

Metacognition: A Key to Success for EFL Learners

Chutima Thamraksa

ABSTRACT

The main difference between proficient and less proficient learners lies in the conscious ability to master their knowledge and learning processes, or so-called "metacognition." Students who possess good metacognition know how to learn and what to do in any learning circumstances. Metacognition is not inherited, but can be instilled into students through direct approaches. In EFL contexts, teachers should provide students with classroom activities that enhance both language skills and metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring, and evaluating.

INTRODUCTION

As teachers, we may be impressed by the type of students who can understand the materials after their first reading or give well-thought-out oral or written responses to the teachers' questions promptly. In contrast, we may not be content with the type of students who can hardly grasp the materials despite the four-to-five time reading or who simply give thoughtless responses. Students of the first type are indisputably given labels such as "successful, experienced, or proficient," while the other as "weak, inexperienced, or less proficient."

Weak or less proficient students differ from successful ones in many aspects. Among other things, weak students often are not aware of their thinking processes and fail to monitor their learning processes. Put simply, they are less able to take charge of their own learning; they do not know 'how to learn' and 'what to do' when facing problematic learning tasks. Successful learners, conversely, have a wide variety of thinking skills. They are aware of their knowledge and know when, where, and how to apply it to any learning situations. It is accepted that successful learners possess metacognition—the *conscious ability to recognize their knowledge, understand and have control over their own learning*. Students with good metacognition are able to monitor and direct their own learning processes; they have the ability to master information and apply the learning strategies to solve problems more easily.

METACOGNITION

The notion of metacognition first originated in the context of information processing studies in the 1970s. The term is most related to John Flavell (1976, 1979) who theorized that metacognition entails

both *metacognitive knowledge* and *metacognitive experiences*. Metacognitive knowledge refers to one's knowledge or beliefs about the factors that control cognitive (knowledge) processes. It is divided into three types: person variables, task variables, and strategy variables. The person variables are the individual's knowledge and beliefs about himself as a thinker or learner, and what he believes about other people's thinking processes. For instance, you believe that you can learn better by doing than by listening to lectures. The task variables refer to knowledge or all the information about the nature of a proposed task. This knowledge guides the individual in the management of a task, and provides information about the degree of success that he is likely to produce. As an example, you are aware that it will take you more time to write an essay on a political issue than an essay narrating your birthday party. The strategy variables include knowledge about both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, as well as conditional knowledge about when and where it is appropriate to use such strategies. For instance, you recognize that you need first to figure out the main idea of the text before you can answer inference questions to a reading selection.

The other category "metacognitive experiences," refers to a person's subjective internal responses to his own metacognitive knowledge, tasks, or strategies. Livingston (1997) described metacognitive experiences as monitoring phenomena, which can control cognitive activities, and ensure that a cognitive goal has been achieved. These processes help to regulate and manage learning, and consist of planning and monitoring cognitive activities, as well as checking the outcomes of those activities. Take the following situation as an example. After reading an assigned selection, you question yourself about the overall concepts of the text as your cognitive goal is to comprehend the text. If you realize that you cannot answer your own questions as a result of lack of comprehension, you decide that you must reread the material in order to be able to answer the questions previously asked. If after rereading the material, you can answer the questions, you then recognize that you have developed an understanding of the text. All these processes show that you are involved in the metacognitive experiences wherein you regulate and manage your own learning through self-questioning--a common metacognitive comprehension monitoring strategy to ensure that the cognitive goal of comprehension is achieved.

METACOGNITION AND READING COMPREHENSION

Metacognition plays an important role in reading comprehension. Research on metacognition has revealed that less proficient learners do not recognize the purpose of reading and tend to focus on word-by-word reading rather than reading for meaning (Di Vesta, Hayward, & Orlando, 1979). Harris et al. (1988) added that poor readers often finish reading passages without even knowing that they have not understood them. Also, poor readers are less able to adjust their reading rate to suit the purpose of reading (Smith, 1967). When they fail to comprehend the text, poor readers are not as flexible as good readers in utilizing different strategies to solve the problem (Garner & Kraus, 1980). As concluded by Langer (1982), poor readers are less efficient in monitoring their understanding of the material read or are deficient in metacognitive skills.

By contrast, Pressley, Borkowski, and Schneider (1987) highlighted that good readers automatically employ metacognitive strategies to focus their attention, to derive meaning, and to make adjustments when something goes wrong. Affirmed by Harris et al. (1988), readers who have higher metacognitive skills are able to check for confusion or inconsistency, undertake a corrective strategy, such as rereading, relating different parts of the passage to one another, look for topic sentences or summary paragraphs, and relating the current information to their past knowledge. Harris et al. (1988) went on to report that these readers do not label these skills while performing them but if asked, they can describe their metacognitive processes accurately. They have a conscious awareness of their own knowledge and the conscious ability to understand, control, and manipulate their own cognitive processes. Pressley, Borkowski, and Schneider (1987) concluded that since metacognitive strategies are potentially conscious and potentially controllable, learners with good metacognition are able to monitor and direct their own learning processes quite efficiently.

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES FOR EFL LEARNERS

Learners who can effectively use metacognitive strategies are in charge of their own behaviors. They are aware of their own thinking as they perform a specific task and can use this awareness to control what they are doing. According to Anderson (2002), understanding and controlling cognitive processes is one of the most essential skills that classroom teachers can help learners develop. In an EFL classroom, thus, rather than focusing students' attention solely on learning the language, teachers should teach metacognitive strategies to help students plan, control, and evaluate their learning. The basic metacognitive strategies that can lead to more effective learning and

improved performance, especially among the less proficient students include the following:

Preparing and planning for learning. It is difficult for students to become self-directed when learning is planned and monitored by someone else. Therefore, students must assume increasing responsibility for planning and regulating their own learning. Teachers can teach students to set up their learning goals and make plans for learning tasks. By engaging in preparation and planning in relation to a learning goal, students can think about what they need or want to accomplish and how they intend to go about performing it. However, it is important that teachers should have students be explicit about the particular learning goals. The clearer the goal is, the easier it will be for students to measure their own progress. For example, in an EFL writing class, students might set a goal for themselves of being able to write a process essay at the end of a lesson. They may then make such plans as organizing ideas, preparing an outline, and deciding on the techniques to make a paper unified and coherent.

Selecting and Using Learning Strategies. Students must be able to think and make conscious decisions about the appropriate learning strategies to be used when solving learning tasks. For instance, in an EFL reading class, readers may have several learning strategies to choose in dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary in a text. One possible strategy is the use of context clues to help predict the meaning of a word. Another is the use of word analysis (prefix/suffix). Teachers should give clear explanation about these strategies and when to use them. However, teachers should make it clear to students that no single strategy will work in every instance; hence, students must know how to choose the strategy that has the best chance of success in a given situation.

Monitoring Strategy Use. Once students have begun using the selected strategies, they need to ask themselves whether or not they are really using the strategies. For example, in a writing lesson, students learn several strategies to create a good essay; among other things to consider are the "audience" and "purpose" in writing. Students should be taught to monitor their use of these strategies by pausing occasionally while writing and asking themselves questions about what they are doing. In this case, students may ask whether or not they have provided the right amount of background information for their audience and whether the details being used are effective in achieving their purpose.

Evaluating One's Own Learning. By encouraging students to evaluate whether or not what they are doing is really effective, teachers can help students be actively engaged in metacognition. To evaluate the outcome of their learning, Anderson

(2002, p. 3) suggested that teachers have students respond thoughtfully to the following questions: “(1) What am I trying to accomplish? (2) What strategies am I using? (3) How well am I using them? (4) What is the outcome? (5) What else could I do?” In answering these questions, students can reflect on the processes of their learning. That is, preparing and planning relates to identifying what is to be accomplished, while selecting and using specific strategies relates to the question of which strategies are being used. The third question corresponds to monitoring strategy use, while the fourth and fifth relate to the evaluation of one’s own learning.

TEACHING METACOGNITION

Like many other processes, metacognition can be taught to students. The approaches in teaching students the metacognitive strategies include *direct instruction*, *teacher modeling*, and *application*. For direct instruction, teachers give clear explanation about the strategies to be taught, why they are important and when students will need to use them. Teachers also present a number of examples to illustrate their instruction. Other than giving direct explanation, teachers can model the strategies by using the technique “think out loud” to show “when and how” the metacognitive strategies should be used. The important point in this approach is that teachers would provide a model of the thinking process by saying out loud what is going on inside their heads. As important, students must be given ample opportunities to perform the same task under the guidance of teachers in order to internalize them until they become automatic. This application of the strategies serves as independent practice accompanied by teachers’ feedback. Recognizing and practice in applying metacognitive strategies will help students successfully solve problems not only in their subject areas but throughout their lives as well.

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE METACOGNITION IN EFL CONTEXTS

As mentioned elsewhere, metacognition is the conscious awareness that one has about his/her knowledge and the conscious ability to monitor and gain control over his/her own thinking and learning processes. Metacognition thus is cognitively interwoven with reflection—the “active process of exploring events or issues and accompanying thoughts and emotions” (Kerka, 2002, p. 2). Given that reflection plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of learning (Daniels, 2002), EFL teachers should incorporate into their teaching activities that promote reflective practices along with the development of language per se. Such activities, discussed below, raise the students’ awareness of what happens during the language learning process, thus, leading them to develop their metacognition and stronger learning skills.

Keeping a Reflective Journal. A journal is a place wherein learners can explore ideas, record their thinking processes, feelings, and reflections. Journal writing is a vital means of developing metacognition through reflective processes. Initially, in each lesson, teachers may encourage students to write about “what they know” and “what they don’t know” as a way to trigger their prior knowledge and “what they want to learn about” to reveal their expectation. Teachers should also have students write about their thoughts, feelings, related experiences, beliefs, attitudes in regards to the lesson, “make note of their awareness of ambiguities and inconsistencies” (Blakey, & Shiela, 1990, p.2), comment on how they have dealt with difficulties in their learning processes, as well as evaluate themselves as learners.

As an alternative, teachers may have students keep a ***dialogue journal***: “a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly—daily, weekly, etc., depending on the educational setting—over a semester or a course” (Kreeft, 1993, p. 1). In dialogue journals, students play an active role in directing conversation. They write as much as they choose and teachers write back, giving responses to the students’ questions, comments, and observations, introducing new topics of discussion, or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student. Like oral conversation, the dialogue journal depends on mutual, reciprocal discourse; it encourages readers to engage in talking with a writer.

Either through reflective journals or dialogue journals, teachers should function as a mental guide, helping students to focus on the reflective moment rather than as an evaluator correcting or commenting on the students’ writing. As important, teachers should be explicit about the various benefits of journal writing. Students must understand that the more they write, the more they can develop fluency in writing English, increase their awareness of tacit knowledge (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997), promote the development of reflective judgment and metacognition (Fong, 2002), and also enhance self-exploration and personal growth (Clark, 1985).

Talking about Thinking. Similar to the thinking-out-loud approach in teaching metacognition, this activity engages the students in the self-talk-out-loud about their own thinking process. In the process, students would talk to themselves about their metacognitive strategies when engaging in a learning task. Before reading an assigned article, for example, students talk about how they plan to read, their prior knowledge or schemata, and anticipation of the topic. While reading, they identify the learning strategies being used, analyze the difficulties experienced in reading, and how they cope with such difficulties. In addition, they talk about whether their prior anticipation is accurate, the insights gained after reading the text, and their success or failure in the reading process, as well as the final thought about

what they will do in the next reading. This self-talk approach is important because it not only enables students to articulate their own metacognitive process starting from planning, monitoring, and evaluating, but it also enables them to develop their vocabulary in labeling the thinking processes while using them.

Self-Questioning. In this activity students ask themselves questions that enhance the development of metacognitive strategies. Teachers act as facilitators guiding students with reflective questions that trigger their metacognition as in the following.

Before: When students are developing a plan of action, they can ask themselves:

- What is my prior knowledge that will help me do this task?
- What should I do first?
- What is my expectation in doing this task?
- How much time do I need to complete this task?

During: When students are doing the task, they can ask themselves:

- How am I doing?
- Am I on the right track?
- What strategies am I using?
- Should I use a different way/strategy to complete this task?
- What other things/information should I need?

After: When students are evaluating their task, they can ask themselves:

- How well did I do?
- What did I learn from doing this task?
- Was what I learned more or less than I had expected?
- Do I need to redo the task?
- What could I have done differently?

Through self-questioning, students can consciously raise awareness of their thinking processes starting from the initial stage of preparing, monitoring, and evaluating.

CONCLUSION

The concept of metacognition—the ability of learners to be aware of and have conscious control over their own learning processes—has become known ever since John Flavell introduced the term in the late 1970s. It has been accepted that metacognition promotes effective learning in diverse areas; students who are skilled in metacognition are more strategic and perform better than those who are less equipped. These students are in control of their behavior, i.e., they are able to manage their learning effectively and independently: they plan a likely-to-be successful approach to a learning task, select and use effective learning strategies, monitor

their use of strategies, evaluate and decide when a learning task is solved to a satisfactory degree.

In EFL settings, given that metacognition plays a vital role in the learning processes, teachers should teach their students metacognitive skills in addition to the language. To do so, teachers can provide direct instruction about how the strategies can be used, or take students through each strategy by modeling. Either way students must be given guided practices, wherein they assume full responsibility for completing a task; this entails the strategies of **planning**, **monitoring**, and **evaluating**. In addition, metacognition should be taught through classroom activities that foster reflective thinking and practices. Students should be encouraged to keep a journal—either reflective or dialogue-based—in order to learn new things, reflect upon their thinking, and evaluate themselves as learners. Such reflection, as Thamraksa (1997) pointed out, is important, for it is a means to bring learning to conscious attention, thus, to the level of awareness. Students should also be given an opportunity to talk out loud about what's on their mind when they engage in a learning task; it is through talking that students come to gain control over their thinking processes. Equally important is the use of self-questioning activities in which students ask themselves questions that trigger each stage of their thoughts from planning to approach a particular task, monitoring the effectiveness of strategies being applied to the task, to evaluating their learning outcomes. These activities engage students in a kind of reflection-in-action of the work they are doing. Thus, metacognition can develop when awareness is situated in practice. Apart from improving metacognition, these activities can provide another context for language skills development as students have the opportunity to use English to perform the activities in a non-threatening atmosphere.

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Asst. Prof. Dr. Chutima Thamraksa holds a Ph.D. (English Rhetoric and Linguistics) from Indiana University of Pennsylvania U.S.A., a M.A. (English for Non-Native Speakers), and a Certificate in TESL from Central Missouri State University, and a B.Ed. (English) from Chulalongkorn University. Her professional interests are in awareness-raising in language learning, implementation of critical thinking skills, ICT and language teaching, and student-centered learning. She is currently the Chairperson of the English Department, School of Humanities, Bangkok University.