplying the quotient by 100. Accordingly, participants who scored below 49% were classified as low-achievers, those scoring between 50% and 79% were classified as medium-achievers, and those scoring above 80% were classified as high-achievers. The majority of participants fell into the low-achievement category in both tests. However, a slightly larger number of students were classified into the medium- and high-achievement categories in Test 2 compared to Test 1. Overall, these findings indicate that performance in both tests was relatively concentrated at the lower end of the distribution, suggesting limited familiarity with the grammatical terminology used in the textbook. Participants showed variability in their ability to engage with individual items targeting grammatical terminology, particularly in relation to less frequently encountered terms. However, they demonstrated

relatively higher performance in tasks requiring interpretation of meaning-oriented descriptions of language.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for learners' knowledge of metalanguage terminology

Rank	Metalanguage Terminology	Mean (SD)
1	Adjective	0.87 (0.34)
2	Verb	0.75 (0.43)
3	Question	0.73 (0.44)
4	Countable Noun	0.64 (0.48)
5	Uncountable Noun	0.60 (0.49)
6	-ing Form	0.59 (0.49)
7	Continuous Form	0.57 (0.49)
8	Noun	0.55 (0.50)
9	Modal Verb	0.51 (0.50)
10	Adverb	0.50 (0.50)
10	Adverb of Frequency	0.50 (0.50)
10	Irregular Verb	0.50 (0.50)
10	Passive Voice	0.50 (0.52)
14	Subject	0.42 (0.49)
15	Defining Relative Clause	0.41 (0.49)
16	Short Answer	0.40 (0.49)
17	Conditional	0.39 (0.49)
17	Reported Speech	0.39 (0.49)
19	Infinitive	0.36 (0.48)
20	Question Tag	0.32 (0.47)
21	Time Expression	0.31 (0.46)
22	Verb Be	0.29 (0.45)
23	Non-defining Relative Clause	0.28 (0.44)
23	Quantifier	0.28 (0.44)
25	Past Participle	0.26 (0.43)
26	Reported Question	0.23 (0.42)
27	Irregular Adjective	0.21 (0.40)
28	Auxiliary Verb	0.17 (0.37)
29	Relative Pronoun	0.12 (0.33)
30	Definite Article	0.11 (0.32)
31	Reporting Verb	0.10 (0.29)
31	Word Order	0.10 (0.29)
33	Indefinite Article	0.09 (0.28)
34	Possession	0.08 (0.26)
35	Statement	0.07 (0.25)
35	Vowel	0.07 (0.25)
37	Contracted Form	0.06 (0.23)
37	Zero Article	0.06 (0.23)
39	Consonant	0.04 (0.19)
40	Agent	0.02 (0.13)

Examination of participants' scores in Test 1 revealed a predominance of low scores and few high scores. The lowest scores were observed on items *Agent* (item 4), *Consonant* (item 7),

Zero Article (item 40), *Contracted Form* (item 9), *Vowel* (item 38), *Statement* (item 32), *Possession* (item 23), *Indefinite Article* (item 13), *Word Order* (item 39), *Reporting Verb* (item 30), *Definite Article* (item 12), and whereas the highest scores were obtained on items *Adjective* (item 1), *Verb* (item 36), and *Question* (item 35). Table 2 above presents the mean score for each item in Test 1.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics for learners' understanding of grammatical functions

Rank	Grammatical Function	Mean (SD)
1	Necessity	0.89 (0.32)
2	Completed past actions	0.81 (0.39)
3	Ability	0.78 (0.41)
4	Lack of necessity	0.75 (0.43)
5	Actions in progress / Temporary situations	0.74 (0.43)
6	Advice	0.70 (0.45)
7	Imaginary results of imaginary actions in the past	0.70 (0.45)
8	Giving extra information about a person, thing or place	0.64 (0.48)
9	Facts, general truths / Permanent situations / Habits and routines	0.60 (0.49)
10	Identifying, classifying or defining a person, thing or place	0.57 (0.49)
11	About the number/amount of nouns	0.55 (0.50)
12	Possibility	0.53 (0.50)
13	Habits in the past	0.51 (0.50)
14	Nouns mentioned for the first time	0.50 (0.50)
15	Checking a piece of information	0.49 (0.50)
16	Obligation	0.47 (0.50)
17	Nouns already mentioned / Obvious from context / Only one of something	0.46 (0.50)
18	Making comparisons	0.45 (0.50)
19	Possible future result of another action	0.43 (0.49)
20	Plans and intentions	0.42 (0.49)
21	Permission/prohibition	0.32 (0.47)
22	Predictions	0.32 (0.47)
23	Deduction	0.31 (0.46)
24	Actions in progress in the past	0.27 (0.44)
25	Focusing on the action not on the agent	0.27 (0.44)
26	Focus on the length of the time of an action	0.26 (0.43)
27	Experiences up to now / Linking past and present	0.25 (0.43)
28	One event before another in the past	0.23 (0.42)
29	One thing is the result of another	0.20 (0.40)
30	Imaginary/unlikely situations in the present/future	0.14 (0.35)

A further examination of participants' scores in Test 2 indicates an overall upward shift in scores relative to Test 1, despite some overlap between the two distributions. The lowest scores were observed on *imaginary/unlikely situations in the present/future* (item 17) (*Second Conditional*), *one thing is the result of another* (item 25) (*Zero Conditional*), *one event before another in the past* (item 24) (*Past Perfect Tense*), *experiences up to now/linking past and present* (item 9) (*Present Perfect Tense*), *focus on the length of the time of an action* (item 11) (*Present Perfect Continuous Tense*) and *focusing on the action not on the agent* (item 12)

(*Passive Voice*), whereas the highest scores were obtained on *necessity* (item 20) (*Need to*), *completed past actions* (item 7) (*Past Simple Tense*), *ability* (item 1) (*Can*), *lack of necessity* (item 18) (*don't have to*) and *actions in progress/temporary situations* (item 3) (*Present Continuous Tense*). Table 3 above presents the mean score for each item in Test 2.

Participants' scores from the both tests were converted into percentages and a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare their performance on Test 1 and Test 2. The results showed that the mean percentage score for Test 1 (M=33.58, SD=18.26) was lower than that for Test 2 (M=48.53, SD=22.08). This difference was statistically significant, t (104) = -8.01, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of -14.75 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from -18.40 to -11.10. These findings indicate that participants performed significantly better on Test 2 than on Test 1. Given that Test 1 required participants to demonstrate their knowledge of grammatical terminology, whereas Test 2 focused on recognizing grammatical concepts through meaning-oriented descriptions, the higher performance on Test 2 may suggest that participants had greater difficulty with the explicit identification and use of grammatical terms than with understanding the grammatical concepts represented by those terms. In other words, participants may have been able to recognize or understand grammatical concepts without necessarily being able to identify or articulate the corresponding terminology. However, this interpretation should be treated cautiously, as the two tests differed in task format as well as in the type of knowledge they targeted.

Discussions

The findings suggest that intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners possess limited familiarity with the grammatical terminology employed in their textbook. Even when these terms had been previously encountered, they were often not well understood, and participants frequently struggled to define them or provide illustrative examples. In contrast, learners demonstrated a statistically significantly stronger capacity to recognize and interpret the procedures and strategies used in the textbook to describe and discuss language. This discrepancy indicates an imbalance in learners' metalinguistic knowledge, where functional or conceptual understanding appears more developed than formal, declarative knowledge of metalanguage. Specifically, learners seem more comfortable with meaning-oriented descriptions (e.g., "imaginary/unlikely situations in the present/future") than with technical labels (e.g., "conditional"). This suggests that while explicit terminology knowledge remains relatively limited, learners may still have developed an implicit or semi-explicit understanding of the underlying grammatical concepts through exposure to contextualized input.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the differing cognitive demands of the two tests. Test 2 primarily required recognition and selection, placing relatively lower demands on productive recall, whereas Test 1 required participants to retrieve, define, and exemplify grammatical terminology. As a result, the lower performance on Test 1 may reflect not only limited familiarity with metalanguage but also the greater cognitive and linguistic demands associated with producing explicit definitions and examples.

Another contributing factor may relate to the nature of instruction and classroom practices. The findings may indicate that learners are more frequently exposed to and engaged with meaning-oriented language rather than formal grammatical terminology. Meaning-focused explanations are often more accessible, contextually embedded, and easier to retain, which may make them more salient and memorable for learners. In this sense, learners' stronger performance on Test 2 could reflect the pedagogical emphasis placed on meaning over terminology in their learning environment. This interpretation is supported by Basturkmen (2002), who found that

metalanguage in communicative L2 classrooms tends to emerge mainly during focus-on-form episodes, often in pre-emptive rather than reactive contexts, and is typically expressed using non-technical, simplified language. In such settings, both teachers and students may engage in discussions about language without relying heavily on specialized grammatical terminology. The present findings appear to align with this pattern, suggesting that while metalanguage is present in instruction, it is often used in more accessible and less technical forms, which may limit learners' explicit command of formal terminology.

Participants' limited familiarity with grammatical terminology in the present study is consistent with the findings of Dikici (2012), who investigated pre-service English teachers' beliefs towards grammar and its teaching as well as their knowledge on the metalanguage of grammar. The findings show that pre-service teachers struggled with basic grammatical terminology such as subject, object, verb types, and conjugation. *Tense* was the most accurately identified term (90%), followed by *transitive verb* (81.1%) and *subject* (74.4%), while *conjugation* was the least recognized (8.9%). Despite being fourth-year students, many participants had difficulty identifying even common terms, suggesting an overall limited grasp of metalanguage. The findings of the current study are also in line with Tokunaga (2014), who investigated the extent to which low-intermediate EFL learners in Japan understood grammatical metalanguage. The findings revealed that participants struggled to recognize fundamental parts of speech and sentence components, and often confused similar grammatical structures and terms, indicating that many learners possess insufficient metalinguistic knowledge to fully comprehend grammar explanations presented through such terminology in teaching materials or by instructors. Aydın (2018) investigated the relationship between L2 metalinguistic knowledge and L2 achievement among intermediate-level adult Turkish EFL learners. The metalinguistic knowledge test employed in Aydın (2018) assessed only the basics of English grammar knowledge in accordance with the curriculum and the participants' course book (such as question forms, modals/modal like expressions, relative clauses, tenses, if-clauses, countable-uncountable nouns, articles and comparative/superlative). Despite this, they performed relatively lower, suggesting that the explicit metalinguistic understanding of intermediate-level adult Turkish EFL learners is weak. Given that basic grammatical terminology poses challenges for learners ranging from intermediate-level EFL students to pre-service teachers, this issue warrants greater attention from EFL practitioners.

On the other hand, Hu (2011) reported that Chinese EFL learners had a productive knowledge of a large number of metalanguage terms, and their metalinguistic knowledge and facility with metalanguage were positively related. This difference between Hu (2011) and the current study might be attributed to the learners' instructional backgrounds and learning objectives. The participants in Hu (2011) had been exposed to large doses of explicit, detailed instruction in English grammar, consisting mainly of teacher-fronted lessons conducted almost entirely in Chinese through deductive presentation of grammar rules, syntactic parsing, contrastive analysis, pattern practice, error-correction, and translation. It should be clear from this brief description that the participants had been exposed to much metalinguistic information. In addition, the participants in Hu (2011) were enrolled in a program at a university in a different country (Singapore). This might suggest that those learners had higher levels of motivation to learn English. It is also worth noting that they were at upper-intermediate level, suggesting that learner proficiency might play a role in metalinguistic knowledge.

Although EFL learners' knowledge of grammatical metalanguage is often reported to be limited, the pedagogical consequences of this limitation remain underexplored. Nevertheless, learners are regularly exposed to metalinguistic terminology in instructional contexts,

suggesting that such knowledge may play a facilitative role in engaging with explicit language explanations. A large body of research highlights the value of metalanguage in language learning. Studies indicate that metalanguage plays an important role in communicative language teaching by helping learners analyse, explain, and communicate more effectively in the target language (Ellis, 2016; Roshan & Elhami, 2016). Ellis (2016) suggests that metalanguage can be effectively used in communicative teaching when learners' proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge are considered; written tasks promoting passive knowledge work best, and metalanguage also supports learner autonomy beyond the classroom. This happens by enabling EFL learners to notice and analyse linguistic features, set specific learning goals, and monitor their own progress. Drawing on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis and Holec's (1981) concept of learner autonomy, it can be argued that metalinguistic awareness helps learners engage more effectively with input and take greater responsibility for their learning. In this way, metalanguage facilitates independent use of resources and promotes ongoing language development outside formal instructional contexts.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that metalanguage contributes to greater attention to grammar, improved language proficiency, and heightened language awareness (Abdollahzadeh, 2016; Berry, 1997, 2009, 2010; Hanson, 2013; Hu, 2010; Randen, 2022; Roshan & Elhami, 2016; Rizqan, 2022). In a similar vein, Basturkmen (2002) found a link between students' use of metalanguage and their uptake in student-initiated focus on form. In other words, the study found that when students used metalanguage while asking questions or discussing language, they were more likely to notice, understand, and remember the correct forms. To put it differently, when learners actively employed metalanguage to formulate questions or discuss linguistic features, they were not only more likely to notice gaps in their knowledge but also to process and retain the target forms more effectively. This highlights the facilitative role of metalanguage as more than a descriptive tool; rather, it functions as a cognitive resource that deepens learners' engagement with language and enhances the quality of their learning during meaning-focused interaction. Schleppegrell (2013) also notes that the use of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) metalanguage helps L2 learners engage in complex English language arts (ELA) practices by enabling them to analyse and generalize about language systems. It allows students to identify patterns and variations in language, make informed linguistic choices across contexts, and improve reading and writing within academic subjects. Through focused attention on how language constructs meaning via metalanguage, students develop language awareness, which supports both language proficiency and academic success in meaningful classroom activities. In this sense, SFL metalanguage obviously matters for EFL learners as it helps learners analyse authentic texts (e.g., academic writing), supports writing development by showing how meaning is constructed and encourages deeper language awareness, not just rule memorization. Building on these findings, it can be argued that instructional frameworks that ensure learners understand the technical terminology used in grammatical explanations may be beneficial.

Conclusion

Although the intermediate-level Turkish EFL learners demonstrated limited familiarity with the grammatical terminology used in their textbook, they showed statistically stronger awareness of the strategies and procedures employed to describe and discuss language. This indicates that while learners may not fully command formal linguistic terminology, they are still able to engage with metalinguistic concepts when these are presented through meaning-oriented and contextually supported explanations. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of aligning the use of metalanguage with learners' proficiency levels and existing metalinguistic knowledge.

Overall, these results highlight a difference between declarative knowledge of metalanguage and functional understanding of grammatical concepts. This gap may have pedagogical implications, suggesting that instructional approaches which aim to explicitly connect formal terminology with meaning-based explanations may help support the development of learners' metalinguistic awareness. The effectiveness of explicit instruction may be influenced by the extent to which learners can access and understand the metalanguage used in instructional materials. In particular, when technical terminology is not sufficiently familiar to learners, explanations that rely heavily on such terminology may be less accessible. Accordingly, teachers may benefit from introducing grammatical terminology gradually and supporting it with clear explanations, visual representations (e.g., charts, timelines, or diagrams), and examples drawn from meaningful contexts. Classroom practices such as guided discovery tasks, text-based noticing activities, and collaborative discussion may further support learners in identifying patterns without being overwhelmed by technical language. In addition, teachers can facilitate learners' engagement with metalanguage by modelling key terms and providing scaffolding, such as sentence frames, to support learners' ability to talk about language. Similarly, textbook designers may consider presenting metalanguage in a more accessible manner by combining technical terminology with learner-friendly explanations, glossaries, margin notes, and tasks that encourage learners to observe and describe language in context.

In conclusion, rather than directly measuring instructional effectiveness, the present study points to a potential mismatch between the metalanguage used in instructional materials and learners' metalinguistic knowledge, suggesting the importance of carefully calibrating the presentation of metalanguage to learners' levels in EFL contexts.

Appendix A: Test 1-Terminology

Name:

1. ADJECTIVE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

2. ADVERB
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

3. ADVERB OF FREQUENCY
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

4. AGENT
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

7. CONSONANT
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

8. CONTINUOUS FORM
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

9. CONTRACTED FORM
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

10. COUNTABLE NOUN
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:

5. AUXILIARY VERB
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

6. CONDITIONAL
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

11. DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

12. DEFINITE ARTICLE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

13. INDEFINITE ARTICLE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

14. INFINITIVE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

15. -ING FORM
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

16. IRREGULAR ADJECTIVE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

17. IRREGULAR VERB
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

18. MODAL VERB
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

19. NON-DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

20. NOUN
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

21. PASSIVE VOICE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

22. PAST PARTICIPLE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

23. POSSESSION
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

24. QUANTIFIER
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

25. QUESTION
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

26. QUESTION TAG
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

27. RELATIVE PRONOUN
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

28. REPORTED QUESTION
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

29. REPORTED SPEECH
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

30. REPORTING VERB
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

31. SHORT ANSWER
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

32. STATEMENT
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

33. SUBJECT
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

34. TIME EXPRESSION
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

35. UNCOUNTABLE NOUN
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

36. VERB
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

37. VERB BE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

38. VOWEL
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

39. WORD ORDER
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

40. ZERO ARTICLE
A. I have never heard of this before.
B. I have heard of it, but I don't know its meaning/function.
C. I know its meaning/function, and I can show it:
_____

Appendix B: Test 2-Matching

Match the grammar structures on the left with their meanings/functions/explanations on the right.

A.	Present simple	_____
B.	Present continuous	_____
C.	Be going to	_____
D.	Will	_____
E.	Past simple	_____
F.	Past continuous	_____
G.	Used to	_____
H.	Present perfect	_____
İ.	Present perfect continuous	_____
J.	Past perfect	_____
K.	Indefinite article	_____
L.	Definite article	_____
M.	Comparatives/Superlatives	_____
N.	Defining relative clauses	_____
O.	Non-defining relative clauses	_____
P.	May/Might/Could	_____
Q.	Must/Can't	_____
R.	Can/Could/Be able to	_____
S.	Must/Have to	_____
T.	Should/Ought to	_____
U.	Need to	_____
V.	Be allowed to	_____
W.	Don't have to	_____
X.	Zero conditional	_____
Y.	First conditional	_____
Z.	Second conditional	_____
AA.	Third conditional	_____
BB.	Quantifiers	_____
CC.	Question tags	_____
DD.	Passive voice	_____

1. Ability
2. About the number/amount of nouns
3. Actions in progress
Temporary situations
4. Actions in progress in the past
5. Advice
6. Checking a piece of information
7. Completed past actions
8. Deduction
9. Experiences in our lives up to now
Connecting the past and the present
10. Facts and general truths
Permanent situations
Habit and routines
11. Focus on the length of the time of an action
12. Focusing on the action not on the agent
13. Giving extra information about a person, thing or a place
14. Habits in the past
15. Identifying, classifying or defining a person, thing or a place
16. Imaginary results of imaginary actions in the past
17. Imaginary/unlikely things/situations in the present/future
18. Lack of necessity
19. Making comparisons
20. Necessity
21. Nouns already mentioned
Obvious from the situation
Only one of something
22. Nouns mentioned for the first time
23. Obligation
24. One event happened before another event in the past
25. One thing is the result of another
26. Permission/prohibition
27. Plans and intentions
28. Possibility
29. Possible future result of another action
30. Predictions

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