

## Metacognition and Students' English Learning

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### Abstract

The term metacognition was first put forward by American developmental psychologist John H. Flavell (1979). It literally means cognition about cognition, or more informally, thinking about thinking. Flavell defined metacognition as knowledge about cognition and control of cognition. Research has shown that metacognition plays a very important role in students' study and is the real factor that causes the differences of students' academic records. The relationship between students' metacognitive skills and their academic records is that the stronger their metacognitive skills are, the higher their academic records are. Students' metacognitive skills influence students' study in three phases: the phases of pre-study, study and post-study. This paper mainly talks about how to improve students' metacognitive skills in the three phases and make them do better in English studying. It can be done from three aspects: 1. Help students have a correct idea of learning. Students should learn to know about their study task and make a proper study plan before starting their study activities. 2. Train students to have the ability to choose proper learning strategies. Learning strategies is part of metacognition. Teachers should tell students their education principles and let students know the destination and the expected result of their teaching activities. Thus students could learn to choose proper learning strategies in their language study. 3. Improve students' ability of self-regulation in their language study. Self-regulation is the essence of metacognition. Teachers should be involved in specific teaching steps, know students' problems and puzzles and help students evaluate if they are approaching their aim.

### 1. Metacognition and Students' English Learning

The term metacognition was first put forward by American developmental psychologist John H. Flavell (1979). It literally means cognition about cognition, or more informally, thinking about thinking. It comes from the root word "meta", meaning beyond. It can take many forms; it includes knowledge about when and how to use particular strategies for learning or for problem solving. Metacognition is classified into three components: *Metacognitive knowledge* (also called metacognitive awareness) is what individuals know about themselves and others as cognitive processors. *Metacognitive regulation* is the regulation of cognition and learning experiences through a set of activities that help people control their learning. *Metacognitive experiences* are those experiences that have something to do with the current, on-going cognitive endeavor.

Metacognitive knowledge includes three different types: *Declarative knowledge*: refers to knowledge about oneself as a learner and about what factors can influence one's performance. Declarative knowledge can also be referred to as "world knowledge". *Procedural knowledge*: refers to knowledge about doing things. This type of knowledge is displayed as heuristics and strategies. A high degree of procedural knowledge can allow individuals to perform tasks more automatically. This is achieved through a large variety of strategies that can be accessed more efficiently. *Conditional knowledge*: refers to knowing when and why to use declarative and procedural knowledge. It allows students to allocate their resources when using strategies. This in turn allows the strategies to become more effective. Similar to metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive regulation or "regulation of cognition" contains three skills that are essential. *Planning*: refers to the appropriate selection of strategies and the correct allocation of resources that affect task performance. *Monitoring*: refers to one's awareness of comprehension and task performance. *Evaluating*: refers to appraising the final product of a task and the efficiency at which the task was performed. This can include re-evaluating strategies that were used. Metacognitive experience is responsible for creating an identity that matters to an individual. The creation of the identity with metacognitive experience is linked to the identity-based motivation (IBM) model. The identity-based motivation model implies that "identities matter because they provide a basis for meaning making and for action."

The controlling and monitoring function of metacognition in the process of learning has been found in lots of empirical research. It has been shown that metacognition plays an important role in students' learning activities and has a great influence on students' cognitive activities. Wen Qiufang, in a case study of an excellent student and a slow one, has found that the excellent student showed great ability

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of macro and micro regulating and often reflected on whether he had made progress and whether his learning strategy had been effective, while the slow student seemed to be weak in these sides. The relationship between students' metacognitive skills and their academic records is that the stronger their metacognitive skills are, the higher their academic records are. It is also true of language study. How do language learners apply their metacognitive skills to their study in order to improve the efficiency of their study? This question has gradually become the focus of research.

## 2. Improvement of students' metacognitive skills

The influence of metacognition on students' study could be found in three different phases: the phases of pre-study, study and post-study. The phase of pre-study includes the process related to self-evaluation of efficiency, task assessment and the choice of learning strategies. It is metacognition that provides information for the task assessment and the choice of strategies; it is not the evaluation made after the study has done that provides the information. The phase of study includes the choice of learning projects and the monitoring of the learning process. The learner would be observed when he is doing study of the chosen project and the learner would analyze and then make judgment on whether he has reached the expected aim. During the post-study phase the whole learning process will go around and begin again. If the study doesn't reach the learner's expected purpose, he will go back to the starting point and start again. Based on what has been mentioned above, I think teachers should train students in the following aspects in order to improve their metacognitive skills.

1. Help students have a correct idea of learning. The most important factor that influences students' study is the idea of learning that students have had. Wrong learning beliefs would bring bad effect to students. In order to do their teaching effectively, teachers should help students know whether their learning beliefs are correct or not and help them correct the wrong idea of learning. Teachers should make students know the differences between college English study and middle school English study that would appear in teaching methods, learning methods and the relationship between teachers and students. Also, teachers should let students know clearly about the requirements listed in "College English Teaching Syllabus". For example, the ratio of the time used for English study in and after class is 1:2, and the ratio of the amount of reading in and after class is 1:4.2. Students should be told that they should work hard not only in class but also after class. If they just wait for teachers to teach them everything but not do study themselves, it is impossible for them to make progress, not to mention making great achievements. They have to be told that they are what they do, but not teachers make them who they are. Definitely speaking, teachers should train students to learn to know about their study task, make a proper study plan, and prepare conditions of learning before starting their study activities, and thus help them to develop correct learning beliefs.

2. Train students to have the ability to choose proper learning strategies. Learning strategies is part of metacognition. Language learning strategies is a term referring to the processes and actions that are consciously deployed by language learners to help them to learn or use a language more effectively. They have also been defined as "thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very outset of learning to the most advanced levels of target language performance". Before choosing learning strategies, students should know about their learning activities, that is, they know that they are to finish some study task. So teachers should tell students their education principles and let students know the destination and the expected result of their teaching activities. Thus students would be able to exploit their advantages as adult language learners to the full and learn to choose proper learning strategies in their language study. For example, in the teaching of Intensive Reading, the study of the passages in each unit is in fact the interaction between teachers and students. Students are expected to be involved in the analysis of the text, class discussion and answering questions in class in order to improve their language learning awareness, develop their English thinking ability and promote their understanding of the content and discourse of the text. But the fact is that students seem to be only concerned about how many new words they are going to learn in this unit. All these undoubtedly bring about difficulty to teachers' teaching. So in order to make learners coordinate with teachers, teachers should teach them something about the characteristics of English and the knowledge about English study. Only in this way could students understand the meaning of each teaching step and then choose proper learning strategies in their study.

3. Improve students' ability of self-regulation in their language study. Self-regulation is the essence of metacognition and the most effective way of learning. It is a process of consistently thinking, judging and adjusting. Those students with strong ability of self-regulation are able to decide on their learning objectives, select proper learning methods, monitor their learning process and evaluate their learning results. Self-regulating learners are able to select, build and even create the most proper environment of study. Usually students would depend on the external feedback such as

the result of examination when they evaluate their study or what they reap in one stage. If the result doesn't live up to their expectation, they would easily become worried, lose confidence and doubt if their learning methods are correct. So teachers should be involved in specific teaching steps, know students' problems and puzzles as individual learners, help students evaluate if they are approaching their aim by using formative and summarized assessment, and eventually develop their ability of self-regulation in their study.

Metacognition emphasizes that individuals make adjustment and reflection on their cognitive activities and results. We can say metacognition has great influence on students' English study in many aspects such as reading comprehension, writing, listening and speaking and in every learning step such as previewing, listening in class and reviewing. Therefore it is of great significance to pay more attention to improving students' metacognitive skills.

## References

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