

The Role of Metacognitive Reading Strategies in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

This article aims at describing the importance of metacognitive reading strategies in second language learning. To learn specific information in order to perform some criterion tasks and the learning for academic purposes, overall for making proficient learners the metacognitive strategies have a number of far reaching implication. This study of metacognition makes an interest with a belief that if researchers could help the ESL readers by giving them metacognitive strategic knowledge, then they would be in a better position to make a fruitful choice in teaching L2 reading. When learners can identify the importance of metacognitive reading strategies and can grasp the metacognitive knowledge, they might be encouraged to use this knowledge with confidence to improve their reading efficiency in real reading situations. It makes an outlook with the definition of metacognitive reading strategy that was given by several researchers. It describes a model of metacognition reading strategies which was shown by a researcher with a critical analysis that might be the teacher's model strategies for learners to follow.

1. Introduction

The field of language learning and teaching has started to show its interest on learners and learning rather than teachers and training which can be stated as a prominent movement from the last twenty years. By this new research field, the researchers try to investigate learner characteristics and second language acquisition (SLA). It also has made its interest on learning process itself and the importance of language learning strategies in the acquisition of second language. There are also some sort of interest are found in the researchers that how learners process new information and what kinds of strategies they use to understand, learn or remember the information dealing with the area of second language learning.

Language learning strategies are used by almost all language learners consciously or unconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks. Learners attempt to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required while they are connected in activities to attain certain purpose and usually they use thought and intentional behavior during learning which helps them to understand, learn and remember new information. Stern (1992; 261) states that “the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engaged in activities to achieve certain goal and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques”.

Research in second language suggests that learners use a variety of strategies to assist them with the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information (Rigney, 1978). Rubin (in Rubin & Wenden 1987:19) defines learner strategies as ‘any set of operations, steps, plans, routines, used by-the learner to facilitate he obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information. There can be made a distinction between strategies that make learners more effective versus strategies that improve comprehension where the first one is generally referred to as learning strategies in the second language literature.

For gaining and learning more knowledge, reading is an important gateway. For being a better performer which makes a reader enable to read, synthesize and critically evaluate a text, reading plays an important role. Good reading can help empower the learner and makes a reader confident by showing the way to independent learning. Reading is the main process for being a good reader. More recent models have considered reading as an interactive cognitive process in which using the prior knowledge readers interact with the text (Carrell & Eisterhold 1983; Carrell 1985, 1988). For being a good reader metacognition plays an important role.

2. An Overview of Metacognition

Metacognition was first introduced in the 1970’s by Flavell and has widely attracted attention in domain of education (Baker 2005; Samuels, Ediger, Willcutt, & Palumbo 2005). Flavell (1979) illustrates metacognition as “knowledge and cognition about

cognitive phenomena” (p. 906). He uses the term metacognition as an individual’s awareness of his or her cognitive processes and strategies (Flavell 1979, 1987). He also advocates the importance of metacognition in both education and psychology fields. Baker and Brown (1984) classify metacognition into two categories: knowledge about cognition and regulation of cognition. Knowledge about cognition focuses on one’s own awareness and appraisal of one’s cognitive process; while regulation of cognition takes into account self-regulation and strategies leading to the achievement of self-regulation (Baker & Brown 1984).

Metacognition is usually defined as knowledge about cognitive objects, that is, anything cognitive. However, the concept could reasonably be broadened to include anything psychological, rather than cognitive. Metacognitive knowledge is conceived as simply that portion of the total knowledge base that pertains to this content area. After the study of Baker & Brown (1984) who categorizes metacognitive knowledge into two subdivisions, Flavell describes that it can be subdivided into three categories: knowledge of person variables, task variables and strategy variables (Flavell 1987).

Metacognitive strategies are involved planning for learning, thinking about learning and how to make it effective, self monitoring, and ‘self evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed (O’Malley and Chamot 1990). Metacognitive reading strategies have taken place as one of the six strategies when Oxford (1990) categorized them within the broader context of reading strategies and it could be referred to as sub-strategies. Oxford (1990) described metacognitive strategies as the behaviors undertaken by the learners to plan, arrange and self assessment which also included directed practice, opportunities and so forth.

It refers to the “knowledge about cognitive states and abilities that can be shared among individuals while at the same time expanding the construct to include affective and motivational characteristics of thinking” (Paris and Winograd, 1990). This statement can be compared with the definition of Flavell (1979, 1987) as describing the metacognition as an awareness of the cognitive process.

Metacognitive knowledge or awareness knowledge about ourselves, the tasks we face and the strategies we employ (Baker and Brown 1984). Knowledge about ourselves may include knowledge about how well we perform on certain types of tasks or our proficiency levels. Knowledge about tasks may include knowledge about tasks difficulty level. About strategies we may know that verbal rehearsal and elaboration of materials assist in retrieval or that prediction of article content based on titles improves comprehension. Metacognitive awareness therefore, also involve the awareness of whether or not comprehension is occurring and the conscious application of one ore more strategies to correct comprehension (Baumann, Jones, & Seifert-Kessel 1993).

Metacognitive processes in this study include knowledge of strategies for processing the reading text, the ability to monitor understanding of the text and the ability to adjust and employ strategies when required in a new situation (Auerbach & Paxton 1997).

During a National Public Radio broadcast in the United States in March 1999, a sixth grader explained what she was learning from playing the Stock Market Game, an activity designed to help children become familiar with how the stock market functions. She said, “This game makes me think how to how think” [Prakash 1999]. What this statement reveals is that this young learner was beginning to understand the real key to learning. She was engaged in metacognition.

Learners’ metacognitive strategic knowledge involves thinking about the reading process, planning for reading, monitoring comprehension while reading – overseeing, supervising, regulating, evaluating the reading process and the effectiveness of strategies used in reading, and verifying what is read, as well as specific steps in problem solving during comprehension (Flavell 1987; O’Malley & Chamot 1990; Wenden 1991; Young & Oxford 1997).

Metacognition is the knowledge (i.e. awareness) of one's cognitive processes the efficient use of this self-awareness to self-regulate these cognitive processes (Niemi 2002; Shimamura 2000); this interpretation is almost similar with Brown (1987).

It can be defined simply as thinking about thinking. Generally it can be stated that learners who are metacognitively aware know what to do when they don't know what to do; that is, they have strategies for finding out or figuring out what they need to do. In addition it also can be said that the use of metacognitive strategies ignites one's thinking and can lead to more profound learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are struggling. The learners who have the metacognition awareness have the knowledge about their doing that means; they can find out what they need to do by using their strategies. The use of metacognitive strategies can lead to more profound learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are in great effort to do well in learning.

In their study Samuels et al. (2005) acknowledge that related with personal cognitive processes there are three factors that constitute the notion of metacognition; the nature of the task that learners are expected to carry out; various approaches to achieve it under different circumstances; and strategies that enable learners to monitor and regulate their cognitive processes. Compared to the interpretation of Backer and Brown (1984), Samuels et al. (2005) put emphasis on the nature of the task, which also implies that in order to achieve the task learners should choose metacognitive strategies accordingly. In fact, Baker and Brown (1984) conducted similar statement regarding the relationship between the task and strategies: 'Strategies vary, depending on the goal of the activity'. (p. 354) Therefore, metacognitive strategies play crucial roles in learning and its achievement.

3. Importance of metacognitive knowledge of strategies

Reading is considered an essential skill for students, more so for students wanting to attend university (Anderson 1994; Carell 1991; Eskey 1973). Anderson & Armbruster (1984) pointed out that in relation to the reading at secondary and college levels, the

purpose was often to learn specific information in order to perform some criterion task. The knowledge of metacognition helps the reader for gaining that type of reading involved a number of complex activities such as understanding and remembering task demands, identifying and selectively attending to important information, using appropriate strategies for remembering that information, monitoring comprehension and learning, and taking corrective action when necessary (Baker & Brown 1984; Brown 1980).

Students of institute of higher learning need to be able to read accurately the sources of information from print and beyond the information in print. Academic learning demands that learners can work independently. For understanding their reading, they have to utilize their different skills and strategies as for higher learning there is no bound in reading. They need to know the accurate meaning of their text, go beyond the surface meaning of the text and not only that, they must have to have the capability to interpret them with their own views. Specifically students going abroad for higher education must have the knowledge of metacognition for being better readers.

Metacognition which is also known as the process of monitoring one's comprehension has been recognized as being vitally important to skilled reading (Mokhtari et al. 2002). Yang (2002) stated that during reading and integrates new information with existing knowledge, comprehension monitoring helps an individual to be able to perceive right from the wrong. The importance of metacognition in reading has increasingly been recognized and undoubtedly contributes to the expertise of learning in different domains.

Students who demonstrate a wide range of metacognition skills perform better on exams and complete work more efficiently. They are self regulated learners who utilize the 'right tool for the job'. They have the knowledge to modify learning strategies and skills based on their awareness of effectiveness. Learners with the knowledge and skill of metacognition can identify blocks to learning as early as

possible. And they have the capability to change the tools that means the strategies to ensure goal attainment. Individual with a high level of metacognition is aware of his own strengths and weaknesses, the nature of the task at hand, and available skills.

Many studies (Lengkanawati 2004; Phakiti 2003; Yeung & Wong 2004) have given emphasis on the metacognitive strategies, students use when they read. When the metacognitive knowledge of the learners is uncovered; they might be encouraged to use this knowledge with confidence to improve their reading efficiency in real reading situations (Lehtonen 2000).Learners' metacognitive strategic knowledge involves thinking about the reading process, planning for reading, monitoring comprehension while reading – overseeing, supervising, regulating, evaluating the reading process and the effectiveness of strategies used in reading, verifying what is read, as well as specific steps in problem solving during comprehension (Flavell 1987; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Wenden 1991; Young & Oxford 1997).By studying these studies it can easily be said that for improving one's second language learning there is no another important gateway without metacognitive strategic knowledge.

4. A Model of Metacognition

Anderson (2002) in his study describes a model of metacognition which the teachers can show their learners to follow. The learners can be benefited with this model.

According to Anderson (2002) metacognition can be divided into five primary components: (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.

4.1. Preparing and planning for learning

For improving student's learning, it has an important relation to a learning goal such as thinking about the task and their willing to go about accomplishing it. By conducting the students in locating their own learning goals the teachers can uphold their learning. For measuring the progress of the learning the clear articulation of the

goal is more important. The teacher might set a goal for the students of mastering the vocabulary from a particular chapter in the text book. For being capable to answer the comprehension questions a student might set a goal for himself.

4.2. Selecting and Using Learning Strategies

It has been suggested by the researchers that teaching readers how to use specific reading strategies is a prime consideration in reading classroom (Anderson 1999; Cohen 1998; Oxford 1990). The learners can think and make conscious decisions about the learning process when they have the metacognitive ability to select and use particular strategies in a given context for a specific purpose.

To know the real situation of using a variety of learning strategies the metacognitive instructions may be helpful for the students. For example there are a variety of strategies for the second language learners from which they have to choose theirs one when they encounter an unknown vocabulary and that when they determined they need to know to understand the main idea of the text. One possible strategy is word analysis, dividing the word into its prefix and stem. Another one can be the context clues for guessing the meaning of a word.

4.3. Monitoring Strategy Use

Students can find themselves on the way to meet their own learning by monitoring their strategy use on learning. After selecting and implementing the specific strategies they need to monitor their use of learning strategies whether or not they are on the right way. For example, students may be taught that an effective writing strategy involves thinking about their audience and their purpose in writing and from the teaching they have to know that they should pause occasionally at the time of writing for asking themselves questions about what they are doing.

4.4. Orchestrating Various Strategies

It is an important metacognitive skill to know how to orchestrate the use of more than one strategy. There is a major distinction between the strong and weak second

language learners that are the ability to co-ordinate organize and make associations among the various strategies. To make the learners to be aware of multiple strategies can be a support from the teachers such as, by teaching them how to use both word analysis and word clues to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word. The teacher also can assist the students by showing them how to recognize the strategy that is not working and how to move to another one.

4.5. Evaluating Strategy Use and Learning

The attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of their tasks means the active involvement in metacognition of the second language learners. To ask themselves to respond thoughtfully to the following questions by the help of the teacher the students evaluate their strategy use:

- 1) What am I trying to accomplish?
- 2) What strategies am I using?
- 3) How well am I using them?
- 4) What else could I do?

Responding to these four questions integrates all of the previous aspects of metacognition, allowing the second language learner to reflect through the cycle of learning. The whole cycle is evaluated during this stage of metacognition. The following framework illustrates the model of Anderson (2002).

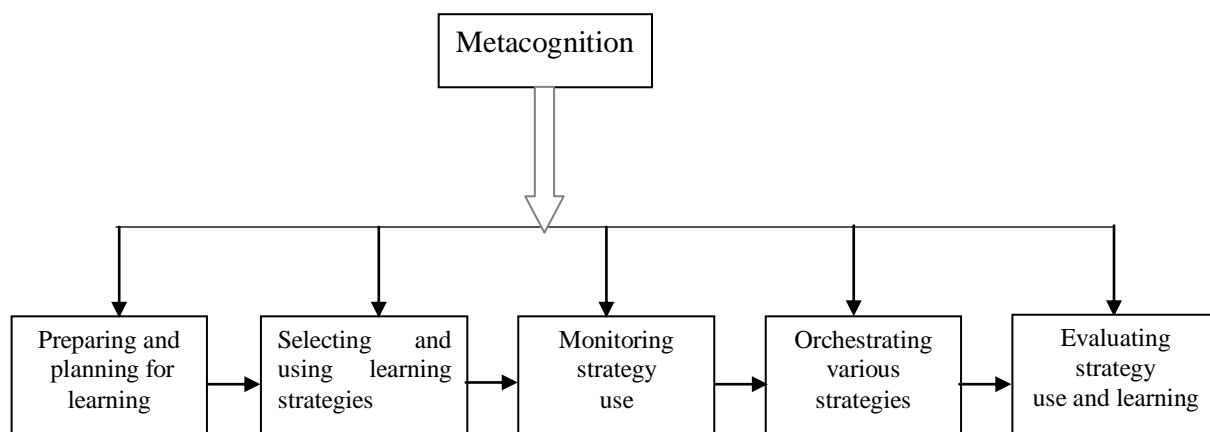


Figure 1: Anderson's (2002) model of Metacognition.

5. Critical Analysis of the metacognitive model

Based on the comparative studies of Anderson and others it is found that this model of metacognition needs some additional features which are describing as follows. But before describing the model the following structure shows the conceptual framework.

Teachers can show the learners this model to follow in all five areas but to help them adequately the teacher can prepare a short questionnaire so that the students can describe themselves and their language learning by filling at the beginning of a course. It helps the teacher to find out the purpose of the student's learning a language and the reason why they learn a language. The teacher can have adequate knowledge about the students, their goals, motivations, language learning strategies, and their understanding of the course to be taught (Lessard-Clouston 1997:5).

Before selecting and using learning strategies (the second stage) the language teacher should provide a wide range of learning strategies for meeting the needs and expectations of the students possessing different styles, motivations, and strategy preferences Therefore, Hall (1997:5) in his paper stated that in foreign language teaching the most important teacher role is the provision of a range of tasks to matched varied learning styles.

Anderson (2002) at the last stage of his model mentioned four questions to ask the readers themselves for evaluating their strategy use. But here another thing also important to be done is that the language teacher should study his own teaching method and analyzing his lesson plans. This helps the teacher to be determining whether his methods help the learners in using a variety of learning strategies or not. By questioning himself about the planning before each lesson and evaluating his lesson plan after the lesson in terms of strategy training, the teacher can help himself to get better preparation to focus on language learning strategies and strategy training during the process of his training (Lessard-Clouston 1997:5).

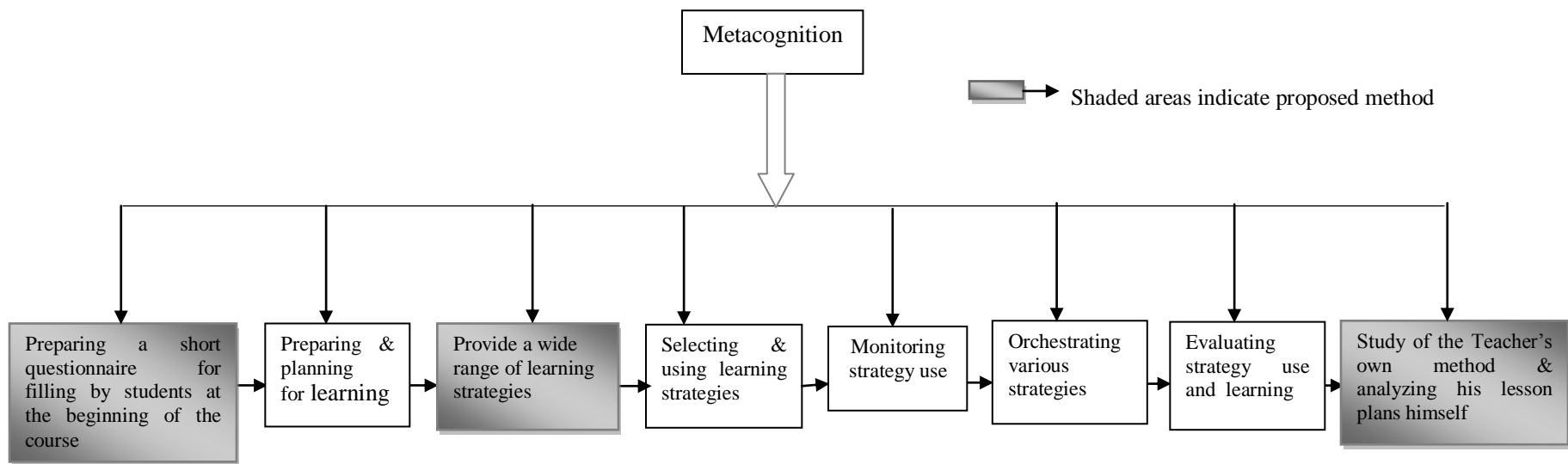


Figure 2: Conceptual framework.

6. Conclusion

Metacognition has a critical role to play in successful learning that is, it is important that it be demonstrated by both learners and teachers. Learners who demonstrate a broad range of metacognition skills perform better improvement in their learning. For attaining goals student has have to a high level of metacognition knowledge which help them to identify the blocks to learning and change strategies when it needs. Strong metacognition skills empower second language learners.

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