

Using Metacognitive Skills in ESL/EFL Classes to Promote Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

In order to have ELLs take responsibility for their own learning, it is important that they develop skills to work their studies strategically. The less they rely on the instructor as the content provider, the more they become active learners and have a higher sense of self-regulation and confidence in the learning process. The teacher then provides the learners metacognitive tools to foster their creative power of learning outside the classroom. This paper investigates using metacognitive strategies as a means to develop learner autonomy. As a result of this discussion, a new teacher-student relationship is proposed that encourages learners to reflect, think critically, and act upon their realities. In this new paradigm, teachers take the role of a language advisor and real educator providing students strategies that contribute to life-long abilities.

Frustrations among teachers dealing with unmotivated students who are more and more indifferent about their education are common discussion topics in the educational field. Such topics often centers on English Language Learners' (ELLs) learning insecurities and lack of engagement in the assignments. These are complicated issues because learning a second or foreign language requires a significant amount of effort and dedication to the learning process. What teachers may not know, however, is that in order to have ELLs take ownership of their own learning, it is important that they acquire certain skills to develop their studies strategically and have a clear picture of

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their learning strengths and limitations (Gu, 2013; Cubukcu, 2009; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Anderson, 2002; Rahimi & Katal, 2012). The less ELLs rely on the instructor as the content provider, the more they become active learners and have higher senses of self-regulatory skills and freedom in the learning process. Based on this new student-teacher relationship, the teacher in the role of a learning advisor presents the learners tools such as study plans and reflection to foster self-regulated and strategy-based learning.

Autonomy is commonly referred to as one taking responsibility for his or her own learning. Different successful learning experiences help learners become more critical of their own strengths and limitations. Sometimes mistaken with the idea of learning alone, autonomy is based on interaction and, aligned with clear knowledge of strategies, it gears up the process of learning a language (Benson, 2001). By the same token, using metacognitive skills, learners are able to reflect upon their own learning process and modify learning strategies based on awareness of effectiveness, which not only involves taking control of their own learning process, but also giving up control of what does not add to it. The interplay between self-reflection and the use of learning strategies opens the way for learners gradually to become more autonomous. The more reflective one gets, the more autonomous he or she becomes and therefore ready to achieve more.

When learning metacognitive strategies, ELLs are introduced to cognitive competences such as *elaborating*, *planning*, *monitoring*, and *evaluating*. By developing these cognitive competences, ELLs are able to understand how language works and benefit from a lifelong ability to comprehend the effects of language on human life. Metacognitive strategies allow learners to be able to develop thinking skills using certain cognitive aspects in the process of learning a language. When learners develop a

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critical analysis of their own learning through metacognition, their attitudes are affected and can result in autonomous behavior in learning. At this point, they reach a higher level of maturity in learning and are called self-regulators (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Peirce, 2003).

The purpose of this research is to discuss the contribution of metacognitive learning skills to developing autonomy and to explore how to facilitate such skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. In order to achieve that, this research will analyze the characteristics of autonomous learning in ESL/EFL contexts, discussing the role of self-regulation in light of teaching metacognitive skills and learning tools needed to develop students' autonomy in class through metacognition. The research questions presented in this work are a result of assumptions and studies regarding autonomous learning.

- 1) What are some benefits of autonomy-supportive teaching over traditional classes?
- 2) How can students develop autonomous behavior in class?
- 3) What are essential characteristics of autonomy-supportive instruction?

This research was conducted through a review of literature. Books, ELT journals, and scholarly articles were the main source of information. In possession of such information and given the time devoted to the readings, it was possible to develop discussion based on the scope of this research.

Metacognitive Skills

Reflective learning is an important part of autonomous behavior because it enables learners to think about what knowledge and skills to use in future assignments.

Thus, reflective learning connects to action and study methodology and is responsible for the success of learners in different areas. In order to understand them as important characteristics of autonomous behavior, it is important to discuss metacognitive and self-regulated skills in relation to developing autonomous behavior.

Defining Metacognitive Skills

According to Rahimi and Katal (2012), metacognitive skills encompass the control of cognitive aspects in the learning process or the consciousness of one's mental process. Students who apply metacognitive strategies are exposed to a variety of mental processes and are called to think about them as process and not as product. These mental processes include abilities such as *noting*, *summarizing*, *recombining*, *skimming*, *deducing*, *translating*, *transferring*, *analyzing contrastively*, and *analyzing expressions*.

Metacognitive strategies take place when the student is able to reflect critically upon mental processes that occur during the course of his or her personal language learning experience (Rahimi; Katal, 2012). Metacognition is the first step for the student to become a self-regulator, when he or she is ready to control and make use of these mental processes appropriately. The level of critical analysis and ability to manage choices well are special characteristics of autonomous learners or, more specifically, self-regulators.

Metacognition and Self-Regulation

According to Benson (2001), autonomous learners are able to take control of their learning in three levels: cognitive processes, content, and management. They use a variety of different strategies to achieve their learning goals and based on different successful learning experiences, they become more critical of their own strengths and limitations.

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The purpose of teaching metacognitive strategies to students is closely related to helping them become more self-regulators. Students who are self-regulators are easily identified in class because 1) they are self-starters 2) they are confident, strategic, and resourceful, and 3) they are self-reactive to task performance outcomes. Cubukcu (2009) explained that these students are able to engage metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally to their learning process:

...students who use self-regulated strategies and prove to be autonomous learners are more likely to volunteer for special projects, they are intrinsically self-motivated, and they rely on a planned learning and use more goal setting, planning, organizing, memorizing and self-monitoring strategies. (p.54)

One of the causes of poor academic performance among students is the lack of self-regulation in their own learning process. Self-regulation is an important characteristic of autonomous behavior, and it is developed by the level of reflection involved in the learning process (Benson, 2001). The more reflective learners are, the more autonomous and self-regulatory they become.

The Reflective Process

The reflective process comprises the five important metacognitive skills that empower sparks of self-regulated behavior. The five skills are *planning*, *selecting*, *monitoring*, *orchestrating*, and *evaluating* (Anderson, 2002). Each of them interacts with the others, and it does not necessarily follow a linear order to happen. Anderson explained the model as follows:

Planning: This is the stage in which students need to prepare and approach the learning task attentively. Peirce (2003) added that “many students who perform badly

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misinterpret the tasks.” They tend to apply the same strategies they do in other assignments instead of understanding individual assignments accurately to select the most effective study strategies for each one (section VII, 1).

Selecting: Students at this stage select and use the learning strategies based on the ability to think and make decisions in the learning process. This is when they realize that no single strategy works in every task.

Monitoring: By monitoring their performance, students are able to keep themselves on track. They critically ask themselves what is going right and what is not. Critical thinkers monitor their actions at every stage in order to make better choices along the way.

Orchestrating: This is the implementation step when students are able to organize, coordinate, and make associations with the various types of strategies they use. They are able to tell what strategy works best and which does not as well as make new combinations.

Evaluating: This stage involves students automatically in the process of metacognition just by attempting to self-assess the whole process. The students need arguments for successes and failures and identifying the attributes are necessary for future tasks.

The author suggested that teachers “should model strategies for learners to follow in all five areas” (Anderson, 2002, p. 2). Thus, it is necessary that teachers reinforce these metacognitive skills in class through pedagogical tasks that ensure students are in the right track. Students who lack such skills may underestimate their abilities during the learning process.

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Learner Motivation

Motivation plays a key role in developing learner autonomy. So much so that Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan (2002) acknowledged that teachers need to ensure motivation is on the rise before training students to become autonomous. In addition to this, an intriguing way to address the relationship between learner motivation and metacognitive skills is through the eyes of attribution theory. Lu et al., (2014) emphasized that attribution theory refers to “constructions imposed by perceivers to account for the relation between an action and an outcome” (p. 2). The authors reiterated that attribution theory of motivation is one of the most cited theories for explaining an individual’s behavior in a certain educational context. Dickinson (1995) in his review of research on autonomy in relation to motivation concluded that

. . . learning success and enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning successes or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside of their control. Each of these conditions is a characteristic of learner autonomy as it is described in applied linguistics. (p. 174)

According to Dickinson, an autonomous learner draws on intrinsic motivation for controlling failure and success in learning. Students attribute different reasons for successes and failures in learning, and legitimate students’ reflection base their successes and failures on the amount of effort and strategies used in the task. Similarly, Lu et al. (2014) advocated that attributing failure to lack of effort protects student self-esteem and maintains the motivation and expectation for future success. In other words, one way to protect students’ motivation is to associate greater effort to better learning.

Facilitating Metacognitive Skills in ESL/EFL Contexts

As mentioned before, autonomous learners see learning as a process rather than a product (Rahimi and Katal, 2012). That means they are capable of describing their own process of acquiring knowledge or explaining their best forms of learning with the help of metacognitive input. Schunk and Zimmerman (2012) claimed that “one has to regulate oneself to fit in with the predominant view of appropriate behavior, which includes learning” (p.391). Therefore, when learners are able to make the right choices to meet specific goals and become strategically confident about the way they learn, they are called self-regulators.

Considering the scenario above, the ultimate challenge is to teach students how to acquire these specific behaviors by adding reflective skills to their own learning process. Teaching students to explain the trajectory they take when they learn makes it easier for them to reflect upon their choices and consequently improve their level of motivation and autonomy in the learning process (Peirce, 2003; Rahimi and Katal, 2012).

Explicit instruction and modelling are effective teaching approaches to facilitate metacognition in class. Students observe the teachers’ thought process and imitate the steps for a successful performance followed by the teachers’ guidance and corrective feedback along the learning process. By using explicit instruction and modelling in class, teachers “pave the way for students to discern what constitutes expert performance and to practice what they have seen and heard” (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2012, p. 238). Another way to promote autonomy in class through metacognitive skills is having teachers develop the role of learning advisors.

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Teachers as Learning Advisors

The concept of teachers as learning advisors emerged from language advising theories, which have proved its efficacy in promoting learner autonomy (Reinders, 2008). Language advisors or language counsellors discuss the learner's needs and progress in the language through advisory sessions that commonly take place in the so-called Self Access Language Learning Centers (SALLC). Self-Access Language Learning Centers are educational facilities that promote the approach where students learn independently making their own learning choices from the different resources available. Language advisors provide advisory language sessions in those centers to guide students in their self-directed study plans. They also offer feedback, recommend materials, and introduce metacognitive skills such as *elaborating*, *planning*, *monitoring*, and *evaluating* in order to help ELLs plan their own learning. A new challenge comes after the positive findings of language advising regarding learner autonomy: adapting the advisory session techniques used by a language advisor to formal language classrooms (Reinders, 2006, 2010; McCarthy, 2013).

An important action a teacher in this position can take is to initiate classroom discussions of different learning strategies students can use to benefit from in the process of learning a language. Teachers need to describe the appropriate strategies - what they are, how they operate, and when to apply them - and be able to lead discussions so that students can explore their understanding about how they learn. For instance, using songs to enhance listening skills strategically, using alternative ways to take notes, and creating study plans are examples of metacognitive techniques that encourage students to regulate their learning process (Cubukcu, 2009).

Another action drawn from language advising sessions to use in a formal

language classroom is to provide students with learning-style questionnaires and direct them to the appropriate learning activities that build upon their most predominant learning preferences. By doing so, students become aware of their special tendencies in learning and teachers have the chance to pinpoint learning strategies explicitly. This way, teachers are able to use explicit instruction and model specific strategies with the groups of students that share the same preferences in the way they learn (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2012, p. 238).

Autonomy-Supportive Instruction

Instructions can use various teaching approaches to set the environment for potential autonomous behavior. The metacognitive skills used for the activities in class are some examples of teaching classroom methodology that values learner autonomy. In addition, Schunk and Zimmerman (2012) presented four teaching approaches that intentionally promote autonomy in classroom.

The first teaching approach is to initiate classroom engagement. Autonomy-supportive teachers aim to construct such autonomous intentions by bringing instructional lessons to the learners' own resources, interests, preference, or curiosity. This activates their inner-motivation and makes a lesson easier to comprehend.

The second teaching approach is to overcome their motivational problems. Autonomy-supportive teachers rely on language that is non-controlling, informational, and flexible, especially when dealing with poor performance. "I have noticed your struggles in this project. Is there anything I can do to help?" This is an example of language that autonomy-supportive teachers use, which is not pressuring or rigid.

The third teaching approach is helping learners keep motivation and interest in

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activities that are not fun or interesting but important in the lesson. Explaining the tasks and its rationale to students help them to understand the purpose behind it, and it adds value and personal meaning to these intentional and useful activities.

The fourth teaching approach is negotiating the conflicts that arise during lessons, especially the discrepancy between what students want to do in class and what they need to do. Autonomy-supportive teachers accept the negative feeling or resistance as part of a potential valid reaction in learning. These teachers mention that learning has both its negatives such as frustration and its positives such as sense of accomplishment.

The approaches presented above help facilitate students' autonomous motivation instead of having them feel as if they are controlled in a learning pattern (Schunk and Zimmerman, 2012; Freire, 2000). There are also different learning tools that autonomy-supportive teachers can use in class in order to give ELLs more control over their learning.

Autonomy-Supportive Learning Tools

Autonomy-supportive learning tools are there to foster and operationalize learner autonomy. Some examples of learning tools include the use of portfolios, tandem learning programs, and personal learning environments. These learning tools help students manage their language learning process and intentionally foster learner autonomy. They can also operate in online learning environments, offering materials for self-study, tips for independent learning, and opportunities for staff and student communication (Reinders, 2010).

Self-access centers or online self-access materials are the most common way of implementing autonomy theories because they make many learning resources available

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in order to promote independent learning and staff support. Self-access learning can be integrated into the classroom time or outside classroom time with either a teacher or independently (Reinders, 2010; 2006).

Self-reflective written entries, such as journals, blogs, or self-study modules are also utilized in language advising sessions. When students write about their learning, it gives the teacher a good indication of the level of the students' awareness during the learning process. Some ELLs even prefer the written dialogue because it provides them more thinking time, especially if they are not confident speaking the target language (Mynard & Navarro, 2010).

Conclusion

This research reviewed important characteristics of autonomy in the learning process, which is discussed here as an ability for a student to take responsibility for his or her own learning. Because autonomous learners rely less on the instructor, they develop a higher sense of self-regulatory skills and freedom in their learning process. However, students are not born autonomous. In the classroom, teachers need to encourage the development of such skills by explicitly training students for their metacognitive awareness. Metacognitive skills will help them to become more aware of themselves as language learners and more proficient in the use of a broad range of strategies throughout the learning process.

Based on the theories discussed in this paper, learner autonomy is strengthened when students are aware of their own learning process and teachers can promote this awareness directly by introducing and discussing learning strategies, cognitive and motivational characteristics of their learning process. Taking time to find specific learning tools to encourage students to learn the language will develop meaningful

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learning experiences and autonomous students. Language learning takes place differently for every student; In the role of a language learning adviser, instructors engage students in the learning process by using autonomy supportive instruction and metacognitive skills to strengthen reflection. Aligned with specific learning strategies, these become effective tools to promote autonomous behavior in class.

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