

The Interrelatedness between Metacognitive Learning Strategies and Autonomy in Adult EFL Classes

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Abstract

Recently more and more qualified and skilled people are demanded in order for catering for the requirements of highly competitive world. This trend has led education to less focus on the improvement in specific skills, but more on lifelong learning outcome, which is “autonomous learning.” The requirement for augmenting the number of autonomous learners has paved the way to the introduction of some methods among which incorporating metacognitive learning strategies into regular English language teaching courses takes its place. Metacognitive model of strategic learning does have a facilitative effect on language learning through four processes; planning, monitoring, problem-solving and evaluating. The execution of these four processes is highly likely to stimulate autonomy amongst language learners. Thus, the ultimate purpose of this case study is to investigate the probable interrelatedness between metacognitive model of strategy training and autonomous learning in preparatory classes adult language learners attend to. With a view to achieving this objective, 26 intermediate level university prep class learners are subjected to training on metacognitive strategies for three months. The findings of the study gathered through both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools reveal that university prep class learners’ motivation level increases and they tend to become autonomous language learners by employing metacognitive learning strategies.

Keywords: Metacognitive learning strategies, learner autonomy, adult learners, learner motivation

Introduction

One of the issues in the field of English language teaching to which the attention and interest of teachers, administrative staff and researchers has been ascribed over the last three decades is the matter of learner autonomy. The shift from teacher fronted classes to the ones where learner autonomy has been prioritized could be associated with the conception that the dominance of teachers in language classes is conceived to be a great handicap lying in front of the success and autonomy learners could gain.

Given the steadily growing popularity of autonomy in learning both within and out of the territories of classrooms as stated by Benson (2006), comprehension of what is proposed by autonomy in general and learner autonomy in particular appears to be highly significant. Little (1994) defines autonomy as a whole including a potential for ‘detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action’. In line with the definition of autonomy proposed by Little (1994), Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning ... to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning”. Taking into account the power delegated to learners in terms of getting control of all the decisions with respect to learning, it is not unlikely that autonomous learning is comprised of different layers of awareness. Simard (as cited in Porto, 2007) puts forth that autonomous learning involves diversified awareness in distinct areas: language awareness (sensitivity to how language works), self-awareness as a language learner (the learner’s attitudes toward the target language and language learning in general), awareness of learning goals (the learners’ understanding of their goals in language learning and of their strengths and weaknesses), and awareness of learning resources (the learners’ awareness of learning strategies and the resources available to them to foster learning).

Independent learning or self-directed learning is the term used interchangeably in the literature with autonomous learning. Irrespective of the term preferred, the common point amongst these terms is verbalized by Holec (1981). He emphasizes the existence of “ability” whilst defining autonomy and underlines the notion that managing the learning process is an ability which is not inborn rather it is natural or learned through formal instruction. As could be derived from the definition of autonomy, autonomous learners take the responsibility for the steps they take in due course of learning which has been designated to be endless. In this process, learners are not alone but do possess the consultation and guidance of their teachers as needed. The support of teachers aids learners to get control of learning, setting goals, planning and using strategies when they encounter difficulties.

In order to help learners become autonomous and struggle against remaining as passive receivers of the information provided by teachers within the walls of classes, metacognitive strategies are to be presented to and utilized by learners. The metacognitive model of learning was introduced to the literature following the detailed research on learning strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary & Robbins, 1999). Materna (2007) describes metacognition in learning as follows:

“From an educational perspective, true learning is looking beyond the superficial meaning of a concept and understanding the concept from multiple perspectives. Metacognition is the ability to understand your own thinking processes and to apply active learning strategies that will promote a sense of knowing, in other words, knowing what you know and knowing what you don’t know as well as knowing those strategies to use to learn what you don’t know” (p. 91).

The metacognitive model of learning consists of four processes: planning, monitoring, problem solving and evaluating. Merely by means of concentrating on the meanings these

four processes carry, encouraging and enabling learners to become autonomous seems achievable. By the medium of the strategies brought together under the title of metacognitive model of strategic learning, learners can overcome the times of difficulty and facilitate their learning process.

Encountering autonomous learners in Turkish context, regardless of learner age, does not seem to be likely. University prep class students, the major concern in this study, largely depend upon the knowledge of their teachers. The unwillingness, or unawareness of learners to apply metacognitive learning strategies, which could positively influence the learning process, may be eliminated with the training on metacognitive strategies. In this study the effect of metacognitive learning strategies on attaining learner autonomy will be explored. This study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- Is motivation an influential factor in developing autonomy among prep class learners?
- Can learners become autonomous by the help of metacognitive learning strategies?
- What kind of changes will occur in students' perceptions of being autonomous learners subsequent to applying metacognitive strategies?

Methodology

The study was conducted as a group case study lasting three months. Twenty intermediate level prep class learners whose ages differed between 18 and 21 participated in this study. The participants had 26 hours of English course per week. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were employed to gather data. In order to collect the quantitative data two questionnaires were administered. The first questionnaire was an adapted one from Chamot et al (1999) on metacognitive model of learning which contained 20 questions. The other questionnaire was taken from Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (hereafter MSLQ) and it included two questionnaires as 33 motivation strategies questions and 12 metacognitive self-regulation strategies questions. Qualitative data were gathered by semi-structured interviews which were conducted at the beginning and end of the study.

At the beginning of the study one of the researchers conducted a semi structured interview to shed light on the current state of the participants concerning their awareness of the facilitative effect of metacognitive learning strategies on their own language learning journey. This semi-structured interview was also a means of finding out the existing motivation level of the participants. In pursuit of the administration of the interview, the questionnaires were given to the participants to extend the information about the participants' perceptions of metacognitive learning strategies and motivation. To analyse the data collected from pre and post questionnaires Wilcoxon matched paired test (SPSS 22.0) was used.

Researchers designed the courses in such a way that metacognitive learning strategies were infused into the regular implementation of the program in the classes. The first step in metacognitive model of learning is planning during which good language learners take decisions about how to approach and carry out the task. As for planning, setting goals, directed attention, activating background knowledge, predicting, organizational planning and self-management strategies were presented and practised in the class. Monitoring, another component of the four processes, enables learners to check the effectiveness of the strategies while they are coping with the task. For monitoring, asking if it makes sense, selectively attending, deduction, induction, personalizing, contextualizing, taking notes, using imagery, manipulating, self-talk and cooperating strategies were in concern as dealing with the units in student course books. The strategies of problem solving step in as students face difficulties in

learning process such as inferencing, substitution, asking questions to clarify and using resources. After the completion of the task, competent learners assess the success in the task and the effectiveness of the strategies applied during the task. At that stage evaluation strategies come forth. In this study, verifying predictions and guesses, summarizing, checking goals, evaluating yourself, and evaluating your strategies were taken advantage of.

Findings and Discussion

The interview conducted at the beginning of the study revealed that the participants were not aware of how to become autonomous language learners by the medium of drawing advantage from metacognitive learning strategies. In addition to this, it was observed that the participants were not motivated adequately to carry on struggling even if they encounter obstacles in their learning process. As a way of collecting quantitative data, the questionnaires taken from MSLQ and the questionnaire adapted from Chamot (1993) were administered in the class. It was understood from pre-questionnaires that the participants were not motivated enough and did not know how to apply metacognitive learning strategies and their influence on language learning.

As can be seen from Table 1 on motivation which is adapted from MSLQ, providing instruction to the participants on metacognitive learning strategies resulted in the rise of the motivation level of the students ($p < .05$). The term motivation refers to the reason for someone to take action and the reason may be intrinsic or extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Whether learners are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, they can possess the willingness and eagerness to do their best to accomplish their goals. The researchers were able to observe the positive effect of increased motivation level on students and this could be drawn from Table 1.

No	Item	Negative Rank	Positive Rank	P.
1	If I try hard enough, then I will understand the course material	7,89	5,00	.028
2	When I take a test I think about items on other parts of the test I can't answer.	7,63	8,79	0,50
3	I am confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in this course.	6,38	9,21.	.026
4	I want to do well in this class because it is important to show my ability to my family, friends or others.	6,50	7,77	.034
5	Considering the difficulty of this course, the teacher, and my skills, I think I will do well in this class.	4,50	7,75	.022

Table 1: Motivation (MSLQ)

Table 2 belongs to the adapted questionnaire from Chamot (1993) on learning strategies which indicates the statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) achieved by the medium of three-month instruction on learning strategies. The participants commenced to use strategies more subsequent to the training.

No	Item	Negative Rank	Positive Rank	P
1	Do you try to set goals before starting to deal with an activity?	15,00	8,63	.002
2	Do you concentrate on particular task and ignore the others?	7,50	10,07	.010
3	Do you plan the task and content sequence?	11,00	8,73	.008
4	Do you focus on key words, phrases, and ideas?	6,00	9,64	.040
5	Do you consciously apply learned or self-developed rules	4,50	6,33	.026
6	Do you use synonym or descriptive phrase for unknown words?	3,50	6,00	.031
7	Do you ask for explanation, verification, and examples?	7,50	10,27	.027
8	Do you use reference materials about the language and subject matter?	5,50	9,47	.001
9	Do you judge how well you learned the material/did on the task?	6,00	8,31	.004
10	Do you relate or classify words according to attributes?	4,50	8,88	.002
11	Do you use previously acquired linguistic knowledge; recognize words that are similar in other known languages?	4,00	8,29	.001

Table 2: Questionnaire on Metacognitive Learning Strategies

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The last table, Table 3, on learning strategies taken out of MSLQ signals the raised consciousness amongst the participants of metacognitive learning strategies via the instructions on metacognitive learning strategies.

No	Item	Negative Rank	Positive Rank	P.
1	During the class I often miss important points because I am thinking of other things.	4,63	9,23	.017
2	When reading for this course, I make up questions to help focus my readings.	6,25	10,43	.008
3	When I become confused about something I'm reading for this class, I go back and try to figure it out.	5,00	8,75	.010
4	If course readings are difficult to understand, I change the way I read the material.	7,67	10,42	.080
5	Before I study new course material thoroughly, I often skim it to see how it is organized.	7,17	10,00	.106
6	I ask myself questions to make sure I understand the material I have been studying in this class.	10,50	10,50	.114
7	I try to change the way I study in order to fit the course requirements and the instructor's teaching style.	4,33	8,92	.007
8	I often find that I have been reading for this class but don't know what it was all about.	7,07	8,81	.549
9	I try to think through a topic and decide what I am supposed to learn from it rather than just reading it over when studying for this course.	7,60	7,44	.357
10	When studying for this course I try to determine which concepts I don't understand well.	2,00	8,92	.001
11	When I study for this class, I set goals for myself in order to direct my activities in each study group.	.00	9,50	.000
12	If I get confused taking notes in class, I make sure I sort it out afterwards.	3,50	10,36	.000

Table 3: Learning Strategies from MSLQ

The interview carried out at the end of the study extends the insights on the force of metacognitive learning strategies while trying to create autonomy in the classroom. The comments of the participants advocate the data gathered through quantitative data collection tools. Feeling more motivated could be explained by the effectiveness of equipping language learners with metacognitive learning strategies. Some of the responses of the participants during the interview are given below:

- Teacher: Are the strategies you practiced useful for you?

- S1: Yes, they were useful. Now, I take notes during lessons and revise what I learn as much as I can do when I go home.
- S2: I couldn't apply all of the strategies, but I am more conscious what to do to be more successful.
- Teacher: Do you apply the metacognitive learning strategies?
- S3: Yes, my scores are higher now and if I use these strategies all the time, nobody can pass me.
- Teacher: What do you think about the relation between motivation and success?
- S4: Motivation is important for success and you motivated us very well. I am more confident now.
- S5: I was afraid of failing the prep-class, but now I am sure that I will pass, I study very hard, I use extra materials at the dormitory and work with my friends who are better than me.

Conclusion

Autonomous learners, who are confident and willing to study both inside and outside the territory of school, know how to become more successful and are aware of accelerated language learning process resulting from employing metacognitive learning strategies. That is not unlikely to be the dream of English language teachers which may be fulfilled via the efforts of both teachers and learners. English instructors in Turkey need to do more to change the beliefs of adult prep class learners about traditional language classes which are characterized by the dominance of teachers and learners acting as passive receivers of the disseminated data and learners leaving behind what they learn in the class. University prep-class learners, the major concern of this study, were in need of the guidance of their English instructors to build a new learning model by which they could turn into motivated learners and be conscious of applying metacognitive learning strategies in their lifelong language learning journey. Following the training, the participants were able to realize the importance of employing metacognitive learning strategies especially when they got stuck as learning. Provided that teachers believe in the potential their learners have and try to bring that potential to light, learners can turn out to be autonomous learners who are disciplined, logical, reflective, flexible, responsible, persistent, willing to take risks, confident and aware of their own learning process.

Implications

Language teachers must become skillful in supporting learners and disseminating information. In order to do this, we need to know what methods learners use to learn and how they are motivated since language learners need to be highly motivated and have the ability of self-monitoring to become autonomous. According to Zimmerman (1986) "learning is not something that can be done for students rather it is something that is done by them". In line with what is put forth by Zimmerman, the results of this study reveal that the students are more likely to succeed on the condition that they can learn to control their learning. Since teachers seem to function as key figures in presenting metacognitive learning strategies in the classroom and promoting language learners to apply them, the initiative aiming at increasing the employment of metacognitive learning strategies by learners of all ages could be initialized by training English language teachers on these strategies.

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