

**METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS AND BILINGUAL LEARNING: THE
OVERLOOKED BRIDGE TO CRITICAL LITERACY**

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Abstract: This study explores the role of metalinguistic awareness in bilingual learning and its impact on the development of critical literacy skills. While bilingual education often focuses on language proficiency, the cognitive and reflective abilities that arise from metalinguistic awareness are frequently overlooked. By examining how learners consciously analyze language structures, negotiate meaning across languages, and reflect on linguistic forms, this research highlights the significant bridge between bilingualism and critical literacy. The findings suggest that fostering metalinguistic awareness can enhance learners' critical thinking, reading comprehension, and analytical skills, ultimately promoting deeper engagement with texts in multiple languages.

Keywords: Metalinguistic awareness, bilingual learning, critical literacy, language consciousness, cognitive development, reflective thinking, multilingual education.

Introduction. The development of critical literacy skills has become an essential goal in contemporary education, particularly in multilingual and bilingual contexts where learners navigate multiple languages and cultural frameworks. While traditional approaches to bilingual education have often emphasized language proficiency and communicative competence, emerging research suggests that these approaches may overlook a crucial cognitive and reflective component: metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistic awareness refers to the ability to think consciously about language, understand its structures, functions, and variations, and reflect on how language influences meaning. This awareness enables learners to analyze texts more critically, compare linguistic forms across languages, and make informed interpretive decisions, thereby enhancing their overall literacy. Bilingual learners, in particular, are uniquely positioned to develop this awareness due to their exposure to multiple linguistic systems, which allows them to notice patterns, contrasts, and nuances that monolingual learners might miss. By cultivating metalinguistic awareness, educators can foster not only linguistic proficiency but also higher-order thinking skills, including analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and critical interpretation of texts. Despite its evident benefits, metalinguistic awareness remains underexplored in many educational settings, often overshadowed by the more immediate goals of grammar instruction, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative fluency. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the intersection of metalinguistic awareness and bilingual learning, highlighting how it serves as a bridge to critical literacy. By integrating theoretical perspectives from linguistics, cognitive psychology, and educational research, the study aims to provide insights into instructional strategies that can enhance learners' capacity for reflective thinking and critical engagement with texts.

Literature review. Research on bilingual education has long recognized the cognitive, social, and linguistic benefits of learning multiple languages, yet the role of metalinguistic awareness in

promoting critical literacy has often been underestimated. Metalinguistic awareness, defined as the conscious reflection on the form and function of language, enables learners to analyze linguistic structures, detect patterns, and understand the impact of language on meaning [1]. Scholars such as Cummins [2] emphasize that bilingual learners who develop metalinguistic skills are better equipped to transfer knowledge across languages, facilitating deeper comprehension and interpretation of texts. Additionally, Bialystok [3] highlights that bilingual individuals exhibit enhanced executive function and cognitive flexibility, which supports analytical reasoning and critical thinking, foundational components of critical literacy. Studies in classroom settings have shown that explicit instruction aimed at raising metalinguistic awareness, such as comparing grammatical structures or discussing language usage in context, significantly improves students' ability to engage critically with texts [4]. Moreover, research indicates that metalinguistic awareness is not only a cognitive skill but also a socio-cultural competence, as learners negotiate meaning within diverse linguistic and cultural frameworks [5]. Recent investigations suggest that integrating metalinguistic activities into bilingual curricula, including code-switching exercises, language reflection journals, and translation tasks, strengthens learners' ability to interpret, critique, and produce complex texts [6]. Despite this evidence, educational practice often prioritizes language proficiency tests, vocabulary acquisition, and conversational fluency, leaving little space for reflective language analysis [7]. Consequently, there is a growing consensus that fostering metalinguistic awareness should be viewed as an essential pedagogical strategy to bridge bilingual learning and critical literacy. By synthesizing findings from linguistics, cognitive psychology, and educational research, current studies underscore the potential of metalinguistic awareness to cultivate higher-order thinking skills, empower learners to become autonomous interpreters of texts, and enhance their lifelong learning capacities [8]. This literature review thus establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for examining how metalinguistic awareness can be systematically integrated into bilingual learning environments to promote critical literacy outcomes.

Research methodology. The research methodology employed in this study is designed to investigate the role of metalinguistic awareness in bilingual learning and its impact on the development of critical literacy skills. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research strategies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitative data are collected through structured surveys and standardized language proficiency assessments administered to bilingual learners in secondary and tertiary educational settings. These instruments measure participants' metalinguistic awareness, language proficiency across two or more languages, and their ability to engage with texts critically. In parallel, qualitative data are gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of learner-generated artifacts, such as reflective language journals, translation exercises, and critical reading responses. This triangulation of data sources ensures the reliability and validity of the findings by capturing multiple dimensions of learners' linguistic, cognitive, and reflective abilities. The participant selection follows a purposive sampling strategy, targeting bilingual students who have consistent exposure to at least two languages and are enrolled in curricula that encourage active engagement with texts in multiple languages. The research methodology is guided by the premise that understanding the interplay between metalinguistic awareness and bilingual learning requires both measurable data on language

proficiency and critical literacy performance, as well as rich descriptive insights into learners' cognitive processes and reflective practices.

1-Table. Metalinguistic awareness and critical literacy skills among bilingual learners

Student Group	Language Proficiency	Metalinguistic Awareness Level	Critical Literacy Performance	Notes
Group A	High	High	High	Bilingual learners can analyze texts deeply
Group B	Medium	Medium	Medium	Learners can understand and compare languages
Group C	Low	Low	Low	Critical analysis is challenging; reflective thinking is limited

The first table, "Bilingual Learners' Metalinguistic Awareness and Critical Literacy Skills," presents a comparison of students' language proficiency, levels of metalinguistic awareness, and critical literacy performance. The table highlights the strengths and weaknesses of different student groups in bilingual learning contexts and identifies which groups demonstrate high or low abilities in critical thinking and text analysis. For instance, students in Group A with high language proficiency are able to analyze texts deeply, Group B with medium proficiency show moderate skills in comparing languages and reflective thinking, while Group C with low proficiency face challenges in critical analysis and reflective thinking.

2-Table. Strategies for developing metalinguistic awareness

Activity Type	Purpose	Required Resources	Expected Outcome	Responsible Personnel
Code-switching	Compare languages, develop reflective thinking	Teacher, textbooks, exercises	Improved language and text analysis skills	Language teachers, educators
Language journal	Monitor grammar and language errors, self-assessment	Notebook, writing tools, guidelines	Learners understand and analyze their mistakes	Teacher, mentor
Translation exercises	Understand language differences and meanings	Texts, dictionaries, computer	Enhanced critical and analytical thinking	Educators, linguists

The second table, "Strategies to Develop Metalinguistic Awareness," outlines practical activities designed to enhance metalinguistic awareness. Each activity type—such as code-switching, language journals, and translation exercises—includes its purpose, required resources, expected outcomes, and responsible personnel. This table serves as a strategic guide for teachers and educators, aiming to improve learners' critical literacy, reflective thinking, and deep understanding of languages. Additionally, it demonstrates the practical effectiveness of each activity in fostering more autonomous and analytical bilingual learners, ultimately supporting the development of higher-order thinking and critical engagement with texts.

Research discussion. The discussion of the findings emphasizes the critical role of

metalinguistic awareness in enhancing bilingual learners' critical literacy skills. The quantitative data indicate a positive correlation between learners' metalinguistic awareness and their ability to analyze, interpret, and critique texts across multiple languages. Learners who demonstrated higher levels of metalinguistic awareness consistently performed better on critical reading tasks, showing deeper comprehension, nuanced understanding of linguistic structures, and an ability to identify implicit meanings. These findings align with previous research suggesting that bilingual learners possess cognitive advantages that support analytical reasoning and reflective thinking [1][2]. Qualitative data further illustrate that learners engage more effectively with texts when they consciously reflect on language forms, notice cross-linguistic similarities and differences, and apply this awareness to interpret meaning. Classroom observations revealed that students who participated in metalinguistic activities, such as code-switching discussions, translation exercises, and language reflection journals, were more confident in questioning assumptions within texts and providing evidence-based interpretations. This indicates that fostering metalinguistic awareness not only improves language proficiency but also strengthens critical thinking and interpretive skills, thereby bridging the gap between bilingual learning and critical literacy [3][4]. Furthermore, the discussion highlights that metalinguistic awareness serves as a socio-cognitive tool, allowing learners to negotiate meaning within diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Students reported that engaging in comparative language analysis helped them appreciate the nuances of cultural expressions and recognize the influence of language on thought processes. The findings suggest that integrating metalinguistic instruction into bilingual curricula can create more reflective and autonomous learners capable of critical engagement with texts, both in academic and real-world contexts [5]. Despite these positive outcomes, the study acknowledges challenges such as limited instructional time, varying levels of learners' language proficiency, and the need for teacher training to effectively implement metalinguistic activities. Addressing these challenges is essential to fully realize the benefits of metalinguistic awareness in bilingual education. Overall, the discussion underscores the importance of viewing metalinguistic awareness not as a peripheral skill, but as a central component of bilingual learning that fosters critical literacy, cognitive development, and lifelong learning capacities.

Conclusion. In conclusion, this study highlights the pivotal role of metalinguistic awareness as a bridge between bilingual learning and the development of critical literacy skills. The findings demonstrate that learners who cultivate an understanding of language structures, functions, and cross-linguistic relationships are better equipped to analyze, interpret, and engage with texts critically. Metalinguistic awareness not only supports linguistic proficiency across multiple languages but also enhances cognitive flexibility, reflective thinking, and problem-solving abilities, which are essential components of critical literacy. By integrating metalinguistic activities such as comparative language analysis, code-switching exercises, and reflective language journals into bilingual curricula, educators can foster more autonomous, analytical, and culturally aware learners. The research underscores the need to shift educational priorities from a sole focus on grammar, vocabulary, and conversational fluency to a more holistic approach that values conscious reflection on language as a tool for critical thought. Moreover, promoting metalinguistic awareness can empower learners to navigate complex textual and cultural landscapes, preparing them for academic challenges and real-world communicative situations. Ultimately, the study advocates for recognizing metalinguistic awareness as a central component of bilingual education, emphasizing its capacity to strengthen critical literacy, enhance cognitive

and socio-cultural skills, and contribute to lifelong learning and informed engagement with diverse texts.

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