

MOVING TOWARDS METACOGNITION

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Anderson (2002) defines metacognition as “the ability to think about your thinking-to make your thinking visible”. Research shows that students that have this ability to think about their thinking are more effective than students that don’t. Thus, teaching the students to become more self-aware becomes one of the most important roles that the teacher plays.

In this paper, I will briefly go over the characteristics of good language learners and how metacognition helps students learn more effectively. I will also show how the teacher can include in the everyday curriculum activities that promote self-awareness.

How do people learn?

If you’ve been teaching for a while, you will have noticed that not all your students learn at the same pace. Some students seem to learn quickly, while others take much longer and forget much sooner. You may have also deduced that this does not really depend on what you do in the class- on your teaching methodology, or the material you use- but on the students themselves.

In the 70s and 80s, language teaching was very much focused on methodologies: audiolingual, communicative, functional-notional approaches, depending on where and when you were teaching.

In the 90s, however, researchers began to tell us that what the teacher did in the classroom was less important than what the student did. What really makes a difference in learning the language is the way that individual students process the input they receive, they said. The concept of learning strategies came into being.

Rebecca Oxford, one of the first and foremost researchers into the topic, defines learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make

learning easier, faster, more fun, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (1990: 8).

She divides them into six categories:

- ❑ Memory strategies: those used to memorize new vocabulary or rules.
- ❑ Cognitive strategies: such as note-taking or practicing;
- ❑ Compensatory strategies: those used when we don't have enough language to express our wants or needs;
- ❑ Metacognitive strategies: such as planning, monitoring and evaluating our learning;
- ❑ Affective strategies: such as anxiety reduction; and
- ❑ Social strategies: asking questions, working with other learners, etc.

Effective language learners tend to use strategies naturally, but the good news is that these strategies can be taught, helping less effective learners. This teaching should be both implicit and explicit (Cohen 1998). For example, in the course of a normal class, teachers tend to have students use certain strategies: skimming and scanning readings are two of the most common. In this case, the teaching is implicit, because you have the students use learning strategies without actually telling them why or how they can be effective. The next step would be explicit teaching: you would tell students that skimming and scanning are effective learning strategies, you would teach them how to do them, you would have them discuss if they are effective strategies and you would remind them every now and then to use these strategies. Both steps are important in creating effective learners.

Most modern course books include explicit teaching and implicit use of learning strategies throughout their lessons. Many teachers have studied learning strategy training to help their students become more effective. Now it is time to take strategy training one step beyond, moving towards metacognition.

What is metacognition?

Recent research (Cohen 1998, Anderson 2002, Santana 2003) is showing that the strategies that mark the true difference between effective and ineffective learners are the metacognitive strategies. That is, the more a student knows about how he learns, the better learner he will be. Anderson states “Metacognition results in critical but healthy reflection and evaluation of your thinking, both of which may result in specific changes in how you ...learn”. (2002: 1) My own research (2003) shows that the single greatest predictor of language learning success among my students is the use of metacognitive strategies.

Three elements are crucial to metacognition. The first is self-awareness. “Know thyself” the ancient Greeks told us, and they were right. The first step to effective learning is to know one’s learning style. Am I visual? Am I auditory? Am I kinesthetic? When a student knows his individual learning style, he can take measures that will help him process the information more effectively. For example, if a student knows that his memory is not good, he will also know that he needs to compensate by taking notes and studying them.

The second step is to find out more about how languages are learned. Language learning is a complex process that involves both knowing information and knowing how to use it (declarative and procedural knowledge). If the student believes that by merely attending class, he will learn, it stands to reason that he won’t reach his objective. If the student realizes that it is necessary to participate actively in the class, he has a greater chance of being effective.

The final step is what Anderson calls “preparing and planning for effective learning”. This implies setting learning goals. A student will more easily reach his objectives if he has clearly stated what these are.

What are the implications for the classroom?

If you know that metacognitive strategies will help your students become better learners, then the obvious implication is that you need to incorporate explicit teaching and implicit use of these strategies into the every day classroom activities.

This is not difficult to do. Cohen (1998) cautions however, that strategy training should form an integral part of the language course. If we train the students outside of the course, it will be difficult for them to apply what they are learning to the actual activities within the class.

The first step in strategy training is to help the students know themselves and their learning styles. There are a number of questionnaires available in different books or even on-line. The questionnaire can be done at the beginning of the course as an ice-breaker activity, with students exchanging questionnaires, interviewing each other and then, as a group, discussing their learning styles and some helpful strategies that will help them learn.

Every now and then, you might need to remind the students of their learning styles, to get them back on track and using strategies that are useful for their individual style.

As a teacher, you should be prepared to do a variety of classroom activities that are tailored to the individual learning styles, so that no one is left out.

Learning about learning is also not hard to do. You can find a text that talks about language learning in simple terms and use it as a classroom reading. In the discussion, you can talk again about practical implications and how they can adapt the advice they learned in the reading. Students can work in pairs or in small groups to come up with strategies, based on the reading, that can help them learn more effectively.

Goal setting should be done at the beginning of every new course. Have the students look over the goals of the course book, and then establish their own goals. For example, the student can decide if he merely wants to pass the course, or to get an excellent grade. He can also decide what specific language areas he wants to focus more on: reading, grammar, speaking, etc.

Throughout the course you will have to find moments to do explicit teaching of learning strategies. Select an activity that will be easier for the students to do if they follow a certain strategy (reading or writing, for example). Next, select an appropriate strategy (planning, skimming, etc.). Then, introduce the strategy, explaining what it consists of and why it is useful. Model the new strategy and have

the students try it out. Finally, have your students evaluate the strategy and its usefulness.

Bear in mind that one explanation is usually not enough. If you want your students to consistently use a strategy, you need to remind them every now and then to do it. When you begin a new activity you can ask: “What strategy can you use to understand this reading better? Skimming? Okay, what do we mean by skimming?” and so on.

Even in tests, you can include questions that will foster metacognition. For instance, if you give a reading test, the first test questions can be:

1. What is the title of the reading?
2. What do you know about the topic?
3. What strategies will you use to understand the reading better?
4. What strategies will you use to understand new vocabulary?

At the end of the test, your questions can be:

1. Did your initial strategy help you or did you have to change strategies?

Conclusion

Students that use a variety of learning strategies to process the information they receive in class tend to be more effective than learners who are not strategic. Although there are a variety of types of learning strategies, the ones that help the students the most are the metacognitive strategies, i.e., those that students use to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning.

It is an important part of the teacher’s role to incorporate strategy training into the everyday curriculum, promoting metacognition and helping students to learn. Fortunately, with a good discerning look at the program, it is easy to find numerous occasions to both teach and practice metacognitive strategies.

References:

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