

Role of metacognitive strategies for learning Spanish as foreign language in Indian context

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Abstract

The learning of a foreign language in a non-native context is a very difficult task and the learners very often get bored if they don't have sufficient motivation to learn the given foreign language. The foreign language learning process entails conscious as well as unconscious actions, plans and efforts from the learner's side to acquire the language successfully. These plans and efforts are geared towards facilitating the learning process and help the learners in internalizing as well as storing the new language for its further recovery and use. Some scholars refer to these efforts made by the learners to ease their learning process as strategies. So these plans, attempts as a whole are referred to as language learning strategies. These strategies have been categorized by many scholars in a different way but most of these attempts to categorize language learning strategies more or less reflect the same approach to classify them without radical changes. Metacognitive strategies fall into one of such classification and they deal with planning, organization, evaluation and monitoring of students' own language learning, for example, organizing the time to learn, checking one's progress and analyzing one's mistakes and trying not to do them again. Through this paper, the researcher has tried to analyze these metacognitive strategies which the Indian learners employ while learning Spanish as foreign language. The researcher, on the basis of his research in India, will present some quantitative data to show how the Indian learners employ these strategies and try to see the correlation between metacognitive strategies and competence of successful students.

KEYWORDS: foreign language, internal processes, learning, metacognitive strategies.

Introduction

There have been many conceptual changes in the field of teaching philosophies and learning strategies. In the past few decades, there have been many investigations being carried out on the question of second language acquisition, in general, and foreign language learning, in particular. There has been a paradigm shift from the teacher centred learning to learner-centred teaching, in which there is active involvement of learners now from the passive information receiving agents earlier. There are various factors involved in this complex phenomenon which can be associated with the teaching-learning processes. In this paper, there is an attempt to see how one learns Spanish as foreign language in the Indian context, focussing primarily on the usage of metacognitive strategies involved in this learning path.

The idea of "good and bad" learners, in the opinion of the researcher, is an erroneous notion. Through his personal experience, the researcher has seen "bad" students turning out to be quite "good" by adopting several strategies, which on one hand, helped in acquiring language proficiency by various means like reflecting upon their

learning process, and on the other developing their autonomy and self-regulation. Thus the whole process of teaching and learning turns into a very effective, efficient and successful route for the learners.

Two interrelated questions are: what is the best way to teach a language and what is the best way to learn a language? As a teacher of a language, one must think of these two questions. But teachers in India, in most cases, always want to respond to practical problems in the foreign language classrooms by paying more attention to the aspect of teaching. In most cases, they do not realize the students, their learning process and the strategies used by the students. In this study, this learning process through the use of strategies, more specifically metacognitive strategies, in the Indian classroom has been examined and an overview of how students learn and process ideas has been reflected upon.

Definition and classification

Research in the area of language learning strategies started in mid-70s with the appearance of the work titled "*What the Good Language Learner Can Teach Us*" written by J. Rubin in 1975. This research article is considered a work of great influence in the field language learning strategies research. In this seminal article, the individual variation of learning and differential success among students was questioned. In this paper, the author also examined in detail the strategies employed by successful language learners and how these learning strategies can be taught to less successful students. Rubin gave a series of activities carried out by successful language students such as practice, memorization, guessing etc. As a teacher of a foreign language, one must have come across many students making efforts to find the easiest way to do a task or while processing new information. These attempts and eagerness to do and complete the tasks given by the teacher in the classroom may be referred to as strategies.

Later, different scholars tried to define and classify this term. Amongst them, the pioneering work done by Rebecca Oxford is worth mentioning. She defined and classified the strategies in a more holistic way which is also most accepted. She tried to define the strategies from a psychological perspective and points out that second or foreign language learning strategies can be defined as "an action plan, behaviour, step, or technique that a student uses, with a certain degree of awareness, to improve their progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language". She adds that such strategies can facilitate "the internalization, storage, recovery and use of the new language and are tools for greater student autonomy". She also divides strategies into two main categories; direct and indirect wherein the direct strategies refer to strategies which "require mental processing of language" and indirect strategies are those which "support and manage language learning without (in many cases) directly involving the target language".

In the direct categories she identifies memory, cognitive and compensation strategies and in the indirect strategies, she placed three sub-categories which are metacognitive, affective and social. In this paper, the researcher has discussed these indirect metacognitive strategies as he has observed that the Indian learners don't take full advantage of these strategies which could not only help in facilitating the learning process but also help them to be an autonomous learner.

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognition has been defined as knowledge and understanding of one's own thinking. Meta means "above" or "beyond", so metacognitive means "beyond" the cognitive. So theoretically metacognitive strategies are those which are beyond the cognitive strategies and they involve the internal processing of the learning behaviors. Oxford (1999) has very well established a connection between the learning strategies and Vygotskian psychological work of self-regulation which, in Vygotsky's vision, is similar to what metacognitive strategies refer to. In other words, the whole process of internal planning, monitoring and assessment carried out regarding his/her own learning encompasses the metacognition.

Material and Methodology

The methodology of the research deals specifically with the way in which the data is collected, analyzed and interpreted. It deals with the design and conduct of this research study. The present study is situated within the characteristics of the descriptive correlational framework as there is no background of a study on the same subject to see how the metacognitive strategies are being employed by the Indian learners in Indian universities in the context of learning Spanish as foreign language. There had not been a previous study to measure the learning process of Spanish in the Indian context (non-native) with regards to usage of language learning strategies. This study also serves as a reflection of the students regarding their own process of learning a foreign language in which the characteristics and student's points of view of the students were completely unknown. A study of this kind was also necessary to get to know the place of metacognitive strategies in learning trajectory of the learners.

For this study, one of the quantitative tools is used which is popularly known as SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning). This is a questionnaire developed by Oxford in 1990 designed to evaluate the use of language learning strategies. It is perhaps the most famous (Macaro, 2001), although it is not the only questionnaire of its kind. There are other types of questionnaires and several rating scales of strategies to evaluate the use of language strategies, however, the SILL is considered to be most accepted and with more reliability. The SILL is divided into six groups of strategies, which are classified according to the original system of identification and classification of Oxford (1990). Part D in this questionnaire deals with the metacognitive strategies. The participant has to think about each strategy and then answer them on a Likert scale of five.

The part D of the SILL questionnaire dealing with the metacognitive strategies has 9 questions which are to be answered on a Likert scale. These metacognitive strategies include strategies such as paying attention, planning linguistic tasks, looking for practice opportunities, self-evaluation etc.

Research findings and discussion

The researcher carried out his quantitative research in two of the universities where Spanish is taught as full time. The students are undergraduate students and pertain to the age group of 18-27 years. The result of the survey is discussed below. The below TABLE 1 shows the list of 9 metacognitive strategies which are part of the questionnaire.

TABLE 1: Result of metacognitive strategies in order of higher to lower mean

SILL	Part D- Metacognitive	Average	SD
32	I pay attention when someone is speaking Spanish.	4.16	0.83
38	I think about my progress in learning Spanish.	3.95	1.05
33	I try to find out how to be a better learner of Spanish.	3.79	1.16
31	I notice my Spanish mistakes and use that to help me do better.	3.74	1.02
35	I look for people I can talk to in Spanish.	3.56	1.15
37	I have clear goals for improving my Spanish skills.	3.42	1.09
30	I try to find as many ways as I can to use my Spanish.	3.34	1.12
34	I plan my schedule so I have enough time to study Spanish.	3.19	1.20
36	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in Spanish.	3.19	1.25

In this study, it is found that with the average of use 3.59, metacognitive strategies are used more frequently by Indian learners. From the above table, it can be seen that students pay close attention when someone is conversing in Spanish and they also think about their progress in learning Spanish. Teachers often do not realize the internal processes that play an important role when it comes to learning a foreign language. Metacognitive strategies belong to these internal processes and also motivate students towards successful learning of a foreign language. The other strategies that students reported using in this category are trying to discover the process of improving their Spanish, taking note of their mistakes, looking for people or opportunities to practice their Spanish. Metacognitive strategies are very important because they help to generate motivation and are like steps to make the students autonomous. The problem with this type of strategy is that they are unobservable. Hence it is sometimes difficult for a researcher to consider and quantify them.

Another interesting observation which the researcher would like to point out is the correlation between the metacognitive strategies and competence level of successful students. In this study, the researcher has taken the CGPA (Cumulative Grade Point Average) score of the top 15 successful students from both the universities as their level of competency. The CGPA was found to be strongly related to the usage of metacognitive strategies ($r= 0.462$) in comparison to other categories of strategies. Below is the table showing that relation.

TABLE 2: Correlation between CGPA and use of strategies

		CGPA	SILL	Memoria	Cognitivas	Compensación	Metacognitivas	Afectivas	Sociales
CGPA	Pearson Correlation	1	.298	.377	.152	.362	.462	-.087	.046
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.280	.167	.589	.185	.083	.758	.871
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
SILL	Pearson Correlation	.298	1	.816**	.937**	.673**	.916**	.715**	.836**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.280		.000	.000	.006	.000	.003	.000
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15

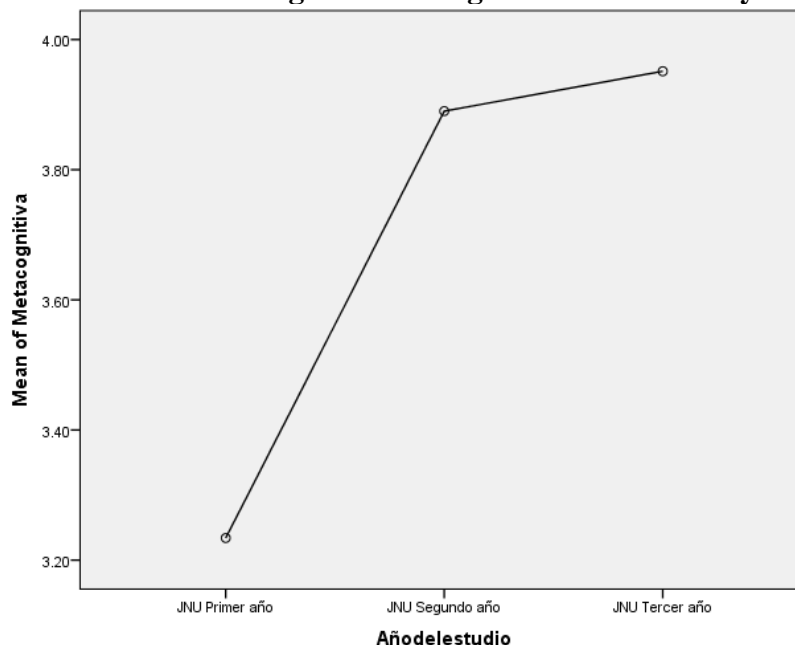
Correlation between competition (CGPA) and use of strategies

Category	Correlation
CGPA vs. SILL	0.298
CGPA vs. Memory	0.377
CGPA vs. Cognitive	0.152
CGPA vs. Compensation	0.362
CGPA vs. Metacognitive	0.462
CGPA vs. Affective	-0.087
CGPA vs. Social	0.046

If one looks at the table of correlations, one can see that the CGPA (the grade) of the students has a moderate positive relationship with the metacognitive strategies: Pearson $r = 0.462$. The correlation between CGPA and SILL is positive: Pearson $r = 0.298$. Interestingly, two other types of strategies, affective and social strategies were not found related to the competency indicated by CGPA. In fact, there is a negative correlation between CGPA and affective strategies: Pearson $r = -0.087$. The metacognitive strategies are more frequently employed by the successful students which underline the fact that they have more metacognitive control and exercise this metacognition in their learning process to enhance their learning experiences.

Another interesting result was found which is worth mentioning here. There was a statistically significant difference in the use of this type of strategies by the first, second and third-year students. This means that the third year students use the metacognitive strategies more than the second year and the second year students use them more than the first year. This result is demonstrated through graph below.

GRAPH: Metacognitive strategies vs. Year of study



This difference in the usage of this metacognitive strategies has to do with the progressive development that takes place after studying the Spanish language for one or two years. The final result of SILL also indicates that students in the third-year use strategies more frequently than the junior level students. This also implies that the experience of studying a foreign language opens the mentality of the students and provides them with many new tools such as strategies that they use to facilitate and improve the learning process.

Apart from the SILL questionnaire, there were other set of 32 strategies provided to the learners to see which strategies they use most in their learning path. Amongst those 32, the following 11 strategies have been listed below in TABLE 2 which are in high average use category.

TABLE 3: List of strategies with high average use

Sl.No	Learning strategies	Total	Average	SD
1	Learning from the teacher.	264	4.3	0.90
2	Doing homework.	254	4.1	0.88
3	Using a computer.	249	4.0	1.00
4	Using a dictionary.	235	3.8	1.12
5	Learning from mistakes.	230	3.7	1.25
6	Learning in an environment where the language is spoken.	229	3.7	1.00
7	Listening to songs in Spanish.	225	3.6	1.26
8	Studying Spanish grammar.	222	3.6	1.14
9	Listening to native speakers of Spanish.	220	3.6	1.20
10	Talking to other students in Spanish.	219	3.5	1.18
11	Trying to think in Spanish.	219	3.5	1.29

The researcher would like to discuss in detail three strategies (strategy number 5, 6 and 11) which are somehow related to the category of metacognitive strategies.

The strategy number 5 in the table is "learn from mistakes". It is very interesting to note here the average use of this strategy by the two categories of students. Although all students reported using this strategy with the average use of 3.71, good or successful students reported using it more frequently. In the case of successful students, the average is 4.09. This strategy also seems to emphasize the fact that the ability to pay careful attention to details and learn from experience is typical of the most competent students and perhaps overcomes the emphasis on fluency at the expense of the precision that has been fashionable during some time (Brumfit, 1984).

The next strategy which is strategy number 6 in the table is "to learn in an environment where the language is spoken". In the case of Indian students, it is a bit difficult. Practically teaching Spanish in the Indian context is very difficult since students do not have the opportunity to see and experience the Hispanic culture. Their knowledge is limited to books and they usually practice, in most cases, in the situations they find around them, which are Indian conditions. In other word one can say that they have a small world in which they try to use the Spanish language but in Indian contexts. Then they have two possibilities left; practice Spanish with their classmates or teachers or practice with the natives if they find someone. But as the result shows that this strategy is very useful and the students have responded positively with the average of 3.69.

The last strategy the above table is "try to think in Spanish." This strategy which belongs to the metacognitive group is also important since it works as a reinforcement and drives the metacognitive skills that are important at the time of making a conversation. According to one of the popular sayings, the moment one begins to have dreams in the foreign language, he/she has mastered the language. Thinking about the learning process itself, about its success, error, lack and everything, helps a lot in achieving proficiency in the language. This also reflects that there is a need to train students in the proper use of the strategies. Thinking in Spanish is a metacognitive and helps in retaining information in short-term memory and serves to develop concepts in long-term memory.

Conclusion

The main idea of this research paper was to reflect upon one of the strategy types, metacognitive strategies, which the Indian learners use in their learning trajectory. This is important as this would give us a base to investigate further on this topic to have a holistic view of the whole language teaching-learning process. Language learning happens at both social as well as individual level. Through this paper, the researcher has tried to look into the individual internal processes through which the learning takes place. Another important point which we as a teacher and researcher have to consider is how to integrate strategy training in the language classroom. The question of intrinsic or extrinsic training of strategies as well as the timing of doing so is an area in which research has been carried out but there is a need to deepen our knowledge in this field which requires further research both transversal as well as longitudinal level. Another point which the author would like to mention is the inclusion of qualitative data and its analysis for a more holistic approach to see the role of metacognitive strategies in language learning which is lacking in this paper.

Another important aspect of metacognitive strategies which needs consideration is their role in autonomous learning. The metacognitive processes that include the organization of learning time, self-control and self-evaluation are like the first steps in becoming autonomous learners. The language learning strategies when defined as specific actions or behaviors for which the student tries to improve their language learning, reflect the degree of student autonomy and are mechanisms by which the student develops even greater autonomy. The important role of the learning strategies cannot be denied since they are the tools used by the students themselves in their learning process and also indicate the first movements of the students towards achieving autonomy. There is a need to train the students to use these strategies and take advantage of them which deal with regulating and planning internal processes of learning a foreign language.

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