

The Potential of Metacognition and Strategy Instruction in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract: *The article examines the potential role of strategy instruction in the context of foreign language learning (English language), as it defines the nature, aims and types of foreign language learning strategies and more particularly metacognitive strategies and their significance in the process. Various classifications of foreign language learning strategies are presented, as well as specific test-taking strategies that could facilitate learners at language proficiency exams. The learners' part in strategy instruction is briefly outlined, as the purpose of the latter is to stimulate their active participation and independence in learning.*

Keywords: *strategy instruction; foreign language learning strategies; metacognitive strategies; language skills;*

Introduction

Foreign language instruction is a key component of the Bulgarian school curriculum. Due to the growing interest in English and its status as an international language, it has become a compulsory subject throughout secondary education, alongside Bulgarian and mathematics. Integrating learning strategies, particularly metacognitive strategies, into language instruction is well-suited to this extended study period. The time allows learners to effectively acquire and automate these strategies, thereby enhancing their learning experience. Due to their universal nature, metacognitive strategies, once adopted and mastered, can be transferred to other cognitive domains facilitating self-regulated learning across subjects.

Foreign language learning strategy instruction includes a set of different strategies for a systematic approach, which aims to help students cope more effectively with the implementation of language tasks in mastering the foreign language as a whole process, strategies for acquiring individual language skills and competencies, as well as some specific exam strategies.

Although not explicitly included in the curriculum, foreign language strategy instruction can be essential throughout the course, particularly in preparation for exams, including the English matriculation exam. This exam, known as the second matura or Държавен Зрелостен Изпит (ДЗИ), is an optional subject which students can choose from a set of school subjects.

Definitions and classifications of language learning strategies

Based on numerous studies, C. Griffiths offers a brief definition of language learning strategies, according to which they are “activities chosen by learners for the purpose of language learning” (Griffiths 2014, 36). According to her definition, the main characteristics of strategies are that they are *active, intentionally chosen by learners, purposeful, and aimed at developing language skills*.

According to the more extended definition of A. Cohen, language learning strategies are “thoughts and actions consciously selected and put into use by language learners to help them in performing multiple tasks from the very beginning to the highest levels of mastery of the language being learned”. Cohen emphasizes that the element of conscious choice is essential as it distinguishes strategies from non-strategic processes (Cohen 2017: 21).

R. Oxford, whose classification of language learning strategies will be presented later in this paper, defines them as specific behavioral and thought processes that learners use to enhance their own language learning (Oxford 2003: 8).

Several researchers have proposed various ways to classify language learning strategies. Once adopted and automated through prolonged, regular use, these strategies can be applied in both language learning and examination contexts, regardless of format, often serving as an immediate goal at the end of a course of study.

A. Cohen broadly groups foreign language learning strategies into categories, based on purpose, learning, and use, and he suggests distinguishing between:

Language Learning Strategies: These are strategies for initial language acquisition, such as identification, differentiation, grouping, memorization strategies, etc.

Language Use Strategies: These strategies support the use of already learned language skills for communication.

Skill-based Strategies: These are strategies that learners can choose to practice specific skills like listening, speaking, reading, or writing in a foreign language. They also include strategies for vocabulary acquisition, mastering grammar patterns, and interpreting or translating.

Function-based Strategies: This category includes cognitive, affective, and social strategies, as well as metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, controlling, and evaluating one’s own performance in learning and using a foreign language.

J. Rubin distinguishes between strategies that contribute directly to learning (cognitive and metacognitive) and those that have an indirect influence (social strategies). J. O'Malley and A. Chamot propose a nearly

identical classification, also consisting of three types: metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies (Williams & Burden, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The most recent taxonomy by R. Oxford builds on Rubin's model, categorizing strategies into two main groups – direct and indirect – and further divides them into six specific categories.

Direct strategies are:

Memory Strategies: These strategies, related to activating memory, help learners connect one language unit or concept to another without necessarily promoting in-depth understanding. Various memory strategies assist learners in storing and retrieving information through methods such as images, sounds (e.g., rhyming), a combination of images and sounds, body movements, flashcards, or spatial associations (e.g., visualizing a graphic image of a page or board). These strategies are typically used more frequently in the initial stages of foreign language learning.

Cognitive Strategies: These strategies enable learners to manipulate language material directly through reasoning, analyzing, synthesizing, taking notes, and reorganizing information.

Compensatory Strategies: These include using context to infer the meaning of words while reading or listening, employing synonyms and descriptive techniques as communication aids, and utilizing body language to compensate for inadequate or missing knowledge.

Indirect Strategies:

Metacognitive Strategies: These strategies are used to manage the overall learning process and are considered strong predictors of second language (L2) proficiency. Key metacognitive strategies include identifying one's learning style, preferences, and needs; planning language tasks; collecting and organizing materials; establishing a study space and schedule; monitoring errors; and evaluating both task success and the effectiveness of specific learning strategies.

Affective Strategies: These involve recognizing one's mood and anxiety levels, discussing feelings, and rewarding oneself for good performance. Although classified as a separate category, affective strategies may not always be necessary. R. Oxford notes that as students progress toward proficiency, their reliance on affective strategies often decreases.

Social Strategies: These strategies facilitate collaboration with others and help learners understand cultural specifics while studying the language. (Oxford, 2003: 12-14).

Strategy instruction in foreign language learning

Foreign language learning involves the long-term development of language and communicative skills throughout secondary education in Bulgaria, providing a solid foundation for integrating various learning strategies. While

English textbooks at all levels include tips and guidelines aimed at supporting students, the degree to which teachers emphasize these strategies remains uncertain.

The central approach to acquisition of foreign language knowledge and skills relies on the practical tasks and the repetition in order to reinforce learning and reduce common errors. However, explicit instruction in detailed strategies and systematic approaches for tackling diverse tasks and potential problems is limited. In other words, the instructional focus is on *what* is being done, rather than on *how* and *why* this is being done right now. The main reason for this is the large volume of the content that must be taught within the timeframe of a structured curriculum, which leaves little time for in-depth strategy instruction (Joseph, 2009).

In practice, language strategy instruction is constrained, yet it holds significant potential to enhance students' performance on exam tasks, leading to better outcomes. Emphasizing specific foreign language learning strategies could benefit students, as the tasks they practice in class closely resemble those in standardized exams, such as the maturity exam and other language proficiency tests.

Metacognition

The concept of metacognition generally refers to awareness of learning, what strategies meet learners' needs, evaluating the effectiveness of strategy use and then implementing the best plan of action for optimally learning. The term was coined by J. Flavell (1975) more than 40 years ago and since then metacognitive knowledge has been the subject of study by numerous researchers in a number of academic fields. In recent years, metacognition has been considered in the context of lifelong learning, with the aim of enabling learners to think critically and learn to learn, concepts and trends that extend beyond formal education and beyond purely educational frameworks.

Metacognitive awareness is necessary for learners to learn to regulate their own learning process (Williams and Burden 1997: 155). At the core of self-regulated learning is the idea of the learner as the initiator and agent of his or her own activity in an educational context (S. Paris and P. Vinograd 1990).

According to R. Slavin, self-regulated learning skills are likely to remain limited to a single situation or context unless practiced in multiple situations (Slavin 2004: 212). This highlights the importance of continuous, strategic learning. Educational efforts to integrate metacognitive (self-regulatory) strategies into the learning process can be directed in two key ways. The first is an individualized approach that fosters awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses and helps learners identify the causes of potential learning challenges or setbacks. The second is the intentional application of these strategies within the learning process itself.

Metacognitive strategies

Regardless of the cognitive domain and the type of cognitive activity a learner is engaged in, the process involves both cognitive and metacognitive skills that contribute to the performance of a particular task and the achievement of specific learning outcomes. For this reason, both types of strategies are essential for managing learning. According to J. Flavell, cognitive strategies are acquired to make cognitive progress and metacognitive strategies are used to control and guide this progress (Flavell 1987: 22-23). J. Livingston similarly compares cognitive and metacognitive strategies, noting that they may overlap; for instance, self-questioning while reading can serve as a cognitive strategy for gaining knowledge or as a metacognitive strategy for monitoring comprehension, depending on the purpose (Livingston 2003: 4).

The presence of metacognitive strategies as a major component in all the classifications presented above is indicative of their importance in the process of foreign language learning. M. Williams and R. Burden point out that metacognitive strategies include processes such as planning, prioritizing, goal setting and self-management, and J. Rubin defines them as strategies that are used to monitor, control, regulate, and self-manage the language learning process (Williams and Burden 1997: 150).

The consistent inclusion of metacognitive strategies in all classifications underscores their importance in foreign language learning. M. Williams and R. Burden describe metacognitive strategies as encompassing planning, prioritizing, goal-setting, and self-management, while J. Rubin defines them as strategies for monitoring, controlling, regulating, and managing the language learning process (Williams and Burden 1997: 150).

Planning involves goal-setting and preparation before starting a task, including activating prior knowledge related to the topic or nature of the task, the purpose of which is to facilitate comprehension (especially in reading and listening tasks). It also includes selecting and applying strategies that aid in completing the task. Monitoring entails observing and managing progress throughout the task, while checking and evaluating involve assessing both the completed task and the effectiveness of the strategies and techniques used. Evaluating the effectiveness of strategy use is an important metacognitive strategy, as it involves assessing the entire cycle of planning, selecting, applying, monitoring, and organizing strategies at the final stage (Rasekh & Ranjbar, 2003). This can be done through self-questioning, discussions or questionnaires to help them look back and track their individual approach to the task.

Although evaluation of task performance and strategy use is of utmost importance, in practice very few language learners actively engage in or feel confident enough to self-assess their work. A possible explanation is learners'

doubts about the objectivity of their self-evaluation. In the Bulgarian learning context, the task of assessment is mainly delegated to the teacher, who is also expected to provide relevant feedback. However, developing independent, self-regulated learners involves fostering their ability to reflect on their own task performance. To achieve this, learners need to be introduced to self-evaluation strategies and encouraged to analyze their work both during and after completing tasks.

Each of the basic language skills requires the use of specific approaches, and their selection and use require metacognitive strategies and skills. For example, strategies such as reading aloud, guessing the meaning of words and phrases, and summarizing may be used in reading. Listening requires strategies such as elaboration, inference, selective attention and self-monitoring. Writing requires strategies such as planning, making inferences, self-monitoring, revising, and speaking involves risk-taking, paraphrasing, and again self-monitoring and self-evaluation (Rasekh & Ranjbar, 2003 as cited in Chamot and Kupper, 1989).

The most important variable in foreign language strategy learning is the learner themselves. Their role is both in the acquisition and use (independently or with the help of a teacher) of certain approaches in strategic terms, and in the selection of appropriate strategies for the implementation of a specific language task. No less important is the individual assessment of the effectiveness of the chosen strategy. However, the existence of effective strategies and the fact that the learner is familiar with them is not a sufficient condition for their implementation (Roberts & Erdos, 1993: 261).

The selection of strategies for learning a foreign language is strictly individual and depends entirely on the attitudes and preferences of the learner, stimulating their activity and independence in learning. The choice of a strategy is determined by additional factors and variables, such as the individual characteristics of the learner (learning style, age, gender, nationality/ethnicity/culture, attributive beliefs, motivation), as well as learning objectives, the specific language situation and the circumstances that require the use of one strategy or the change of one strategy with another (Griffiths, 2008: 86).

The repeated use of a strategy (or group of strategies) helps to assess its effectiveness, for which the time factor is essential.

In short, to be effective, strategic learning must aim to introduce learners to different strategic options so that they can make informed choices. Another important condition is to provide opportunities for practice through explicit and implicit integration of strategies in foreign language teaching (Griffiths 2014: 9).

Exam strategy instruction

Foreign language learning strategies can be highly beneficial when taking a language exam to determine one's level of language competence, such as the state maturity exam in a foreign language, IELTS, TOEFL and Cambridge FCE, CAE, CPE. It should be noted that these exams are not mandatory, but a significant number of students opt to take the English language exam as their second compulsory maturity exam. Consequently, teachers often dedicate many of the language classes in the final year of study to exam preparation.

Despite some differences in the form of the exams listed above, they all share a common focus: assessing proficiency in the four language skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In addition to skill-specific cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies applicable across all skills, exam strategies are essential to help learners perform effectively in test settings. H. Dodeen defines exam strategies as "the cognitive ability to handle any test situation appropriately and the knowledge of what to do during the exam." (Dodeen, 2015: 108). Examples include the effective time management, reviewing all questions before starting, tackling easier tasks first, checking answers, highlighting key words or concepts in questions, eliminating incorrect options, etc. Highlighting keywords in a reading passage is an effective metacognitive strategy that activates prior knowledge, and thus facilitates reading comprehension. Other important strategies are psychological in nature, such as managing test anxiety and stress due to time constraints, and maintaining concentration and attention for successful task completion.

Two related scientific experiments compare the effectiveness of metacognitive reading strategies versus exam strategies, and metacognitive writing strategies versus exam strategies, in improving exam performance. Conducted by two groups of American researchers, the studies examined two experimental groups in each experiment as part of SAT exam preparation. In both cases, the researchers sought to demonstrate that teaching metacognitive strategies for reading and writing as part of exam preparation has a greater impact on students' performance than focusing solely on exam strategies. The findings indicated that students trained in metacognitive strategies achieved better results in reading and writing assessments (Leddo et al., 2019).

These experiments underscore the importance of metacognitive strategy instruction not only in language learning but also in preparing for and succeeding in foreign language exams.

Conclusion

Strategic instruction encourages learners to become more active, independent, and self-regulated, fostering greater autonomy and responsibility for their own

learning. In educational practice, strategic language learning offers an alternative approach aimed at enhancing quality and effectiveness.

The extended duration of foreign language learning in secondary education is a favourable prerequisite for the integration of the foreign language learning strategies alongside core language content. Time and practice are essential for the adoption, consistent use and eventual automation of metacognitive strategies in particular, which, due to their transferable nature they can also be applied across other cognitive domains for achieving successful results.

Including metacognitive strategies throughout the multi-year language curriculum, culminating in a state matriculation examination, presents a valuable opportunity to verify and demonstrate the effectiveness of these strategies in achieving language proficiency.

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