Classroom Techniques

The Dilemma of Language Learning Strategies: Promising Exploitation or Disappointing Application

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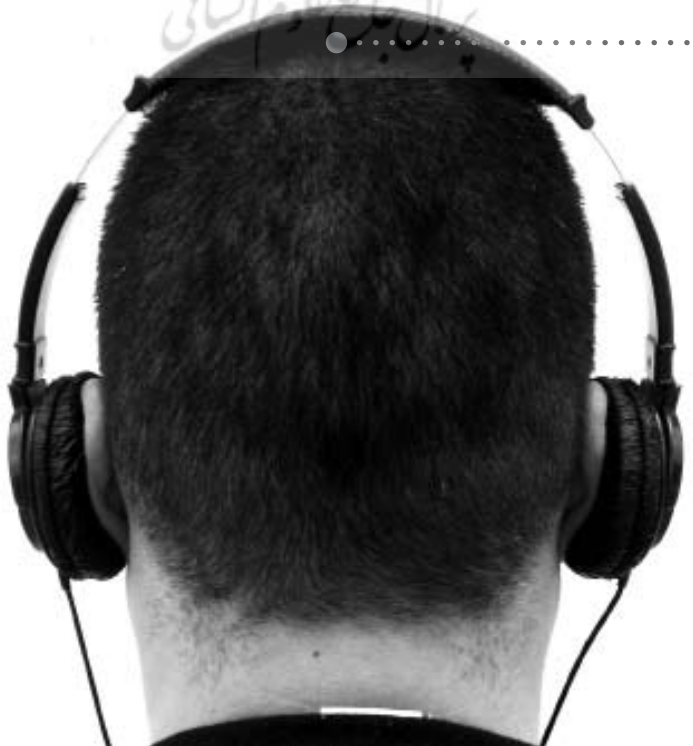

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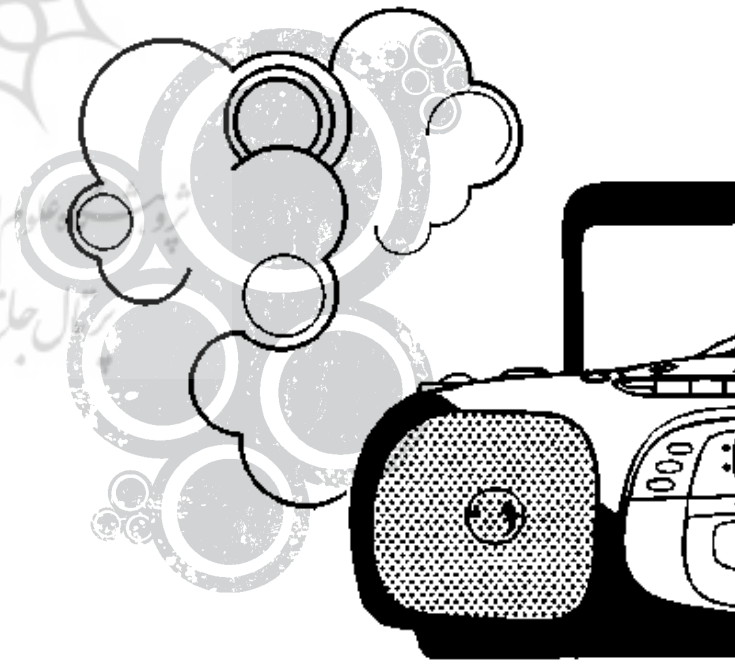
They are highly recommended to draw on and teach metacognitive learning strategies at suitable levels of language learning, taking their language learners' cognitive development into account.

learners' reading quality. What is important is the selection of appropriate strategies that can promote learning at the right time. The selection is based on language learners' psychological readiness, cognitive maturity and language proficiency.

The findings of the present study have pedagogical implications for material designers, language teachers, and intermediate language learners. Material designers are advised to acquaint lower level language learners with the substance and merits of metacognitive learning strategies. They ought to design the listening comprehension tasks and activities that necessitate applying metacognitive learning strategies at lower language ability levels.

As for the language teachers, they are highly recommended to draw on and teach metacognitive learning strategies at suitable levels of language learning, taking their language learners' cognitive development into account. In language classrooms, it is suggested that language teachers familiarize their elementary and pre-intermediate language learners with privileges of metacognitive learning strategies to make them enthusiastic so as to promote their listening comprehension ability. Since this study manifested that explicit instruction on metacognitive learning strategies was not useful for intermediate learners of English, it may not be advisable that language teachers explicitly instruct their intermediate language learners to make use of these strategies, because they can use the meta-cognitive learning strategies on their own.



on the awareness of intermediate language learners of learnering strategies. Rahmatollahpour's (2006) study on investigating strategies across different language proficiency levels also showed metacognitive strategies had the greatest frequency of occurrence among intermediate language learners; however, they were of the lowest frequency among the pre-intermediate language learners.

According to the present study, we can argue that intermediate language learners were able to draw on metacognitive learning strategies in learning tasks on their own and no explicit instruction was required. In other words, intermediate language learners employed metacognitive learning strategies in their efforts to solve their listening problems. Accordingly, their cognitive status enabled them to use these strategies. Therefore, teaching intermediate learners how to apply metacognitive strategies while they were aware of them to improve their listening comprehension skill cannot contribute to the enhancement of their learning.

We assume that intermediate language learners' consciousness is already sufficiently raised so instruction does not improve it any further. Thus it seems that making intermediate listeners develop an awareness of metacognitive strategies through explicit instruction does not influence their listening comprehension ability. Whether instructed or not, intermediate language learners apply these strategies in an unconscious manner.

Plans for how to learn something, thinking about learning processes as they occur, monitoring one's production or comprehension, and evaluating what has been learned after an activity is completed are termed metacognitive strategies.

Conclusion and Implications

This study demonstrates the limitations of explicit metacognitive strategy training. Although literature on the effectiveness of metacognitive instruction is abundant, previous studies have not shown the extent to which this instruction can have a positive influence. The present study showed that intermediate language learners' listening comprehension may have reached a stage where the sterategies focused here did not offer new insights into enhancing their learning. However, in other contexts, for example English for specific purposes contexts, as has been suggested by Dhieb-Henia (2003), appropriate metacognitive strategies for ESP reading can improve the

and language proficiency. Higher language proficiency indicates success in the use of metacognitive strategies and greater use of these strategies suggests greater awareness of how language works in context.

As regards the participants in the control group, we assume our participants made use of metacognitive learning strategies in their listening comprehension process unconsciously since, pedagogically speaking, learning strategy use is common among intermediate language learners. Thus the reason why both groups did almost the same on their post test is that the two groups, despite differences in receiving treatment, had made use of metacognitive learning strategies. What seems almost certain is the ineffectiveness of explicit instruction that we provided.

Previous studies have shown that metacognitive learning strategies differentiate effective and ineffective learners (e.g. Anderson 2002). Taking into account the results of the studies carried out in this regard, one could state that metacognitive learning strategies are paramount in language learning in general and in improving listening comprehension in particular. O'Malley and Chamot's study showed that metacognitive learning strategies improve most EFL students' speaking ability. As for the listening skill, they remarked that these strategies have positive effect on some listening tasks (O'Malley and Chamot 1990). However, what these studies have failed to show is the context in which explicit instruction of these strategies is ineffective.

The results of the present study revealed that explicit instruction has not been effective to intermediate language learners. That is to say, learners use these strategies unconsciously in their listening comprehension skill.

Justify the result of this study we can refer to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. The theory contends that when language learners have reached their actual potential in cognition, then they are ready to receive instruction. That intermediate language learners were impervious to explicit instruction might imply that they already possessed those strategies and this neutralized our instruction. Therefore, instruction can possibly be effective with lower learners when knowledge of these strategies has not been stabilized. Results conform to O'Malley (1987) and Bialystok (1990)

Metacognitive strategies have confirmed a positive relationship between strategy use and language proficiency level and the greater the language proficiency, the greater the use of metacognitive strategies.

Since the medium of communication outside the classroom is Persian and also native speakers of English are very rare in Iran, language learners have few opportunities to practice oral skills beyond the academic context in which they practice English.

was not significant. Therefore, explicit instruction on the use of metacognitive learning strategies did not statistically influence the listening comprehension skill and in fact it turned out to be trivial.

In other words, the t-value revealed that the two groups performed almost equally on the posttest which was indicative of the fact that metacognitive strategy instruction did not offer the participants in the experimental group any privilege and as such had no effect on promoting the listening comprehension skill.

The results of this study, though with different focuses, partly confirm Bremner (1999) and HaIbach's (2000) conclusions that students with higher language proficiency make greater use of strategies even without instruction. However, the results refuted Dhieb-Henia (2003) and Eslami-Rasekh (2003) that instruction enhances strategy use.

Discussion

This section discusses the results of the research by direct reference to the question raised in the study.

Does explicit instruction of meta-cognitive strategies enhance language learners' listening comprehension skill?

Results indicated that the explicit instruction on the use of metacognitive learning strategies did not lead to promoting the listening comprehension skill of the participants in the experimental group. The listening comprehension ability of the experimental group who were instructed on the use of metacognitive learning strategies did not surpass that of the control group. If strategy training to promote the listening comprehension skill is deemed advisable, it might be limited to notifying intermediate language learners of metacognitive learning strategies which they are applying to make them develop greater awareness of these strategies. However, this awareness might not lead to enhancing language proficiency. One reason might be that intermediate language learners already possess knowledge of metacognitive learning strategies at this stage and utilize them perhaps unconsciously even without receiving instruction. This is because instruction could bring a minimal change in the experimental group. Results are in line with suggestion make by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) that intermediate language learners in general employ more metacognitive learning strategies. In other words, there exists a two-way process between strategies

offered some listening tasks and activites and they were asked to perform them in the light of the metacognitive learning strategies. They practiced the listening comprehension tasks and activites with the help of the metacognitive learning strategies presented and the teacher was present to give whatever help they needed. The subjects were also instructed to use the appropriate strategies suited to the listening task and activity in focus. For instance, they made use of the selective attention metacognitive strategy to attend to specific information that had been specified prior to the listening task.

Evaluation: At this stage, the subjects learned to evaluate their progress in their listening comprehension skill. As trained, they asked themselves questions on whether they had comprehended the listening input. They were debriefed on the completed listening comprehension tasks and activities and the metacognitive learning strategies that they had used.

Expansion: At this stage, the subjects were encouraged to apply the metacongitive learning strategies for appropriate listening comprehension tasks and activities. They were instructed to make use of other metacognitive learning stratesies which were suitable to their listening comprehension skill.

After the instructional period, both groups were administered the listening comprehension section of the same pretest, including 25 multiple–choice items on short conversations. Since our university laboratory could only hold 30 students, we ran the test twice. But in order to avoid extraneous variables affecting the results, we randomly took the student groups to the laboratory. They listened to each conversation only once and then they were asked to mark the correct answers. This test lasted for about 35 minutes.

Results

The descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the data obtained after the posttest was administered. The mean score of the experimental group was slightly greater than that of the control group indicating the minimally better performance of the experimental group. However, in order to compare the two mean scores, the statistical t-test was run. Table 1 displays the descriptive and inferential statistics applied to the data.

Table 1. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics Pertaining to the Posttest

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-value
CG	30	52.93	11.53	.047
EG	30	53.06	11.78	

With this information (t-value=.047), we compared it with the critical value which was 1.67 at .05 level of significance. The comparison showed that the difference

the semester, was the metacognitive strategies for listening comprehension selected from O'Malley et al. (1985). The rationale for the selection of these strategies was that they were assumed to be more related to listening comprehension than other strategies suggested in their list. The strategies were as follows:

1. Advanced organizers
2. Selective attention
3. Self-monitoring
4. Directed attention
5. Self-evaluation

Procedure

These strategies were taught en masse to the experimental group based on CALLA model (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) by Chamot and O'Malley (1994) during one whole academic semester. This instructional model contains five stages which are as follows:

Preparation: At this stage, the teacher (one of the researchers) explained the language learning strategies, particularly metacognitive learning strategies which were paramount in conducting this study. The subjects were briefed on the substance of metacognitive strategies in language learning and especially the listening comprehension skill, and their values were discussed one by one. The subjects in the experimental group were also told that the use of metacognitive learning strategies could expedite their listening comprehension ability.

Presentation: The subjects were provided with metacognitive learning strategies after they were acquainted with their nature. They were explicitly instructed on how they could make optimal use of these strategies. For instance, they learned to have a discussion regarding the listening activity that they were going to listen to. Or the subjects, as instructed, attempted to attend to a listening task and disregard the irrelevant parts, e.g. the parts which did not contribute to their comprehension. For example, there were some questions raised about the listening task in their textbooks and they had to focus on them before working on the listening comprehension activity. Thus, their attention was directed toward the parts which included the answers to the questions. Throughout this study, the subjects in the experimental group were instructed to supervise and monitor their listening comprehension processes. The supervisory and monitoring procedures were accomplished by the self-monitoring strategy which is one of the metacognitive learning strategies the subjects in the experimental group were instructed in.

Practice: At this stage, the subjects were

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were sixty homogeneous Iranian sophomore students majoring in TEFL in Masjed Soleiman Islamic Azad University. They were selected from all sophomore students (one hundred sixty) on the basis of their scores on a language proficiency test (the scores between 36 ad 64 out of 100) to represent intermediate language learners. Students whose scores were below or above this range were taken out form the study. The selected subjects had already studied English for about seven years-six years in schools and two semesters at university. None of them had lived in a foreign country before and their experience with English was limited to their academic study situations. They included both male and female with the age range of 18 to 25, and they were randomly divided into two groups of 30. One group's average score was 45 and the other was 42. One group received instruction on metacognitive learning strategies in developing listening comprehension skill, and the other group followed the kind of listening comprehension practice in which they were not taught any metacognitive learning strategies. It should be noted that sex was not considered as a variable in this study.

Instruments

The first instrument in the study was a mock language proficiency test (Sharpe, 2001), including 80 multiple-choice items, which was used to enable the researchers to screen a homogeneous sample. As the homogeneity of the groups was determined through the pretest, because we were interested in the interaction of metacognitive strategies and listening comprehension skills, only the listening section of the same test including 25 multiple-choice items on short conversations was used as an assessment tool for the posttest. The reliability of the test using was found to be. 80 and the listening comprehension section. 732 KR-21. Since the groups were homogeneous in terms of language proficiency and as such the differences were minimal we decided not to compare the pretest and posttest. The materials for practice during the term, which the researchers offerded to both the experimental and the control groups, were the listening comprehension activities selected from New Interchange: Student Book Two (Richards, Hull, and Proctor, 1997). The activites were conversations on general topics, and students were usually required to complete sentences or make predictions on the events or rephrase dialogues. Another instrument, provided only for the experimental group throughout

researchers are very similar, the classification made by O'Malley et al. (1985, 582-584) regarding metacognitive learning strategies is presented below:

Advanced organizers: making a general but comprehensive preview of the organizing concept or principle in an anticipated learning activity.

Directed attention: deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore irrelevant distractors.

Selective attention: deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of language input or situational details that will cue the retention of language input.

Self-management: understanding the conditions that help one learn and arranging for the presence of those conditions.

Functional planning: planning for and rehearsing linguistic components necessary to carry out an upcoming language task.

Self-monitoring: correcting one's speech for accuracy in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, or for appropriateness related to the setting or to the people who are present.

Delayed production: consciously deciding to postpone speaking in order to learn initially through listening comprehension.

Self-evaluation: checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against an internal measure of completeness and accuracy.

Previous studies in metacognitive strategies have confirmed a positive relationship between strategy use and language proficiency level and the greater the language proficiency, the greater the use of metacognitive strategies. However, what is still a moot point is whether explicit instruction enhances intermediate language learners listening comprehension skills. In other words, there exists a dearth of experimental research on metacognitive learning strategies and explicit instruction of the listening comprehension skill at the intermediate level especially in the Iranian academic context. To this end we tried to examine the effect of explicit instruction of metacognitive learning strategies on intermediate language learners' listening comprehension skill. In order to draw up the boundaries of research, this study intended to pursue the following questions:

Metacognitive strategies are learning strategies that encourage learners to focus on the mental processes underlying their learning.

1. Does explicit instruction of metacognitive language learning strategies enhance intermediate language learners' listening comprehension skill? If so, to what extent?

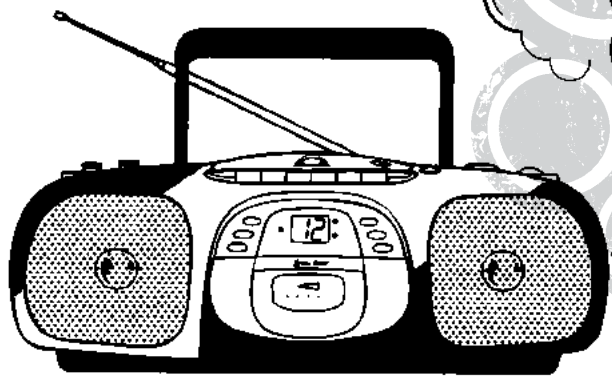
Background

A number of studies have been carried out to scrutinize the effect of metacognitive learning strategies on language learning. One study conducted by Kaylani (1996) in high school in Jordan on EFL learners revealed that successful students made greater use of memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies than less successful learners. Wharton (1997) studied 678 bilingual university students who were studying Japanese and French courses in Singapore. In this investigation, it was revealed that the students made a remarkable use of strategies in their learning. The study concluded that there was a correlation between strategy use and French/Japanese proficiency. Through the study, Wharton noticed that more successful language learners used more strategies than did learners of low proficiency (Wharton 1997).

According to Bremner's (1999) study of Hongkong students majoring in English, 11 out of 50 specific strategies were highly related to proficiency. Hoang's (1999) study showed that learners with highly levels of proficiency used more strategies than learners with lower levels of proficiency. Halbach's (2000) analysis of 12 learners' diaries indicated that students with higher grades in their final term examination drew on strategies more frequently than did the students with lower grades. Dhieb-Henia (2003) investigated the effectiveness of metacognitive strategy training for reading biology research articles in an ESP context. The subjects, being upper-intermediate, were given an introduction to a research article followed by a discussion of the different rhetorical and syntactic aspects of the research article. Using a pre-and posttest design, he found that the group receiving instruction on metacognitive strategies benefited from it. Another study was carried out by Eslami Rasekh and Ranjbary (2003) on metacognitive strategy training for vocabulary learning in an intensive course of English in Tehran Institute of Technology. They concluded that explicit metacognitive strategy training affected positively the vocabulary learning of EFL students. The study on strategy use carried out by Yu (2003) in China also found a correlation between strategy use and listening proficiency.

Liu (2004) launched an investigation into EFL learning strategy use and the factors which might have an impact on their strategy choice among a group of 428 Chinese students majoring in English. Liu stated that the students employed metacognitive learning strategies most frequently compared to the other learning strategies (Liu 2004).

Many researchers have endeavored to classify language learning strategies (O'Malley et al. 1985; Wenden and Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990; Stern 1992). Since the taxonomies presented by the



As regards metacognitive strategies, Brown (1994) considers them as the learning strategies which have executive strategies, Brown (1994) considers them as the learning strategies which have executive roles in learning. Plans for how to learn something, thinking about learning processes as they occur, monitoring one's production or comprehension, and evaluating what has been learned after an activity is completed are termed metacognitive strategies. Nunan states that metacognitive strategies are learning strategies that encourage learners to focus on the mental processes underlying their learning (Nunan 1999, 310). This study intended to find out the relationship between metacognitive strategies and listening comprehension skill in the Iranian academic context.

In the context of Iran listening comprehension is one of the neglected skills even with English language majors at the university level. Undue emphasis is placed on reading comprehension aiming to equip language learners with the ability to access written information. Since the medium of communication outside the classroom is Persian and also native speakers of English are very rare in Iran, language learners have few opportunities to practice oral skills beyond the academic context in which they practice English.

As a preprequisite for degree students majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT), English Language and Literature or Translation should on average pass three courses on oral communication within which they have the chance to improve their listening comprehension ability. It seems that this amount of practice is by no means adequate to develop a good command in listening comprehension especially in classes where university instrctors do not employ effective instructional strategies or suggest effective learning strategies to their learners. Although literature is rich in relation to language learning skills and metacognitive strategies, research on this issue is at its embryonic stages in the context of Iran. Considering the importance of listening comprehension as well as effective use of metacognitive strategies, the researchers aim to investigate whether explicit instruction of metacognitive strategies can enhance the listening comprehension skills of Iranian learners of English

Abstract

Metacognitive strategies have been the subject of a host of studies in second foreign language learning. Many of these studies have acknowledged the positive role of these strategies in learning a second foreig language. However, the moot point is whether explicit instruction makes a difference. The present study attempted to investigate the effect of explicit instruction of metacognitive learning strategies on the intermediate language learners' listening comprehension skill. To this purpose, a language proficiency test was administered to one hundred twenty language learners majoring in TEFL and ultimately sixty intermediate language learners were selected and randomly assigned to two groups. Both groups practiced the same listening comprehension tasks and activities. The experimental group was instructed in the use of metacognitive learning strategies while the control group did not receive any explicit instruction of these strategies for a whole academic semester. The results of the posttest proved explicit instruction of metacognitive strategies to intermediate language learners ineffective. The study suggests that meta-cognitive strategies be introduced at levels that conform to the listeners' actual cognitive potential to enhance comprehension.

Key Words: strategy training, metagnitive learning strategies, the listening comprehension skill.

تصویرسازی: سید میثم موسوی

Language learning strategies are operations that learners take to help the storage, retention and application of information. They are specific actions employed by the learner to facilitate and expedite learning and make it more effective, pleasurable, self-directed as well as applicable to new situations. Strategies help learners become more autonomous. Autonomy requires conscious control of one's own learning processes (Oxford 1990). Language learning and language use strategies are processes consciously selected by learners which may result in action taken to enhance learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of language knowledge and skills (Cohen 1998, 4).