A Comparative Study on English Metacognitive Language Learning Strategy by Chinese EFL Learners of Different Age Groups

WAN Qiong[a],*

[a]College of Foreign Language Education, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

The efficiency of EFL teaching is largely determined by student's learning attitude and method. Metacognitive language learning strategies can help students learn how to correctly use language learning strategies to effectively improve their English proficiency. The author's questionnaire surveyed 500 students from an elementary school, a middle school and a university in the local city. It also described the general features of Metacognitive language learning strategy use in the English learning by Chinese English learners and provided some approaches in strategy training.

Key words: Metacognitive language learning strategy; Questionnaire; Students from an elementary school; A senior school and a university

INTRODUCTION

In order to adapt to the new requirements for English teaching in the today's society, the new requirements for English curriculum are pointed out: one of the purposes of teaching mode reform is to promote students' individualized learning methods and the students' ability of autonomous learning development (Rubin, 1975). Wen Qiufang has long pointed out that the success of language learning does not depend on how teachers teach, but depends on the individuals themselves. Successful second language learners can successfully manage their own language learning process, take the initiative to learn, reflect on the progress of learning, find the problem and make adjustments in time (Wenden, 2002). In the past few decades, most of the study of English learning strategies are focused on the subjects of college students and middle school students. The research of learning strategies for elementary school students is rare. The investigation of English learning strategies used by learners at different ages can help English learning and teaching. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to probe the characteristics, similarities and differences of metacognitive strategies used by English learners of different ages in China. In this paper, the author had a comparative analysis of metacognitive language learning strategy used by 500 students in three schools in the local city (the fifth grade in elementary school, the second grade in high school and sophomores in a university), and pointed out the necessity of metacognitive strategy training and theory with reality. Furthermore, operational training methods and suggestions are provided according to the characteristics of students in different stages and learning.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Definition of Metacognitive Strategy

Just as language learning strategies are defined as techniques, approaches and deliberate actions that learners take to improve their language competence or facilitate their language learning, and metacognition is defined as learners' awareness of their cognitive process and their ability to control those processes, so the definition of metacognitive strategies could be seen as a combination of the definition of language learning strategies and metacognition.

Brown et al. (1983) define metacognitive strategies are higher order of executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity. He notes that metacognitive strategies are sequential processes that one uses to control cognitive activities, and to ensure that a cognitive goal has been met. These processes help to regulate and oversee learning, and consist of planning and monitoring cognitive activities, as well as checking the outcome of those activities.

O'Malley et al. (1985) posit that metacognitive strategies involve thinking about learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed.

Oxford (1990) maintains metacognitive strategies are actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices, and which provides a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition, that is, to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating.

Cohen (1998) views metacognitive strategies as dealing with pre-assessment and pre-planning, on-line planning and evaluation, and post-evaluation of language learning activities and of language use events. Such strategies allow learners to control their own cognition by coordinating the planning, organizing, and evaluating of the learning process.

Wenden (2002) regards metacognitive strategies as general skills including planning, monitoring, and evaluating, through which learners manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning.

According to the definition of metacognitive strategies listed above, it is clear that there are similarities and agreements in these definitions. To put it simply, metacognitive strategies are skills, approaches, and thinking and actions of learners use to control their cognition and learning process.

1.2 The Classification of Metacognitive Strategy

Classification and categorization of metacognitive strategies have also been given by many scholars based on cognitive theory (Brown & Palincsar, 1982; Anderson, 1983; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Ellis, 1994).

Brown and Palincsar (1982) use four designators—knowing about learning, planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation to describe metacognitive strategies.

Anderson (1983) mentions three kinds of metacognitive strategies: planning, selective attention, and monitoring.

Wenden (1983) identifies three categories of metacognitive strategies which she calls "self-directing strategies"—knowing about learning, planning, and self evaluation. Wenden's classification corresponds to Brown's but lacks the monitoring categorization.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claims that metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place, and self-evaluation after the learning activity has been completed. They can be divided into four categories: (a) selective attention, that is, focusing on special aspects of learning task, such as planning to listen for key words or phrases; (b) planning, that is, planning for the organization of either written or spoken discourses; (c) monitoring, that is, reviewing attention to a task, comprehension of information that should be remembered, or production while it is occurring; (d) evaluation, that is, checking comprehension after completion of a receptive language activity, or evaluating language production after it has taken place.

Rebecca Oxford (1990), in her book Language Learning strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know, has also developed a somewhat different system of categorization of metacognitive strategies. While containing most of the features of previous classifications, it is more detailed. In Oxford's system, metacognitive strategies can be broadly classified into three groups: (a) centering your leaning; (b) arranging and planning your learning; (c) evaluating your learning. These three groups of metacognitive strategies are further divided into eleven sets. Since Oxford has offered us a more detailed and feasible classification of metacognitive strategies, we will base our instruction on this system. First, the three groups of metacognitive strategies are discussed one by one.

The first group includes the following strategies: (a) Overviewing and linking with already known material means previewing the basic principles and/or material (including new vocabulary) for an upcoming language activity, and linking these with what the learners already know. Exactly how this strategy is used depends in part on the skill level of the learners. With higher-level students, teachers can be less directive in helping them learn to use this strategy. Regardless of the students' level, let students express their own linkage between new material and what they already know, rather than pointing out all the associations yourself. (b) Paying attention is necessary for all of the language skills. This strategy involves two modes, direct attention and selective attention. Directed attention (almost equivalent to "concentration") means deciding generally or globally to pay attention to the task and avoid irrelevant destructors. In contrast, selective attention involves deciding in advance to notice particular details. Encourage directed attention by providing interesting activities and materials, reducing classroom distractions, reminding students of focusing, and rewarding them when they do so. Facilitate selective attention by giving learners an incomplete chart to fill out, a table or checklist on which to mark details, or some other activity which requires attention to specifics. (c) Delaying speech production to focus on listening mostly relates to listening and speaking.

There are altogether six strategies for arranging and planning the learning. (a) Finding out about language learning means uncovering what is involved in language learning. Learners often do not know much about the mechanics of language learning, although such knowledge would make them more effective learners. (b) Organizing includes a variety of tools, such as creating the best possible physical environment, scheduling well, and keeping a language learning notebook. (c) Setting goals and objectives are expressions of students' aims for language learning. Students without aims are like boats without rudders; they do not know where they are going, so they might never get there! Goals are generally considered to be long-range aims referring to the outcome of many months or even years. Objectives are short-term aims for hours, days, or weeks. (d) Identifying the purpose of a language task involves determining the task purpose—an act useful for all language skills. The strategy of considering the purpose is an important one, because knowing the purpose for doing something enables learners to channel their energy in the right direction. (e) Planning for a language task always involves identifying the general nature of the task, the specific requirements of the task, the resources available within the leaner, and the need for further aids. (f) Seeking practice opportunities indicates that language learners must seek out or create opportunities to practice any and all the skills. If students want to reach moderate to high proficiency, classroom time cannot usually provide adequate practice opportunities. Therefore, students will need to find additional chances to practice the language and must search for these occasions. This strategy underscores students' responsibility to generate their own opportunities to practice.

The two strategies in the third group relate to monitoring one's errors and evaluating one's overall progress. (a) Self-Monitoring help the learners benefit from trying to determine overgeneration from a native language rule, or inappropriate verbatim translation, helps learners understand more about the new language or about their own use of learning strategies. (b) Self-Evaluating involves gauging either general language progress or progress in any of the four skills. Global impressions are often faulty, and the more specific the learner is in self-evaluating, the more accurate the evaluation.

Oxford's metacognitive strategy classification generally matches O'Malley and Chamot's but has more or less different explanation concerning some items, and is more comprehensive. Since Oxford's taxonomy of metacognitive strategies contains more special planning and advance preparation strategies like setting goals and objectives, and makes more use of metacognitive knowledge such as finding out about language learning, identifying the purpose of a language task, etc., we will base our instruction on this system.

2. A SURVEY AND ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT USE OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES OF ENGLISH LEARNERS OF DIFFERENT AGES IN CHINA

2.1 Subjects and Instruments

This investigation adopts the method of questionnaire survey, and 500 students are from primary school to grade five, high school in grade two and Normal University in grade two. The design of the questionnaire was from Oxford 1990 SILL (Inventory for Language Learning), questionnaire by Wen et al. (2003) and questionnaire by Xu et al. (2004). The questionnaire was divided into 5 grades: 1= never use, 2= basically does not use, 3= sometimes use, 4= often used, 5= always use. 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 493 valid questionnaires were returned.

2.2 The Results and Analysis

Table 1
Reliability Analysis of the Clone Bach Coefficient Questionnaire

Valid	493	98.6%
Invalid	7	1.4%
Total	500	100%

Table 2
Comparison of Metacognitive Strategy Use Frequency

Metacognitive strategy use	Average		
	Elementary	**High**	**University**
1. I'm interested in learning English.	2.81	3.00	3.09
2. I can concentrate on my study.	2.33	3.01	3.18
3. I feel very happy when I am learning English.	2.52	3.06	3.29
4. After I finished my homework, I still have my own study plan.	0.03	2.75	3.97
5. I often encourage myself by learning examples of successful people.	0.59	3.20	3.96
6. I will not give up English learning for difficult matters.	0.53	3.15	3.25

To be continued

Continued

Metacognitive strategy use	Average		
	Elementary	High	University
7. I would like to take the initiative to discuss with the teachers and students of the problems encountered in learning.	0.83	3.12	3.29
8. I have a clear short-term and long-term learning goals.	0.61	2.81	3. 19
9. I take the initiative to use the knowledge of English in real life.	0.52	2.38	3.05
10. I take the initiative to analyze my own advantages of learning English.	0.45	2.08	3. 13
11. Every time I find the lack of knowledge of English, I will make up for it in time.	0.37	2.68	2.78
12. I will take the initiative to learn English without supervising.	0.55	2.20	3.55
13. I will not give up learning English because of poor grades in English.	2.94	3.13	3.40
14. I can always cheer myself up while learning.	0.58	2.74	2.96
15. In learning English, I can grasp the key knowledge .	0.66	2.20	3.09
16. I'll seize every chance to practice my Engliah.	2.09	2.56	3.49
17. I use every opportunity to practice English as much as possible.	2.03	2.96	3.71
18. I will come up with a special way to remember the difficult words.	1.21	3.09	3.20
19. To communicate with people, I don't worry about making mistakes in speaking English will face.	2.88	2.68	2.03
20. I often explore the most suitable for their own English learning methods.	1.13	3.11	3.51
21. The teacher's encouragement will increase my confidence in learning English.	3.94	3.23	3.12
22. I will remember the knowledge in the book, and review regularly.	0.12	3.02	3.34
23. I am actively looking for the link between the new knowledge and previous knowledge.	0.04	3.03	3.26
24. The improvement of English achievement makes me more motivated to study hard.	3.82	3.90	3.87
25. I know my week in English very clearly.	1.13	2.69	3.15
Overall average	1.39	2.99	3.38

Table 3
A Comparison of Metacognitive Strategy Use Frequency Between Students in Elementary and High Schools

Variable	Mean of H	SD of H	Mean of E	SD of E	t	p
Overall average	2.99	0.530	1.39	0.480	7.2449	0.0000

Table 4
A Comparison of Metacognitive Strategy Use Frequency Between Students in University and High Schools

Variable	Mean of U	SD of U	Mean of H	SD of H	t	p
Overall average	3.38	0.730	2.99	0.530	1.4568	0.6030

From Table 1 we can see that the clone of Bach's coefficient is 0.986, which indicates that the questionnaire's reliability is high. Table 2 lists 25 questionnaire items, including the three aspects of metacognitive strategies: Metacognitive knowledge (in 1,8,9,10,15,18,23,25), Metacognitive experience (in 3,5,7,13,14,21,24), Meta cognitive monitoring (in 2,4,6,11,12,16,17,19,20). From the investigation and analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

a）Students are still in the initial stage by using cognitive learning strategies, and they can not employ metacognitive strategy as a conscious act.

b）The average score of the use of metacognitive strategies in primary school students was 1.39. According to the standard of frequency put by Oxford in Table 2, the frequency division standard (Oxford, 1990) shows that the score of this level indicates that primary school students almost never use metacognitive strategies.

c）The average score of metacognitive use for middle school students and college students was 2.99 and 3.38. According to Table 2, it is concluded that the level of the score of their metacognitive strategies was in the general use.

d）From Table 4 and Table 3, it can be seen that there is a significant difference in the use of metacognitive strategies between high school students and elementary school students （$T=7.2449$, $P<0.01$）. There is no significant difference in the use of metacognitive

strategies between high school students and university students ($T=1.4568$, $P>0.01$).

3. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

(a) Teachers should guide students to learn English learning strategies, especially metacognitive strategies in time.

By taking part in lectures and questionnaire survey, students can learn what is the meta cognitive learning strategy. In the process of learning, they learn the content of metacognitive learning strategy, how to use them, and how to identify the main problems in the study under the guidance of these knowledge. While teachers should strengthen exchanges between teachers and students to let the students to have a correct understanding of the level of their own learning. By doing that, students would have a timely evaluation in their study, improve their learning methods, and realize self-management, self-monitoring and self-evaluation for metacognitive learning strategy has a significant role in promoting learning.

(b) Schools should pay attention to the training of appropriate metacognitive learning strategies in elementary school.

From the previous survey results, we can know that there is no significant difference between high school students and university students in the use of metacognitive strategies. It is clear that more or less in the middle school, learning strategies have their ways in the teaching guidance. While the primary school students almost never use metacognitive strategies, and they are in a state of blindness in the use of strategy. The teacher should pay attention to help them to develop their ability for self-management, self-monitoring and self-evaluation of their young age. Students need to know the significance of these methods for the future learning and doing a good job in the effective connection between the elementary school and middle school

REFERENCES

Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language.* Harlow, Essex: Longman.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition.* Oxford University Press.

Liu, Y. C. (2002). The case study between LHAs and LLAs in strategies using. *Foreign Language World,* (2).

Liu, R. Q. (2003). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach.* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Malley, J. M., Chamot, A. U., Stewner-Manzanares, G., Russo, R. P., & Kupper, L. (1985). Learning strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students. *Language Learning,* 35.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know.* Newbury House/Harper Collins, NY.

Ru, B. (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly,* (9).

Wen, Q. F., & Wang, L. F. (2003). *The theory of English learning.* Xi'an, China: Shaanxi Normal University Press.

Wenden, A. (2002). Learner development in language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 23,* 32-55.

Xu, J. F., Peng, R. Z., & Wu, W. P. (2004). An investigation and analysis of non-English major college students' autonomous English learning ability. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 36*(01).

Zhu, Y. (2005). *Language learning strategy instruction with English Majors: A study in the Chinese context* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Shanghai International Studies University.