

Metacognitive strategies in English learning

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Abstract

This paper describes the concept of metacognitive strategies applied in the English classroom. These are approaches to teaching intended to give students better access to the learning process. Metacognitive strategies are intended to help students activate and actualize the learning process by examining it on a personal level, as individual learners and using the “tools” that are most appropriate for them. Also examined are various tool and tactics used in Metacognitive strategies.

Key words : appropriate learning strategies, autonomous learning, motivation

1. “Learner-centered”

English education has been, even if it might not have been dramatically, changing over the last couple of decades. The author still remembers that people often criticized translation work and grammar learning as useless. These two methods are not entirely wrong, as they have their own advantages, and of course there are still many courses specifically about language translation and grammar rules, but it is also true that they do not provide answers to every requirement in using English. On the other hand, the communicative approach is receiving more and more popularity among language learners and teachers. Reflecting this trend, many researchers present their study results and opinions. For example, Siegel mentioned after the 2008 JALT conference, a transition of ;

... from treating a student body as a monolith to better understanding individual learner psychology ; a change from pre-specified inflexible course design to more fluid material that addresses specific local needs ; a shift from teacher-focused content to learner-centeredness ; a move from neglecting individuality to seeking and recognizing student investment. ... I believe existing strategies should be incorporated and nurtured ; teachers may provide alternative options but should not slight those strategies initially selected by learners. (Siegel, 2009. p182).

In short, he saw the transition of teacher-centered classroom management to learner-centered one.

A student-centered curriculum “is not static, it is impossible to expect that the developer be in a position to identify the perfect balance of the abilities noted above for any particular group

of learners” (Gatehouse, 2001). It is more about learner psychology and linguistics, about how learners acquire language and about how languages are acquired. Therefore, need analysis is one step that teachers should remember to conduct, because learners have different 1) learning strategies, 2) learning skills, 3) learning schemata, 4) motivational levels, and 5) interests. It means teachers do not only hand down language knowledge systematically, but they are expected to be flexible according to learner learning tendencies, motivation, attitude, and interests, nor do they ignore the learning methods that students prefer.

There are different insights between teachers and learners concerning the unwillingness to study in the classroom. According to Christmas (2009), teachers see students as not participating when they use the cell phone, do make-up, sleep, are absent, lack preparation and come to lessons without pencils, textbook, or homework. Of course, students might not take part in classroom activities at all. On the other hand, for students, problems exist like boredom, classroom anxiety, and the inability to recognize the necessity of subject matter. She comments that it is crucial to help learners to re-connect with subject matter and with other learners in the classroom to let more learning take place and that learner motivation largely depends on teachers. She might be right to a certain degree, but there are some students, whose interest and willingness are practically zero in required courses, or who dislike to get connected with other students at all. Besides, teachers trying so much in the classroom and preparing so that learners can easily participate may actually spoil learners and may create even more dependant learners.

Active learner participation is ideal in connection with a learner-centered classroom and higher motivation can vitalize participation. In order to raise learner motivation and create a positive attitude toward learning, autonomy can be one important factor. Autonomy can be accelerated when learners are aware of metacognitive strategies. They need to recognize learning strategies and skills, feel their progress with achievable goals. They can be more autonomous when they are certain what to do. To avoid issues like learners being reluctant in the classroom and incapable of relating to subjects, again, it seems beneficial to create an autonomous learning environment, too.

2 . Motivation and metacognitive approach

Among different components of motivation, learners with intrinsic motivation are considered to learn the target language the most effectively. Feeling satisfied with learning must be one important factor in order to raise intrinsic motivation, because the drive to learn is because it is fun to learn. To achieve some satisfaction, learners should have learning goals and recognize how to learn rather than just do tasks imposed on them by teachers without thinking about its objective.

Small and Venkatesh (2000) also write that learning satisfaction is useful for educators because satisfaction can enhance intrinsic motivation and let one continue learning. It might be

easier to be satisfied if learners can be involved with some decision making concerning learning itself and this type of involvement and satisfaction may draw out confidence. Another thing a teacher should keep in their mind is that learners have positive closure and also more clear closure to foster clear satisfaction (Small & Venkatesh, 2000). Seeing the end of each task positively allows them to feel achievement and confidence more.

Acknowledging what is going on in learning can enhance motivation, and a metacognitive approach is one way to prompt learners to be aware of learning methods or process. Carrell et al (1998) explain metacognition, saying that thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, the monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and the self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed. Likewise, Chiquito (1995) writes “metacognitive strategies of learning involve thinking about or planning a learning process before the actual learning activity, monitoring the acquisition of new knowledge or carrying out a critical self-evaluation of the results obtained after a learning process” (p211) and goes on to say those strategies “are supposed to arouse learner awareness of possible relationships between previously acquired knowledge and new information” (p211).

Metacognitive strategies consist basically of becoming aware of the cognitive approach. Metacognitive strategies cover different aspects and stages in learning and each stage allow learners to be aware of the learning process. Oishi and Kinoshita (2004) explain metacognitive strategies with 1) selective attention, 2) planning, 3) monitoring, and 4) evaluation. Learners are expected to be reflective regarding their purpose, process, achievement, and new goal settings. This cycle can be short or long term, or combinations of both. It could be more useful to have a series of short term cycles to construct a long term one. With this reflection within learners, they can be more conscious of learning skills and strategies.

There are differences between learning skills and strategies. Paris et al (1983) explain that the former is applied to a text unconsciously for many reasons including expertise, repeated practice, compliance with directions, luck, and native use. On the other hand, the latter is about an action deliberately chosen to achieve particular goals. Learners need to pay attention to new ways of learning or learning methods which they are not accustomed to yet and when they deliberately choose certain skills to gain certain knowledge, it is called strategy. So it is not difference in methods themselves, the difference lies among psychological aspect of learners. Paris et al (1983) write “strategic actions are ... skills that are made deliberate, it follows that a “strategy” can mirror any level of skill. Deliberate, strategic allocation of effort to mimic a modeled behavior is often a precursor to skill acquisition” (p296). Through language development due to learning, “individual responses become aggregated into automatic sequences of complex actions” (p296) and when strategies are automatized, they are called skills. In short, a word “strategy” itself connotes learners’ consciousness on “how.”

There is more research to see if learners find values on activities/tasks they do in the classroom. One good example available is study done by Figura and Jarvis (2007) about how

learners feel about using a computer for self-access study. In this study, they find that learners use not only English, the target language, but also other languages to communicate with others. Using other languages is not necessarily bad, because learning may take place more efficiently and it may give more explicit knowledge about what they learn, but it should require more research on the effect of using target language and non-target language. Using their own first language for metacognitive approach has some value in it, too, because the main purpose for this is to be conscious of setting up goals, selecting learning strategies, getting feedback and evaluation on achievement, and modifying or proposing new goals. There are, of course, limits to metacognitive strategies, but it is worth while for learners to have a subjective opinion about their own learning. It helps prevent the chances of mistakes that they may make in the target language by using their own language.

3 . Recognition of appropriate learning strategies

The reason why learners should know strategies is not only to be aware of their importance, but also to recognize what strategies are suitable to gain certain skills and knowledge. Nakayama (2005) expresses regrettably that individuals have some misunderstanding in certain learning tasks. One of his examples is trying to take notes very neatly and carefully when one is supposed to be learning oral skills and they are encouraged to do more verbal practice. In fact, the author has encountered a number of students who complain that they have studied English grammar so hard and did translation so much and yet they were not able to communicate in English verbally.

For example, appropriate reading strategies are required to have better reading comprehension. Needless to say, successful readers have better reading skills than unsuccessful ones. Good successful readers are attentive to text structure, respond in an extensive mode, monitor their comprehension, relate themselves to content more affectively and personally, while unsuccessful readers do not integrate reading skills, rely much more on personal experiences and have a reflective mode more often than not (Carrell et al, 1998). Those who “orchestrate” various reading skills and apply them strategically read/comprehend better.

One can write down strategies and study plans to help to see what one knows and plans. For instance, a “can-do list” can be useful to raise metacognitive awareness (Kitzman, 2009), especially in order to perceive what learning strategies or even language skills people think they can perform. This explicitly informs people of what they are capable and not. For a start, having questions with yes/no answers, likert scale questions, or items with ranking would be easy for both learners to respond to and teachers to see actual conditions regarding learner awareness of their own ability. However, open-questions may elicit something teachers never imagined. Still, doing this within guideline constructs is important to seize results systematically.

Apart from or extended from the can-do list, one finds the learning portfolio as another

example, which is quite helpful to raise metacognitive awareness. Teachers can design a learning portfolio for their students, but allowing them to participate in designing process can induce a sense of involvement of being active and having a freedom of choice. Carrell et al (1998. p105) give three components of reading strategies, procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge, and conditional knowledge and say the last component is often missed the most. Conditional knowledge contains when and where learning occurs and how to evaluate. Besides learning strategies, themselves, the time and place of learning and evaluation procedures help learners relate themselves to knowledge to be gained and that should be declared as a part of learning. Like this, a portfolio helps to see what the missing aspects of learning are.

Chiquito (1995) conducted a study to see if advance organizers (oral and written) and captioning (subtitles, etc.) are useful to facilitate L2 learning. Single or a combination of different types of advance organizers, each or both, may facilitate learning a foreign language but, as she also writes, the results of her pilot test is only indicative not conclusive. In fact, the study results do not clearly show these are beneficial. Again, when learner-centeredness is oriented, teaching should not be static, as each individual has different tendencies, so study results would not be able to determine what is best and can not be over-generalized. However, warming up with checking background knowledge directs learner attention to what they are to learn more clearly.

Advance organizer is, basically, that learners think about theme and goals which remind them of what they already know, and then carry out actual learning. This can link learning memory, or short term memory, with long term memory. Because advance organizer lets the learner focus on main ideas, and then look into more details, it gives a preview to inherent schema (Chiquito, 1995). She expects advance organizer “to aide perception, interpretation (enabling skills), as well as the integration of the interpreted information into their previously formed schemas (enacting skill)” (p213). Although this type of warming-up task does not necessarily require creating a learning portfolio, it certainly helps clarify what and how learning takes place.

Additionally, learners should receive feedback from peer students and/or teachers and have their portfolios revised occasionally based on feedback and their own contemplation (Christmas, 2009). It is important that not only learners make portfolios, but also that teachers give feedback to offer guidance to correct any gaps between goals and strategies, make sure that learners find meaning in learning, and ensure that modification, if necessary, is smooth. A study done by Nakayama (2005) tries to see the difference in learner attitudes between performance goals oriented learning and that which is learning goal centered. It shows that the more performance goals go through traditional learning, the more negative the correlation with assumption strategies. On the other hand, individuals inclined to learning goals showed a positive relation with assumption strategies, which monitors learning process and speeds. He confirms the importance of helping them to pay attention to how English should be learned. The

purpose of making a portfolio is to cause learners to pay more attention to the learning process rather than the outcome of it, so feedback should be given regularly during the period of learning, but not at the end.

4 . Metacognition does not always guarantee effectiveness

Metacognitive strategies do not provide perfect learning styles. This can be seen with a study by Ito and Yamato (2005), who write that, as English language use is limited in Japan, it is better for language teachers in Japan to spend more time on teaching forms than on creating an ESL environment (Ito and Yamato, 2005). Because people are in a situation where they tend to receive English more than produce it in Japan, they suggest that teachers should teach language forms when they comprehend English. For that, 1) learners are caused to pay attention to target language rules, 2) carry out communication activities, and 3) receive explicit explanations about this process. They discuss that those who experienced metacognitive strategies recognize its effectiveness and the test results of learners with metacognitive strategies were better than those who did not learn with those strategies after the experiment. However, their follow-up research did not elicit a difference. Even though it is arguable that the test may not measure one's language ability entirely, this shows a case where metacognitive strategies are longitudinally not effective.

McKeown and Gentilucci (2007) studied the reading strategies of L2 learners. They write that reading is to create meaning from text and reading in L2 means to expose individuals to “unfamiliar idiom and cultural references” (p136), and also that those who are not good at reading drift away from text and go into their own world and that they look into details too much. Therefore, in the L2, when they learn reading comprehension, they first need to identify the most effective reading strategies.

Good reading strategies are to 1) think-aloud, 2) visualize, 3) predict, 4) relate new topics to prior knowledge, 5) have a purpose for reading, 6) accept ambiguities, 7) monitor comprehension, and 8) use fix-up strategies (McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007). Think aloud strategy is to speak aloud about the text and opinions about it and its aim is monitoring reading comprehension. Fix-up strategy is replacing unknown words and using pictures and graphs/charts to increase comprehension. They compared pre and posttest scores of three groups of English learners who read expository work and the results show think aloud strategies did not help comprehension in general. This strategy even hindered reading comprehension with early advanced students. They conclude that “reading instruction for English learners should focus primarily on vocabulary development, reading fluency, and sentence structure” (McKeown & Gentilucci, 2007. p145). Therefore, picking an inappropriate strategy may bring learners tragedy.

5 . Concluding remarks

This paper's aim is to overview metacognitive strategies for learning English, and to enhance awareness of them as a possible way to raise learning motivation and autonomy among learners. Questions remain to find better, if not the best, way of teaching. Although there are some study results showing metacognitive strategies being ineffective or even sometimes hindering, it is not necessarily meaningless to apply those strategies to all learners in every learning environment. Further studies are required to generalize on its effectiveness. As mentioned above, each learner is different and there are different learning methods to match individual needs and wants. As teaching adjusted to individual needs is not proven wrong, it is not justifiable to ignore learner differences and retain teacher-centeredness. Ito and Yamoto (2005) report that, generally, learners experienced learning with metacognitive strategies favored by them and it is important to conduct this approach longitudinally as well as for each lesson or the short term. Some learners may not be sure about how to learn a language. By showing learning strategies clearly, having learners acknowledge their achievements regularly, and revising the aims of learning and strategies depending on these aims, learner anxiety can decrease. It is advisable to let learners decide their approaches independently, and not impose instructor's ideas, for learners to find the process meaningful. Helping learners to find why and how they learn language correctly hopefully can help them increase autonomous learning. Ormon et al (1991) assert that the contribution of metacognitive knowledge is clearly to competent decision making and to decisional self-esteem. When learners become competent in making decision making and raising self-esteem, they are hopefully much closer to being competent as language learners as well.

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