



## Metalinguistic awareness and academic achievement: Finding correlations among high-achieving EFL learners

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### Abstract

In cognitive psychology, metalinguistic awareness is a process in which a person is trained to be aware of the target language. It aims to help learners improve their academic performance. This study assesses the relationship between academic achievement and metalinguistic awareness of Saudi high-achieving EFL learners. It also examines whether there are significant differences in the correlation of language learning and metalinguistic awareness in the achievement level of male and female students. The study employs a descriptive survey correlational research design to a random sample of 86 students. Results show that students' academic achievement in English is overall satisfactory. This would mean that the students are capable of learning English as a subject, and that they can manifest proficiency in different areas of language learning such as vocabulary, grammar, writing, speaking, and reading comprehension. Further, results show that their performance in identifying syntactical errors in English, recognizing phonemes in the English language, and following the rules and concord of English grammar is satisfactory. These results would confirm that when a student is aware of the arbitrariness of the English language, they can manifest similar awareness of English lexis and phonology. However, female students display significantly better language learning achievement and awareness as compared to males. Finally, when students possess a high level of metalinguistic awareness, they have a tendency of achieving higher in language proficiency.

**Keywords:** academic achievement; correlational research; metalinguistic awareness; Saudi EFL; syntactical errors

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### 1. Introduction

In cognitive psychology, metalinguistic awareness is a process that allows one to become aware and control the use of language. As a form of mental awareness and autonomy, it is characterized by the ability to recognize and organize cognitive processes and processes (the ability to think about thinking). According to Altman et al., metalinguistic awareness, which requires the speaker to pay attention to the structure and form of language, arises in the later stages of language acquisition, at the age of 5–6, and is based on knowledge previously acquired at an early age. (2018). Metalinguistic awareness is described as the recognition that a person has the power to manipulate language in a

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number of ways and that he or she can govern language. Metalinguistic awareness, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is *the ability to detach oneself from the substance of communication in order to reflect on and change the structure of language*. As stated by Hofer and Jessner (2019), multilingualism requires a high level of linguistic awareness, which differentiates multi-lingual speakers from those who know only one or two languages. The speaker's ability to see and perceive language is referred to in abstract terms, and the study and understanding of language as a controlled and controlled system or object is referred to as a linguistic feeling (Al-Ahdal & Al-Ahdal, 2019; Alkhodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Al-Qunayeer et al., 2020).

## 2. Literature Review

Metalinguistic awareness has been examined in many previous studies (Chen, 2015; Dong et al., 2020; Spellerberg, 2016; Tighe et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). According to the findings of recent research on children, metalinguistic talents have a direct and/or indirect impact (by word reading and/or vocabulary skills) on reading comprehension across multiple grades and across a variety of language backgrounds (Tighe et al., 2019). Metalinguistic awareness has been recognized as a fundamental component of cognitive qualities that predict reading comprehension capacity through decoding and word recognition on the single-word or single-character cognition process, according to Dong et al., (2020). Zhang et al., (2017) performed longitudinal research in Singapore to evaluate phonological and morphological awareness in bilingual word reading in Malay–English bilingual children. Both types of metalinguistic awareness were significant predictors of word reading in both languages, according to separate SEM analyses.

According to recent studies on children, metalinguistic talents (through reading words and / or vocabulary) affect directly and/or indirectly reading comprehension across grades and across different language groups (Tighe et al., 2019). According to Dong et al., (2020), metalinguistic awareness has been identified as an important component of cognitive cues that predict reading comprehension ability through coding and word recognition using one-word or one-letter knowledge. Zhang et al., (2017) conducted a longitudinal study in Singapore to assess phonological and morphological awareness in bilingual word reading in bilingual Malay-English children. According to individual SEM analysis, both types of language awareness were important predictors of word reading in both languages.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that metalinguistics is associated with students' academic accomplishments and performance. Spellerberg (2016) discovered a correlation between performance on a metalinguistic awareness test and scores on the school-leaving exam. Those metalinguistic talents are associated with school achievement, as measured by outcomes from school leaving examinations across a variety of academic areas, which is suggested by this study. Metalinguistic development has also been connected to language usage, cognitive development, reading ability, academic performance, environmental stimulation, intelligence quotient (IQ), and play, in addition to all of the other elements mentioned above (Chen, 2015).

As an important research gap that the present study tries to bridge, it aims to address how Saudi EFL students manifest language proficiency and metalinguistic awareness. Studies in the Saudi context on this variable are limited (Al-Ahdal, 20201; Al-Ahdal & Al-Qunayeer, 2020; Mohammed & Ali, 2021; Saeed et al., 2019). Furthermore, Curdt Christiansen et al., (2015) found that metalinguistic awareness is associated with knowledge of vocabulary, reading fluency, reading comprehension and writing. Phonemic awareness was less associated with these functional features than the morphological and grammatical consciousness. They have also demonstrated a strong two-way distribution of language proficiency, which is the basis of academic proficiency in English and Chinese. Chloupek

(2018) studied the relationship of language proficiency with language abilities. Her findings show that language skills are useful for understanding the unfamiliar language. In addition, she indicated that the amount and level of the named languages may be associated with levels of metalinguistic awareness.

Besides, Varga (2021) concluded in her study that metalinguistic awareness is advocated as a means of facilitating the development of reading abilities across languages regardless of their orthographic and linguistic systems. Metalinguistic teaching can facilitate the beneficial transfer of reading abilities between the mother tongue and the foreign language. Additionally, assignments involving the meanings, structure, and organization of words, phrases, and texts help children develop their thinking abilities, which helps them become better readers in both languages.

Educators opine that academic success requires fluency in the English language. Other activities need literacy skills as well. Common language abilities are combined with more advanced communication approaches in this context. Having the ability to communicate effectively in more than one language is a must for academic achievement. Scientific and technological advances that are well-known across the globe have been reported in English, rendering them unavailable to those who do not understand the language. To be successful, students need to be able to communicate well in English. The capacity to speak well in English is essential for academic achievement too. Science, mathematics, and even English, all use language functions often in their teachings and curricula. Language activities play an important role in critical thinking and analysis in the natural and mathematical sciences. Improving language skills develops students' ability to think more effectively. The higher the level of English proficiency among students, the better their thinking (Feng et al., 2020; Nasirudeen et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2020).

### **3. Research Purpose**

Generally, this study assesses the relationship between academic achievement and metalinguistic awareness of Saudi high-achievers. Specifically, it aims to: 1. Describe the academic achievement of high-achievers in a Saudi college; 2. Describe the metalinguistic awareness of EFL learners; 3. Ascertain the difference in the academic achievement and metalinguistic awareness of the students when categorized by gender, and lastly; (4) find out the relationship between the academic achievement and metalinguistic awareness of Saudi high-achievers.

### **4. Method**

#### *4.1. Research Design*

For the purpose of determining the relationship between academic success and EFL learners' metalinguistic awareness, researchers usually use a descriptive correlational research methodology. To uncover the relationship between variables, descriptive cross-sectional correlational research uses standardized correlating tests to produce a strong pattern of correlation. A total of 86 randomly selected Saudi EFL students (male= 41, female= 45) participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in the B.A Program in the English Department, College of Arts and Literature, Qassim University, for the academic year 1442 AH. The participants shared comparable backgrounds such as number of years of education, type of educational institution attended, place of residence, and economic conditions. They belonged to the same cultural background. The median age of the group fell at 23.6 years. The sampling representation of the respondents was calculated using Raosoft. Being a descriptive survey, the study blended qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection.

#### 4.2. Instrumentation

The data on the students' level of academic achievement in the EFL subject were generated from the English Language Proficiency Test of the University which comprises 100 items. It has been developed by the language experts in Qassim University and was already subjected to item analysis and has been in use for three years. The metalinguistic awareness of the students was evaluated using an adapted version of Dita's (2009) Metalingual Awareness Test. The tools were used with permission from authors and were validated in the Saudi context. Moreover, the metalinguistic test was pilot tested in one college with 25 respondents (14 male and 11 female students not included in the final study) before its actual utilization in this study.

### 5. Procedure and Data Analysis

This research took about three months to complete out of which three weeks went towards data collection. The first week was spent getting approval and authorization from university authorities to perform the research before the official data-gathering phase began. The notification to continue the study was published in the second week. Thereafter, meetings with students were set in advance of the next official gathering, which was to take place the following week. The intention and goals of the investigation were explained to the participants. The researchers were in charge of administering the two pieces of research equipment, making use of all the required licenses, and working in close collaboration to ensure authenticity of the data. The researchers were quite conscientious when it came to research ethics. Following the gathering of students' responses, the data were vetted and statistically analyzed, a process that took about four weeks. The final analysis and interpretation of the data and the writing of the report took one month more. Key descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage rotation, mean weight, and overall bias were used to examine students' learning achievement, and metalinguistic awareness. To answer the research question whether gender influenced students' learning success, the independent sample t-test was employed. The Pearson correlation value was also used to establish the association, if any, between students' academic performance in English and their metalinguistic awareness. The assumptions in using Pearson's  $r$  were based on the level of measurement, absence of linearity and outliers, and the related pairs. For the t-test, this study ensured that the measurement of scale, normality of distribution, adequacy of samples, and random sampling were employed.

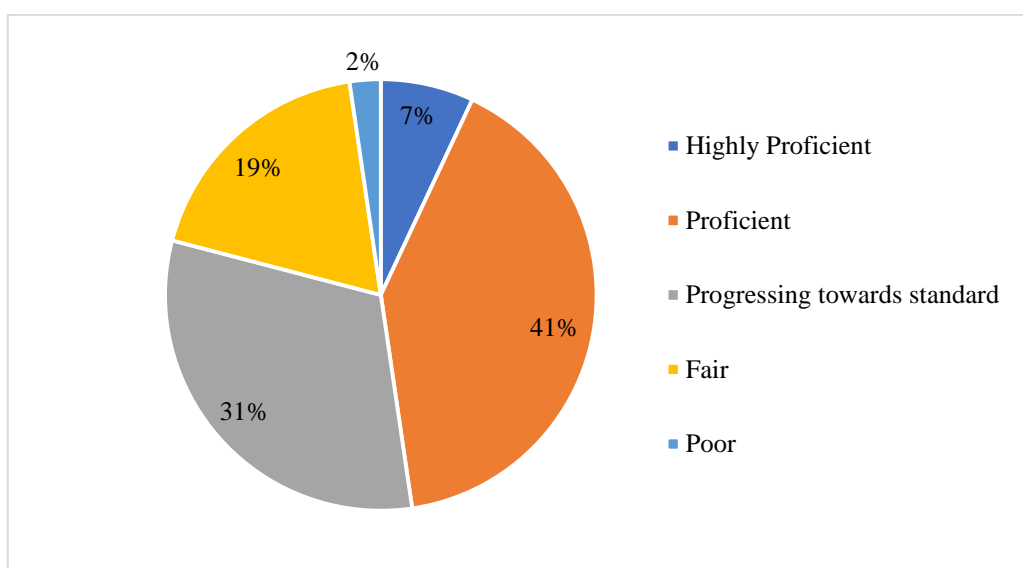
### 6. Results and Discussion

#### 6.1. Level of students' academic achievement in EFL subjects

Table 1 and Figure 1 below display the description of the students' academic level in EFL which is an independent subject of study for them. It is interesting to note that the students have a computed mean performance of 87.67 which means proficient. It can be deduced from the data that a majority of the students are proficient ( $f= 35.41\%$ ), followed by those who are progressing towards the standard ( $f= 27.31\%$ ). The least contributors are those who scored below 75, falling into the category of poor performance ( $f= 2.2\%$ ). This result indicates that the students have satisfactory English language academic achievement. This would mean that the students are capable of learning English as a subject and that they can manifest proficiency in different areas of language learning such as vocabulary, grammar, writing, speaking, and reading comprehension.

**Table 1.** Level of students' academic achievement in EFL subject

Level	Grading Scale	Frequency (n=86)	Percentage
Highly Proficient	90-100	6	7 %
Proficient	85-89	35	41 %
Progressing towards standard	80-84	27	31 %
Fair	75-79	16	19 %
Poor	Below 75	2	2 %
Mean score	87.67		

**Figure 1.** Level of students' academic achievement in EFL subject

Moore (2019) reported that academic achievement was considered the most important outcome of the formal educational experience, and while it is clearly not important in students' academic life and later in their careers, there is little debate over whether it is the most important of formal educational experiences. As stated by Duckworth et al., (2019), academic accomplishment is influenced by a variety of factors: study abilities and learning techniques, as opposed to self-control, are important predictors of school performance. Emotional variables such as math anxiety are also significant, and achieving very difficult tasks over a long period of time (months or years) takes tenacity. Moreover, as previously said, motivation is essential; in the absence of intellectual motivation, self-control is rendered irrelevant (Kapur, 2018).

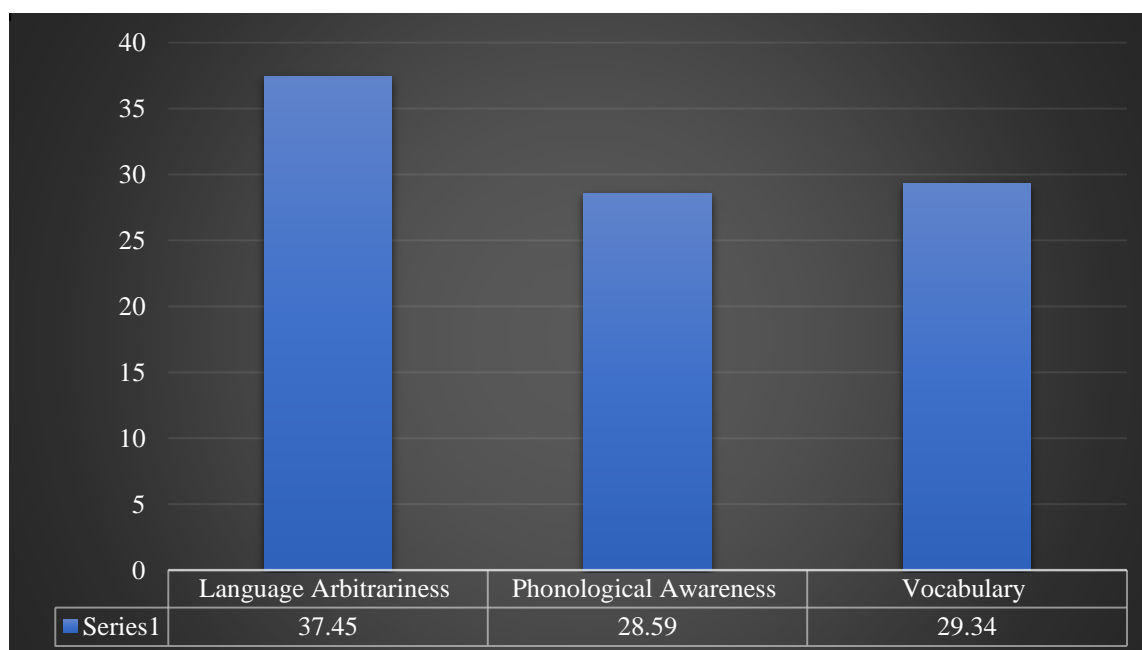
## 6.2. Students' level of metalinguistic awareness as revealed by the metalinguistic test

Table 2 and Figure 2 show the assessment of students' level of metalinguistic awareness on the three forms: language arbitrariness, phonological awareness and, vocabulary. It is evident from the table below that the Saudi EFL students have a very satisfactory level of awareness in the language arbitrariness with the computed mean of 37.45, seconded by the phonological awareness with the computed mean of 28.59, which is satisfactory and lastly, a vocabulary performance of 29.34 which is interpreted as satisfactory. In general, the students' overall level of metalinguistic awareness is satisfactory.

**Table 2.** Saudi EFL students' level of metalinguistic awareness

Metalinguistic Tests in English	Mean Level (n=86)	Description
Language Arbitrariness	37.45	Very Satisfactory
Phonological Awareness	28.59	Satisfactory
Vocabulary	29.34	Satisfactory
<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>31.79</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>

49-60 (Excellent), 37-48 (Very Satisfactory), 25-36 (Satisfactory), 13-24 (Fair), 0-12 (Poor)

**Figure 2.** Saudi EFL students' level of metalinguistic awareness

Metalinguistic awareness in error correction has been a matter of study in many EFL environments, indicating its recognition as one of the central factors in academic achievement. In a study by Izadi and Yarahmadzahi (2018), which looked at the metalinguistic awareness of pupils studying English, the results showed that Baluch respondents in English noticed and corrected a higher proportion of grammatical errors than Persian respondents. Furthermore, Baluch participants corrected errors with a more grammar-focused approach than Persian participants, who corrected certain errors with a more content-oriented approach. In terms of error explanation, Baluch participants provided a higher proportion of error explanations and a more grammar-oriented approach than Persian participants, although the differences were not statistically significant in this case. These discrepancies were detected across the three languages on parameters that were both comparable and distinct. The metalinguistic awareness of multilingual first graders was researched by Fernandez-Dalona and Dalona (2019), and the results revealed that the children's degree of metalinguistic awareness is average. Because they will be employing these languages in their future academic activities, Grade 1 multilingual learners still need to develop their linguistic expertise with English and Filipino, particularly in identifying syntactic faults. The researchers also claimed that the metalinguistic knowledge of early school-age children in Cebuano aids them in completing their linguistic tasks in Filipino and English. Woll (2019) examined how French speakers think about their native tongue. Nearly a third of individuals achieved the greatest level of metalinguistic analysis in the metasemantic component of the test, compared to just 5% in the metagrammatical half. A study of the coding processes indicates that this trend may be connected to the fact that explicit reference to grammatical

categories was required to get maximum scores in the metagrammatical portion but not in the metasemantic section.

### 6.3. Test of Difference in the academic achievement and metalinguistic performance of the respondents when grouped according to gender

Table 3 shows the mean, SD, and p-value and test of difference when gender of the participants is taken into account. In both variables, it is clear that female Saudi EFL students outperformed the males on academic achievement and metalinguistic performance. This result showed that there is a remarkable variation in the students when their language learning achievement and awareness are taken into consideration, with results favoring the female students. Results from this study show that factors such as gender and academic achievement have an influence on how well EFL students learn English. In most of these areas, females are more motivated than males due to differences in language learning motivation based on gender. Females, according to this study, have a larger number of driving aspects for language learning in their lives than male students. Using the qualitative tool of semi-structured interview, researchers in this study had a total of thirteen informal interaction with the students in the study (M= 7, F= 6) and discovered that girls were more motivated and used more effective techniques than boys in learning English language. Females were also more interested in studying English than males were, according to the results of this result. Further, females were more enthusiastic than males in learning English and communicating with others who spoke the language. Females were less anxious in English lessons and while speaking the language than males were. In addition, females were more integrative and instrumental in their approach to learning English than males in the study. These findings are supported by earlier studies which establish that males are more likely than women to enroll in language programs because of the prospective benefits of learning a language (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Al-Ahdal & Algouzi, 2021; Namaziandost & Çakmak, 2020; Nami, 2020).

**Table 3.** Differences on the academic achievement and metalinguistic performance

	Sex	Mean	SD	p- value
Academic Achievement	Male	83.43	10.56	0.003*
	Female	86.47	13.233	
Metalinguistic Performance	Male	43.35	9.67	0.004*
	Female	48.38	8.45	

\*= significant at 0.05 level; ns= not significant at 0.05 level

Note: all other variables are not significant

### 6.4. Test of Relationship between the Academic Achievement and Metalinguistic Performance of the Respondents

Another key goal of this study was to examine the relationship between academic performance and the language performance of respondents. Table 4 shows that there is a strong relationship between academic performance and student achievement ( $r=.32$ ), which is significant at 0.01 alpha level. This positive correlation is interpreted to mean that the higher the level of students' academic and general proficiency in the English language, higher is their metalinguistic awareness. In other words, when students have a high level of metalinguistic awareness, the tendency of achieving higher performance in language increases. Hence, this study concludes that the metalinguistic awareness of students is a predictor of their English language proficiency. In a prior study, Izadi and Yarahmadzahi (2018) found that there is a strong correlation between the language competency of Iranian college students and their academic achievement. There is a strong link between academic success and one's ability to

communicate well in another language. According to their findings, the ability to communicate effectively in English has a direct correlation to academic success.

**Table 4.** Relationship between the academic achievement and metalinguistic performance

	Pearson's R	Probability
Academic achievement and metalinguistic performance	r value	.32
	p value	.003*

*Ns= not significant*

\*= significant at 0.05 level 2-tailed

\*\*= significant at 0.01 level 2-tailed

KekaVaradwaj (2018) investigated the association between metalinguistic awareness, academic achievement, and the *big five* personality characteristics. The findings demonstrate that metalinguistic awareness is a greater predictor of academic success than the major five personality traits, explaining 39 percent of variations compared to just 24 percent explained by the large five personality qualities. Each of the three measures of metalinguistic awareness has a roughly identical influence on academic achievement. When Akbulut (2019) conducted his research, he was particularly interested in the effect of morphological and metalinguistic awareness on reading among Turkish EFL learners. The experimental group's pupils got specific training on features of derivational and inflectional morphology, as well as parts of speech, over the course of the experiment. It was discovered that the experimental group's morphological awareness rose significantly and that their reading comprehension abilities improved as a result of this as well. In another study, Li and Wu (2015) examined the effect of language awareness on reading comprehension and the intermediate role of fluency in reading in Chinese 2 through 4. They concluded that the awareness of morphology plays an important role in Chinese reading and influences reading and understanding in stages two through four. It has also been found that reading fluency is an important link between morphological awareness and reading comprehension in grades 2-4. However, the study also concluded that EFL instructors need to enhance their knowledge of MLK and assist students in developing their MLK. This needs implementation at the national level according to the study's results. As a consequence, the wide variation in teachers' MLK development among institutions indicates how the workplace affects teachers' MLK growth.

## 7. Conclusion

As far as the results of this concerned, there is relationship between the academic achievement and metalinguistic awareness of Saudi EFL students. It may be concluded that the respondents have satisfactory English language academic achievement. This would mean that the students are capable of learning English as a subject, and that they can manifest proficiency in the areas of language learning such as vocabulary, grammar, writing, speaking, and reading comprehension. They also have favorable and good performance on identifying syntactical errors in English, recognizing phonemes in the English language, and following the rules and concord of English grammar. These results confirm that when students are familiar with and aware of the arbitrariness of the English language, they can manifest similar awareness of the lexis and phonology of English. In like manner, there is a distinguished variation between the male and female students' learning achievement and awareness in favor of the female students. Finally, the test of relationship showed a positive correlation between the level of students' academic and proficiency in the English language and their metalinguistic awareness. This means that when students have a high level of metalinguistic awareness, the tendency of achieving higher performance in the language is higher.



## 8. Recommendations and Implications

On the basis of the conclusion presented in the current study, the following are suggested to be recommended and implied in the field of education. Firstly, language instructors need to enhance their skills on the pedagogies of English language teaching through professional development initiatives to cater to the emerging and changing needs of students in language learning. Secondly, Saudi Universities need to sustain and maintain their students' performance in language learning by initiating online language learning programs based on students' motivation, interest, and learning styles. Thirdly, there is a need for the universities to develop a language learning plan to focus on the performance and metalinguistic awareness of male students. Lastly, as to managerial implications, the universities may need to establish an online learning platform for languages by engaging students and teachers in an authentic English language learning program. This may require a higher allocation of budget and funds towards this head.

## 9. Limitations

This study has several limitations which could serve as a basis for further research with the goal of validating the results. In the light of the methodological limitation, this study only framed the use of a correlational research design with a small number of participants. Moreover, the participants were all high achievers but that's not what a real EFL classroom composition is: The learner groups are usually mixed as far as achievement level is concerned. Hence, studies with mixed or low-achievers need to be considered to moderate the results and recommendations of this study. The use of mixed methods research design is offered as a way to examine the relationship of the two variables under survey. In like manner, the inclusion of equally important variables such as income, teacher-related factors, and other family-related factors would also define exceptional results for further studies. Finally, the expertise of language scholars and other stakeholders may be tapped for the future studies in order to come up with shared adoption and utilization of results.

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