METACOGNITIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

When it comes to learning foreign languages, one can never say that he or she has reached perfection in learning it. Learning a foreign language is ever to be further improved, given the complexity of linguistic structures as well as the fact that languages evolve in time. The aim of our paper is to provide several examples of metacognitive learning strategies for teaching English as a foreign language and highlight the impact of their use upon the students' ability to self-regulate learning, their achievement of learner autonomy, as well as their overall learning potential and learning motivation.

Key words*: language, learning strategies, life-long learning, metacognitive strategies, metacognitive skills*

Introduction

One of the most important tasks of teachers is to teach students how to learn throughout their lifetime. Like the proverb says, 'give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime'. In order to teach students how to learn and build their own learning style and, as a result, engage in life-long learning, teachers need to resort to metacognitive strategies.

Metacognition designates the awareness, analysis and knowledge that a person has of his/ her cognitive (learning, thinking) processes.[2] The term 'metacognition' was coined by American developmental psychologist John Flavell (1979), who defined it as knowledge about cognition and control of cognition. In experimental psychology, Nelson and Narens (1990, p. 127) drew a

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[2] "metacognition". Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. 2015. Merriam Webster Online. 23 September 2015. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metacognition .

relevant distinction between *monitoring* – making judgments about the strength of one's memories – and *control* – using those judgments to guide behaviour, especially study choices. Flavell (1979: 908) has classified cognition into three components:

- metacognitive knowledge/ metacognitive awareness: what individuals know about themselves and others as cognitive processors;

- metacognitive regulation: the regulation of cognition and learning experiences through a set of activities that help people control their learning;

- metacognitive experiences: experiences that have something to do with the current cognitive endeavour.

Types of metacognitive awareness include:

- person knowledge/ declarative knowledge, namely understanding one's own capabilities; knowledge about the factors that may influence one's performance as a learner; it is also referred to as "world knowledge" (Schneider, 2010, p. 152);

- task knowledge/ procedural knowledge, or how one perceives the difficulty of a task, translated as the content, length and type of assignment; it refers to knowledge about doing things; a high level of procedural knowledge enables individuals to perform tasks automatically (Pressley, Borkowski & Schneider, 1987, p. 30);

- strategic knowledge/ conditional knowledge, in other words, one's own capability for using strategies to acquire information; it designates knowing when and why to use declarative and procedural knowledge; it enables students to allocate their resources when using strategies and this, in turn, makes strategies more effective (Reynolds, 1992, p. 350).

Metacognitive regulation comprises three essential skills (Schraw, 1998, p. 117; Jacobs & Paris, 1987, p. 263):

- planning: selecting strategies appropriately and allocating resources correctly in order to impact task performance in a positive way;

- monitoring: being aware of one's comprehension and task performance;

- evaluating: assessing the product of a task as well as the efficiency at which the task was performed; this may include a re-evaluation of the strategies used.

Maintaining motivation to complete a task is also a metacognitive skill, together with the ability to become aware of, and resist to distracting stimuli in order to sustain effort over time – this is known as cognitive control.

The importance of metacognitive skills has already been revealed by certain studies: a study comparing fifth and sixth graders' problem-solving skills found that metacognitive knowledge can compensate for IQ and lack of prior knowledge (Swanson, 1990, p. 309); students

with higher metacognitive skills were less likely than other students to have their learning affected by using a mobile phone in class (Rosen et. al., 2010, p. 175).

Examples of metacognitive activities include planning how to approach a learning task, monitoring comprehension and evaluating progress towards the achievement of the task. Supporting students in building metacognitive control contributes essentially to successful learning. Too often, we teach students what to think but not how to think, what to learn but not how to learn. Learning how to learn relies, basically, on thinking how to think. Thinking how to think, in other words, metacognition, occurs in situations when learners become aware of the fact that their cognition, their capacity to understand something has failed them (for example, not being able to understand content or relations (e.g. grammar rules) and, therefore, they have to work in order to make sense of it. Thus, the metacognitive act includes two elements or stages:

- the learner realizes that there are limitations to everybody's knowledge to complete a task;
- the learner realizes that he/ she possesses strategies for correcting the restricting situation and completing the task.

In addition to teaching cognitive skills, it is important that language teachers support students in building metacognitive skills.

Cognitive vs metacognitive language learning style

We believe that it is important to define language learning strategies and draw a distinction between cognitive and metacognitive strategies, because this supports us in identifying the most effective learning strategies. According to Graham (1997, pp. 42-43), metacognitive strategies that enable students to plan, control and evaluate their learning are more essential than strategies that promote interaction and input. Metacognitive strategies help build something more than an inclination towards cooperation, namely self-esteem and self-confidence given by the ability to choose and evaluate one's learning strategies, besides the value of the respective strategies and the autonomy and independence in learning that comes along with them.

Language learning strategies designate the conscious and semi-conscious thoughts and behaviours that learners use with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language (Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002, p. 176). According to the same authors, language learning strategies involve the following subcategories:

- retrieval: calling up material from storage;
- rehearsal: practising target language structures;

- communication: extending the students' communicative means beyond the constraints of target-language proficiency;

- cover: creating an appearance of language ability so as not to look unprepared.

Cohen and Dörnyei also highlight the relevance of self-motivation in learning, by identifying self-motivating strategies that learners can use to increase and protect their existing motivation (idem, p. 179). O'Malley and Chamot (1987: 241-242) have provided a comprehensive and detailed classification of learning strategies, as follows:

- metacognitive strategies: controlling processes in planning for learning, monitoring one's comprehension and production, evaluating how well one has achieved a learning objective;

- cognitive strategies: e.g. reasoning, analysing, summarizing; the learner interacts with the content to be learned by manipulating it mentally (e.g. making mental images or relating new information to previously acquired concepts or skills) or physically (grouping items in meaningful categories, or taking notes, making summaries of relevant information to be remembered);

- social-affective strategies: the learner either interacts with another person in order to assist learning, as in cooperation or asking questions for clarification, or uses some kind of affective control to assist learning.

When reading in order to understand a text, learners apply a variety of strategies that may be (Khezrlou, 2012, p. 50):

- cognitive: making predictions, translating, summarizing, linking with prior knowledge or experience, applying grammar rules, guessing meaning from context);

- metacognitive: self-management or self-regulation, planning, monitoring one's learning process.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) provide a list of general learning strategies (which may also function as metacognitive strategies), highlighting the metacognitive processes involved in each of them:

1) Setting goals: developing/ planning personal objectives, identifying the purpose of the task; the metacognitive process of planning;

2) Directing attention: deciding in advance to focus on particular tasks and ignore distractions; the metacognitive processes of planning, monitoring, problem-solving, evaluating;

3) Activating background knowledge: thinking about and using what the student already knows that helps him do the task; the metacognitive processes of planning, monitoring, problem-solving, evaluating;

4) Predicting: anticipating information to prepare and give direction for the task; the metacognitive process of planning;

5) Organizational planning: planning the task and content sequence; outlining, brainstorming, making a priority list; the metacognitive process of planning;

6) Self-management: arranging for conditions that helps one learn; knowing yourself, planning how to study; the metacognitive process of planning;

7) Asking if it makes sense: checking understanding and production to keep track of progress and identify problems; monitoring comprehension and production, self-monitoring; the metacognitive process of monitoring;

8) Attending selectively: focusing on key words, phrases and ideas; scanning, finding specific information; the metacognitive processes of planning and monitoring;

9) Deduction/ induction: consciously applying learned or self-developed rules; using/ making a rule; the metacognitive process of monitoring.

There are three aspects that are crucial to metacognition. The first of them is self-awareness: The first step in effective learning is to know one's learning style (visual, auditory or kinaesthetic). For example, if a student knows that he has got poor memory, he will compensate this by note-taking and studying the notes. The second aspect of metacognition is related to uncovering more about how languages are acquired, namely what it takes to know information related to that language and how to use the respective information. Students should be aware of the fact that only by attending the language class they will not learn that language; students should be aware of the fact that they need to participate actively, get involved and take part in every activity in order to be successful in their language learning endeavour. The third and final step is preparing and planning for effective learning. It is essential to set learning goals because this makes learners reach their objectives more easily if they have their objectives clearly stated.

Metacognitive learning strategies in the English class

The first thing that a teacher needs to do in the process of building metacognitive skills at his or her students is to help the students know themselves and their learning styles. Identifying the students' learning style can be done through questionnaires applied at the beginning of the course, by having students exchange questionnaires, interviewing each other and then discussing, as a group, the findings related to their learning styles. Now and then, the teacher might need to remind their students of their learning styles, so that students may not be distracted from using the strategies that are suitable to their individual style. The teacher should also apply a variety of

classroom activities that are suited for the students' individual learning styles. At the beginning of every new course, students should establish their own goals in relation to the goals of the course book – for example, students may decide if they merely want to pass the course or get an excellent mark; or, they can decide on the specific language areas they want to focus on: reading, grammar, speaking, vocabulary etc.

Briefly, metacognitive strategies are strategies for acting on what you know – i.e. directing, improving, increasing etc. what you know. Clegg (2015, pp. 4-5) proposes a synthetic presentation of metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective learning strategies. We shall further present and illustrate them because we believe that they are all relevant for language learning and also because the cognitive and social-affective strategies support the building and formation of metacognitive skills.

The cognitive strategies synthesized by the author mentioned above are:

1. Resourcing: using reference materials such as dictionaries, encyclopedias or textbooks;
2. Grouping: classifying words, terminology, quantities or concepts according to their attributes, constructing graphic organizers;
3. Note-taking: writing down key words and concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic or numerical form, taking notes on idea maps, making T-lists;
4. Elaborating prior knowledge: relating new to known information and making personal associations; using what the student knows, using background knowledge, making analogies;
5. Summarizing: making a mental, oral or written summary of information gained from listening or reading; saying or writing the main idea;
6. Deduction/ induction: applying or figuring out rules to understand a concept or complete a learning task; using/ making a rule;
7. Imagery: using mental or real pictures to learn new information or solve a problem; visualizing, making a picture;
8. Auditory representation: replaying mentally a word, phrase or piece of information; using one's mental tape recorder, hearing the piece of information again;
9. Making inferences: using information in the text to guess meanings of new items or predict upcoming information; using context clues; guessing from context; predicting.

The social-affective strategies synthesized by Clegg (2015, p. 5) are:

1. Questioning for clarification: getting additional explanation or verification from a teacher or other expert; asking questions;

2. Cooperation: working with peers to complete a task, pool information, solve a problem, get feedback; cooperating, working with classmates, coaching each other;

3. Self-talk: reducing anxiety by improving one's sense of competence. Thinking positive.

Metacognition has been generally viewed as comprising five main components or skills (Naznean, 2009, p. 758): (1) preparing and planning for learning, (2) selecting and using learning strategies, (3) monitoring strategy use, (4) orchestrating various strategies, and (5) evaluating strategy use and learning. These five metacognitive skills interact with each other, since metacognition is not a linear process, but a constant forward and backward movement between preparing, planning and evaluating one's learning.

The metacognitive strategies synthesized by Clegg (2015, p. 5) fall into three main categories:

I. Planning, with the following components:

a) Advance organization, characterized by previewing, skimming and reading for gist; previewing the main ideas and concepts of a text; identifying the organizing principle;

b) Organizational planning, or planning what to do; planning how to accomplish the learning task; planning the parts and sequence of ideas to express;

c) Selective attention: listening or reading selectively, scanning, finding specific information; attending to key words, phrases, ideas, linguistic markers, types of information;

d) Self-management: planning when, where and how to study; seeking or arranging the conditions that help one learn.

At this point in their learning, students make a plan of what they need to do and establish goals, organizing their thoughts and activities, in order to undertake the achievement of tasks. By preparing, students become more capable of completing more difficult tasks. Also at this stage, students divide larger assignments into smaller parts that are more manageable and thus easier to tackle. Students think about what they want to accomplish and how they intend to do it. Teachers should encourage students to reflect upon their own goals first of all by highlighting more clearly the learning goals for the whole class and then supporting students in setting their own objectives. Setting goals accurately helps students in measuring their own learning progress better. For example, the teacher might set the goal of mastering the vocabulary from a certain learning unit in the English textbook; a student might set the goal of being able to answer the comprehension questions at the end of the respective learning unit.

II. Monitoring, with the following components:

a) Monitoring comprehension: thinking while listening, thinking while reading; checking one's comprehension during listening or reading;

b) Monitoring production: thinking while speaking, thinking while writing; checking one's oral or written production while it is taking place.

By monitoring their own learning, students reflect on their own personal learning styles and strategies, they become aware of how they learn best, the conditions that help them learn better and faster, focus on the task and look for opportunities to practice the language content to be learned in the target language. For example, teaching language learners the different reading strategies is of major relevance in this respect: scanning and skimming make students read for a specific purpose, as well as connect the type of reading with a type of goal. Other strategies include word analysis (dividing the word into its prefix and stem) or using context clues to make sense of a word. However, teachers should show students how to choose the most successful strategy in a given situation. By being constantly aware of the learning strategies they use, students direct, systematize and make connections among the various learning strategies, which makes the distinction between strong and weak second language learners. For example, regarding a writing task, the teacher might ask students to think about their audience and purpose of writing (to explain, to persuade); in the process of writing, students should keep returning to reflect upon the questions of "why" and "for whom" they are writing. Also, teachers should also teach students how to recognize when one strategy is not working and shift to another strategy. For example, word analysis will not work in trying to identify the meaning of the word 'antimony' (since "anti-" is not a prefix in this case), hence the student will have to use context clues to try and get the meaning of this word.

III. Evaluating, namely self-assessment: checking back, keeping a learning log, reflecting on what you learned; judging how well one has accomplished a learning task.

Students should be encouraged to decide for themselves how well they learned a certain content or how well they performed on a task, to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, which may help them perform better the next time. Students also reflect on the efficiency of the learning strategies they used, as well as the changes they would apply to their learning process in relation to a prospective learning task.

Conclusions

There are three metacognitive skills that are relevant in achieving any task: planning (strategy selection and resource allocation); monitoring (awareness about one's task performance); evaluating (assessing the product and the efficiency at which the task was performed). Another relevant metacognitive skill is maintaining motivation to complete a task, as well as the ability to resist to distracting stimuli in order to sustain effort over time. Metacognitive skills can compensate for IQ and knowledge gaps. I

Building metacognitive control at students helps them achieve successful learning. It is important to teach students not necessarily what to think but how to think, not only what to learn but how to learn. Learning how to learn relies, basically, on thinking how to think. Thinking how to think, in other words, metacognition, occurs when learners become aware of the fact that their capacity to understand something has failed them (e.g. grammar rules) and, therefore, they have to make efforts in order to make sense of it. Thus, by engaging in a metacognitive act, learners cover two stages: they realize that there are limitations to everybody's knowledge to complete a task, but also that they possess strategies needed to correct the restricting situation and complete the task.

Moreover, metacognitive strategies help build something more than an inclination towards cooperation, namely self-esteem and self-confidence (Magaldi, 2010) given by the ability to choose and evaluate one's learning strategies, besides the value of the respective strategies and the autonomy and independence in learning that comes along with them.

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