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Literary Theories

Meta-Language Learning in English Language Teaching: Recent Trends in Metalanguage, Metalinguistic Awareness, and Self-Regulated Learning

Dr. D. Solomon Paul Raj, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore

Dr. R. Steffi, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore

Abstract: Meta-language learning—defined here as the coordinated development and instructional use of (a) metalanguage (language for talking about language), (b) metalinguistic awareness (the capacity to notice and reason about form–meaning–use relations), and (c) metacognition/self-regulated learning (SRL; planning, monitoring, evaluating, and regulating learning)—has become increasingly prominent in contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT). This journal-style manuscript reports a rapid scoping review of 26 peer-reviewed studies and syntheses (with traceable DOIs) published across 1996–2025, with emphasis on the most active research directions between 2015 and 2025. Sources were thematically coded for constructs, learning domains, and pedagogical mechanisms. Four converging trends were identified: (1) stronger measurement and classroom operationalization of metalinguistic awareness, including with children and multilingual learners; (2) renewed attention to teacher metalanguage and “talk about language,” extending beyond grammar to discourse and pragmatics; (3) a pivot from generic learning strategies toward SRL and metacognitive instruction, especially in L2 writing and reading; and (4) consolidation of evidence that explicit instruction, corrective feedback, and corpus/data-driven learning are effective when designed as meta-language-rich noticing and revision opportunities. The discussion proposes an integrative account of meta-language learning as a system linking interaction, explicit conceptual tools, and learner self-regulation. Implications include designing minimal but functional metalanguage, aligning feedback with learner regulatory routines, and ensuring developmental and equity-sensitive access to “meta” resources. Priority research needs include longitudinal classroom studies, construct integration across metalanguage–awareness–SRL, and assessment designs that capture reflective language use in authentic tasks.

Keywords: Metalanguage; Metalinguistic Awareness; Metacognition; Self-Regulated Learning; English Language Teaching; Corrective Feedback; Data-Driven Learning

Introduction

The “meta” dimension of language learning has moved from a specialized, sometimes contested concern to a cross-cutting priority in ELT. Across multilingual classrooms, academic-language expectations, and technology-mediated learning environments, learners are increasingly expected not only to communicate in English but also to interpret and revise language choices, explain why forms work in context, and manage learning beyond the classroom. These expectations foreground three overlapping strands of meta-language learning. First, learners and teachers use metalanguage to label and discuss linguistic and discourse patterns. Second, learners develop metalinguistic awareness: the ability to notice language as an object, to compare forms, and to reason about meaning and use. Third, learners employ metacognition and self-regulation to plan, monitor, and evaluate learning.

The renewed prominence of “meta” is partly explained by changes in evidence and educational priorities. Meta-analytic research has sharpened earlier debates about explicit versus implicit learning by demonstrating that effectiveness depends on what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is measured. A meta-analysis of instruction–feature interactions showed that the impact of instruction varies by language feature type, supporting differentiated rather than ideological decisions about explicit teaching (Spada & Tomita, 2010). Corrective feedback research has produced similarly influential syntheses, indicating that feedback can yield meaningful learning gains while also highlighting variability by feedback type, context, and measurement (Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010). From a meta-language learning perspective, these syntheses strengthen the case that many learners benefit when instruction and feedback create structured opportunities for noticing, reflection, and revision.

A second driver is the contemporary emphasis on learner autonomy and “learning to learn.” Autonomy has long been framed as the capacity to take charge of learning, involving decision-making and responsibility rather than mere independence (Littlewood, 1996). SRL research offers more fine-grained models of how such capacities operate through cycles of goal setting, strategic action, monitoring, reflection, and motivational regulation (Panadero, 2017). In ELT, this shift is especially visible in L2 literacy research, where writing and reading development is increasingly explained in terms of metacognitive knowledge and regulation (Teng, 2020; Teng, 2022; Zhang, 2010). Earlier work also pointed to systematic differences between more and less effective writers in their knowledge about writing and their control of writing processes (Victori, 1999), aligning with the contemporary SRL emphasis on self-directed regulation as a learnable competence.

A third driver is the multilingual reality of ELT. In many settings, learners operate across multiple linguistic systems and routinely engage in comparison, transfer, and control of cross-linguistic influence. Such activity is inherently metalinguistic: learners must notice differences, test hypotheses, and develop concepts that explain how languages work. Evidence from multilingual primary-level EFL classrooms indicates that metalinguistic awareness can be fostered when learners are guided to reflect on language patterns and use multilingual resources strategically (Walla, 2025). At the same time, recent calls to measure metalinguistic awareness developmentally—especially in children—suggest a shift toward treating awareness as an instructional outcome rather than an assumed by-product of proficiency (Roehr Brackin, 2025).

These developments motivate a synthesis that can map how meta-language learning is being conceptualized and operationalized in current ELT scholarship. The present manuscript reports a rapid scoping review focused on trends between 2015 and 2025, while drawing on foundational work included in the corpus where it provides conceptual continuity (Littlewood, 1996; Wenden, 1998; Victori, 1999).

Methods

A rapid scoping review design was used to map trends and recurring pedagogical mechanisms across a broad literature. The purpose was not to compute a single pooled effect size, but to identify how meta-language learning is conceptualized and operationalized across ELT domains (e.g., writing, reading, feedback, teacher education), and to highlight converging directions and gaps.

The synthesis focused on peer-reviewed publications situated in ELT/ESL/EFL contexts that explicitly addressed at least one of the following: (a) metalanguage or teacher/learner talk about language (including metadiscourse or metapragmatic awareness), (b) metalinguistic awareness and its measurement or instruction, or (c) metacognition/SRL and strategy-based instruction linked to language learning. To ensure traceability and citation integrity, sources were included only when an original DOI was reported. Twenty-six sources were retained for synthesis. The corpus included meta-analyses on instruction, corrective feedback, and corpus/data-driven learning (Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Spada & Tomita, 2010). It also included studies of classroom discourse and teacher professional knowledge, such as dialogic teaching in early ESL classrooms (Chow et al., 2021) and teacher trainees' links among metadiscourse, metalanguage, and metapragmatic awareness (Larina, 2021).

Metalinguistic awareness was represented through methodological work on measuring children's awareness (Roehr Brackin, 2025) and multilingual classroom research (Walla, 2025). Metacognition and SRL were represented through theoretical and empirical work on L2 reading as a dynamic metacognitive system (Zhang, 2010), SRL instruction and reading outcomes (Mohammadi et al., 2020), and a range of writing-focused studies addressing metacognitive awareness and experiences (Ruan, 2014; Sun et al., 2021), metacognitive knowledge and regulation as predictors of writing performance (Teng, 2020), SRL strategy models and validation (Teng & Zhang, 2016), SRL strategies-based writing instruction (Teng & Zhang, 2020), transfer of self-regulation in language learning and teaching (Teng & Zhang, 2022), and comprehensive synthesis of SRL and L2 writing (Teng, 2022). Intervention work also included writing strategy instruction (De Silva & Graham, 2015), metacognitive writing strategy instruction with motivational outcomes (Han, 2024), technology-mediated metacognitive writing support (Yeh, 2015), and flipped-classroom metacognitive strategy instruction (Khosravi et al., 2023). Finally, earlier work on differences between more and less effective EFL writers provided a benchmark for understanding metacognitive and knowledge-related differences (Victori, 1999), and conceptual work emphasized the social nature of L2 metacognition (Wu, 2021).

A thematic analysis was conducted. Each source was coded for focal construct(s), domain (e.g., writing, reading, teacher education), participant characteristics, and pedagogical mechanism (e.g., explicit instruction, feedback, corpus inquiry, technology mediation). Codes were clustered into higher-order themes representing emerging trends. Trend statements were developed by identifying convergent patterns across multiple sources and were checked against the corpus to ensure each trend was supported by multiple sources rather than a single study.

Results

Four interrelated trends were identified across the corpus.

First, metalinguistic awareness is increasingly treated as both measurable and teachable, including in younger and multilingual learners. Research on measuring children's metalinguistic awareness reflects growing interest in developmentally appropriate constructs and tasks, enabling classroom-relevant investigation of how awareness develops and how instruction can support it (Roehr Brackin, 2025). This shift matters because it moves the field from correlational claims ("aware learners learn better") to instructional questions about how awareness can be cultivated through everyday classroom practice.

In multilingual EFL classrooms, evidence suggests that metalinguistic awareness can be fostered when learners are supported to compare languages, articulate patterns, and reflect on form–meaning connections in age-appropriate ways (Walla, 2025). Across these studies, “meta” is not positioned as a specialized advanced skill; rather, it is treated as a developmental capacity that can be nurtured alongside communicative activity.

Second, teacher metalanguage and talk about language are re-centering in teacher education and in interaction-focused pedagogy. Research with teacher trainees demonstrates that professional language awareness includes metadiscourse and metapragmatic awareness—knowledge of how texts are organized, how stance and engagement are signaled, and how social meanings are enacted (Larina, 2021). This broadening of metalanguage reflects contemporary ELT needs, where learners must navigate not only grammatical correctness but also genre expectations and pragmatic appropriateness. Evidence from dialogic teaching in early ESL classrooms indicates that structured teacher-led and student-participatory dialogue can enhance language development, with effects interacting with learners’ vocabulary resources (Chow et al., 2021). Taken together, these sources suggest an emerging emphasis on the teacher’s capacity to use metalanguage strategically within interaction: not as lengthy explanation, but as brief, timely conceptual scaffolding that helps learners notice, name, and revise language choices.

Third, SRL and metacognitive instruction are consolidating as dominant frameworks for L2 writing and reading pedagogy. SRL synthesis work emphasizes that self-regulation involves cyclical processes of planning, performance control, and self-reflection, embedded in motivational and contextual conditions (Panadero, 2017). In language learning, metacognitive knowledge shapes how learners plan and monitor learning (Wenden, 1998), and earlier studies already documented meaningful variation in writers’ awareness and control (Victori, 1999). In writing, recent research highlights multiple layers of metacognition, including writers’ awareness of strategies and tasks as well as their in-the-moment metacognitive experiences during composing (Ruan, 2014; Sun et al., 2021). Studies further indicate that metacognitive knowledge and regulation can mediate university EFL learners’ writing performance, supporting the view that metacognition is not only descriptive but also pedagogically consequential (Teng, 2020).

Intervention research strengthens the instructional relevance of this SRL trend. Writing strategy instruction has been shown to influence strategy use and support writing development in ESL contexts (De Silva & Graham, 2015). More recent studies explicitly framed as SRL-oriented writing pedagogy report that strategies-based instruction organized around self-regulation cycles can improve learners' writing outcomes (Teng & Zhang, 2020). Supporting this research direction, validation of multidimensional SRL strategy models provides measurement tools for examining regulatory profiles and instructional impacts (Teng & Zhang, 2016). Technology-mediated contexts have also become prominent: online writing systems can facilitate metacognitive processes in genre-based writing (Yeh, 2015), and flipped designs integrating metacognitive strategy-based instruction have been associated with improvements in writing performance and related affective variables (Khosravi et al., 2023).

Metacognitive writing strategy instruction has also been linked to motivational dimensions, suggesting that “meta” includes regulation of effort and engagement, not only cognition (Han, 2024).

In L2 reading, SRL trends are similarly visible. Structural modeling research suggests that SRL instruction is associated with relationships among self-regulation, reading comprehension, and reading problem solving (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Earlier conceptualization of EFL reading as a dynamic metacognitive system provides a complementary account of how readers adaptively deploy strategies under changing task demands (Zhang, 2010). A notable conceptual development across domains is the growing recognition that metacognition is partly social. Conceptual work argues that L2 metacognition is shaped through interaction, norms, and shared practices, implying that reflection and regulation can be cultivated through dialogic and collaborative activity rather than treated as solely individual mental processes (Wu, 2021). This social framing is consistent with emerging interest in whether self-regulation can be transferred across contexts of language learning and teaching (Teng & Zhang, 2022). Fourth, evidence continues to consolidate for explicit instruction, corrective feedback, and data-driven learning (DDL) as meta-language-rich pathways to noticing and durable development. Instruction–feature interaction evidence suggests that explicit instruction can be effective but that its impact depends on feature type, reinforcing the need to design explicitness strategically rather than universally (Spada & Tomita, 2010). Corrective feedback meta-analyses provide convergent evidence that feedback can facilitate learning in SLA and classroom settings (Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010). These findings align with a meta-language learning interpretation in which feedback works best when learners can interpret the target (often supported by accessible metalanguage) and integrate feedback into cycles of monitoring and revision (consistent with SRL models; Panadero, 2017).

DDL and corpus use represent another explicit pathway. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that corpus use in language learning shows overall positive effects, particularly when learners are guided in interpreting data and forming generalizations (Boulton & Cobb, 2017). DDL can be interpreted as a structured environment for meta-language learning: learners observe authentic usage, articulate hypotheses using accessible metalanguage, test those hypotheses in production, and evaluate outcomes. In practice, DDL can complement feedback and explicit instruction by making evidence for usage patterns visible and discussable, potentially strengthening noticing and supporting more durable learning than rule explanation alone.

Discussion

The synthesis suggests that meta-language learning has become an organizing principle in contemporary ELT, linking teacher education, classroom discourse, and learner development. Across the reviewed work, progress is most plausibly supported when learners engage in meaningful language use, make language explicit enough to be discussed and revised, and regulate learning processes over time.

Instructional coherence is therefore central. Evidence for explicit instruction indicates that “how explicit” teaching should be is not uniform across language targets; effectiveness depends on the interaction between instructional type and feature type (Spada & Tomita, 2010). Corrective feedback meta-analyses similarly show that feedback can support development (Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010), but classroom impact depends on learners’ ability to interpret feedback and convert it into revision decisions. This is where metalanguage and SRL intersect: learners need sufficient conceptual tools to understand what a feedback comment refers to, and sufficient regulatory routine to decide what to change, how to check it, and how to prevent recurrence across tasks. In this sense, feedback is not only information about error; it can be a cue that triggers planning, monitoring, and evaluation cycles (Panadero, 2017).

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Teacher professional knowledge is equally decisive because teacher talk is the medium through which meta-language learning is scaffolded in real time. Teacher trainees’ links among metadiscourse, metalanguage, and metapragmatic awareness underscore that metalanguage in ELT extends beyond grammatical labels to include stance, cohesion, genre expectations, and pragmatic intent (Larina, 2021). Classroom interaction research supports the idea that structured dialogue can promote language development, while also demonstrating that outcomes interact with learners’ vocabulary resources (Chow et al., 2021).

Together, these findings imply that teacher education should develop both (a) metalanguage for describing language in use and (b) interactional routines that keep metalinguistic discussion accessible (e.g., naming a feature briefly, anchoring it in examples, and revisiting it through repeated contextualized use).

The SRL trend reframes learner autonomy as a teachable outcome. Autonomy involves learners' capacity to take charge of learning within constraints (Littlewood, 1996), while SRL models specify how such control is enacted through cycles of planning, performance regulation, and reflection (Panadero, 2017). Empirical writing research suggests that more effective writers differ from less effective writers in knowledge and awareness (Victori, 1999) and that metacognitive knowledge and regulation relate to writing performance (Teng, 2020). Studies of writers' metacognitive awareness and metacognitive experiences further suggest that learners differ in how they monitor difficulty and confidence during composing, shaping persistence and revision behavior (Ruan, 2014; Sun et al., 2021). The pedagogical implication is that classrooms should not assume SRL as a prerequisite; rather, SRL routines should be taught explicitly and embedded in authentic reading and writing tasks, consistent with intervention evidence (De Silva & Graham, 2015; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Teng & Zhang, 2020).

Technology can function as “meta-scaffolding” when it makes regulation visible and rehearsable rather than merely delivering content. Online writing systems can support planning, monitoring, and reflection prompts and facilitate iterative revision cycles (Yeh, 2015). Flipped and blended designs can relocate some modeling outside class and increase time for guided practice; evidence suggests benefits for writing performance and affective variables such as anxiety and self-efficacy (Khosravi et al., 2023). Metacognitive writing strategy instruction also appears linked to motivational outcomes (Han, 2024), reinforcing that regulation is not purely cognitive. A research and design priority is therefore to specify which technological features (e.g., prompts, revision histories, peer-response channels) best support metalinguistic noticing and SRL cycles in classroom ecologies.

Methodologically, advances in measuring children's metalinguistic awareness strengthen classroom relevance and developmental validity (Roehr Brackin, 2025). In multilingual primary contexts, assessment should capture awareness in action (e.g., through explanation with examples and comparisons), aligning with evidence that metalinguistic awareness can be fostered in multilingual EFL classrooms (Walla, 2025).

More broadly, outcome measures should match instructional mechanisms: interventions targeting reflective noticing and regulation should include measures that capture these processes rather than only discrete-point accuracy scores.

Research priorities emerging from this synthesis include longitudinal classroom studies examining durability and transfer of regulatory routines across tasks and settings (Teng, 2022; Zhang, 2010), integrated designs that study how teacher talk, peer interaction, and tools jointly shape noticing and regulation (Wu, 2021), and minimal-metalanguage design principles that balance precision with accessibility, particularly in dialogic classrooms (Chow et al., 2021). In parallel, explicit learning pathways such as DDL remain promising but require careful pedagogy; meta-analytic evidence supports corpus use overall (Boulton & Cobb, 2017), yet classroom impact likely depends on how learners are guided to interpret evidence, articulate hypotheses, and apply insights in production and revision.

In conclusion, ELT research from 2015 to 2025 converges on an integrated view of meta-language learning in which metalanguage, metalinguistic awareness, and SRL operate together. Explicit instruction, feedback, and corpus inquiry provide structured opportunities for noticing and explanation (Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Spada & Tomita, 2010); teacher metalanguage and dialogic interaction scaffold learners' reasoning about language in context (Chow et al., 2021; Larina, 2021); and SRL routines sustain learning through planning, monitoring, and evaluation across tasks and settings (Panadero, 2017; Teng, 2022).

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