Enhancing Metacognitive Strategies in English Language Learners in High School: Explicit Instruction and Its Impact on Learner Autonomy. A Case Study of Grade 12 Students in New Yundum Academy

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of a quasi-experimental study conducted to investigate the effects of explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies on the learner autonomy of high school students in Grade 12 in English Language Learning in The Gambia. A twelve (12)-week lesson period was offered to the experimental group (n=25) that integrated instruction using planning, monitoring, and evaluation strategies, while a control group (n=25) used the normal conventional communicative teaching approach for English Language Learning. The data for the study were gathered using a pre- and post-intervention learner autonomy questionnaire, analysis of student reflection papers, and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study indicated a significant increase in self-reported autonomy and strategic knowledge for the experimental group as compared to the control group. The qualitative analysis of the findings suggested that many students developed a clearer understanding of their own learning processes and demonstrated greater ability to self-correct and adapt strategies. The findings suggest that explicit metacognitive strategy instruction is an effective pedagogical method that can support learners and should be systematically incorporated into English language teacher education programs.

Keywords: Metacognition, Learner Autonomy, English Language Learning Strategies, Explicit Instruction

INTRODUCTION

The changes in English language teaching have taken an advanced paradigm shift from basically focusing on linguistic competence to enhancing the students' ability to independently manage the learning process (Benson, 2011). This ability is what is described as learner autonomy. It is defined as the ability to take ownership of one's own learning process (Holec, 1981). While learner autonomy is highly effective and encouraged, it is highly discouraged to place the entire responsibility of the learning process on learners without providing the necessary support and guidelines. This would render the learning process ineffective and meaningless. It is necessary to understand that learner autonomy is not genetically inherited but a learning skill that must be nurtured in students through pedagogical interventions and effective instruction.

According to Flavell (1979), an important aspect of the development of autonomy in learners is the concept of metacognition, which is often referred to as the knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena. In the context of English language learning, this concept would mean the ability of the learner to recognise their own strategies, strengths, and weaknesses, and the skills to plan, monitor, and evaluate their progress (Victori & Lockhart, 1995). Though strategic learning competence is recognised and accepted in frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), clear specific classroom instruction on how to learn often remains unclear and unavailable in most cases.

Therefore, this research addresses this gap by investigating the direct impact of explicit metacognitive strategy instruction (EMSI) on learner autonomy. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies contribute to a measurable increase in English Language learners' self-reported autonomy?

2. How does explicit metacognitive strategy instruction influence learners' actual strategic behaviour and self-regulatory processes, as revealed through their reflections?

3. What are the perceptions of students on the value of metacognitive strategy training?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is linked to the concept of self-regulated learning (SRL) propounded by Zimmerman (2002). This theory argues that when learning is effective, learners become proactive, allowing them to manage their own learning through metacognitive, motivational, and behavioural processes. The Self-Regulated Learning design basically involves a cyclical process of forethought (planning), performance management (monitoring), and selfreflection (evaluation) activities.

Based on the Self-Regulated Learning theory, the study of Rebecca L. Oxford (1990; 2011) on language learning strategies plays an important role in how the concept can be incorporated in the language learning process. Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) conceptualises strategies into direct and indirect types, with metacognitive strategies such as managing your learning, arranging and planning your learning, and evaluating your learning being among the most important indirect strategies for enhancing autonomy.

This study believes that when we make these metacognitive processes explicit, teachable, and reflective, teachers can directly scaffold the development of learner self-regulation and, consequently, autonomy (Wenden, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study applied a quasi-experimental procedure. In doing so, a pre-test and post-test control group design was implemented. The study identified independent and dependent variables. The independent variable was the explicit metacognitive strategy instruction (EMSI), and the dependent variables were learner autonomy and strategic knowledge.

Participants

The study recruited fifty (50) high school students from New Yundum Academy in The Gambia who were purposively selected and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n=25) and a control group (n=25). Both groups were taught by the same English Language teacher to control for teacher effect and impact.

Intervention

The intervention was implemented in the form of lesson activities and lasted for 12 weeks. Both groups used the same core English Language textbook approved by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) and covered similar communicative objectives such as narrating past events, summary tasks, comprehension, and expressing opinions.

- **Control Group:** The lessons for the control group focused on a standard communicative language teaching (CLT) approach without any form of explicit strategy instruction.

- **Experimental Group:** The students in the experimental group received explicit metacognitive strategy instruction (EMSI) which was incorporated into the regular English Language lessons. This strategy consisted of:

    - **Planning:** Setting weekly goals, previewing tasks, selecting appropriate resources.

- **Monitoring:** Using checklists during speaking tasks, noting down comprehension difficulties while listening, identifying error patterns in writing.

- **Evaluation:** Writing weekly reflection journals, self-assessing against rubrics, analysing the effectiveness of strategies used.

Data Collection Instruments

The following instruments were developed to collect data:

1. **Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ):** A 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Zhang & Li (2004) was administered in the form of pre- and post-intervention activities to measure changes in perceived learner autonomy.

2. **Reflection Papers:** Students in the experimental group maintained weekly reflection papers allowing them to reflect on their goals, strategies, successes, and challenges.

3. **Semi-structured Interviews:** Post-intervention, a purposive sample of 8 students from the experimental group was interviewed to gain a clearer understanding of their experiences and perceptions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) were analysed using descriptive statistics and an independent samples t-test to compare the mean gains between groups. Qualitative data from the reflection papers and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify emerging themes related to strategic behaviour and self-regulation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results: Increase in Self-Reported Autonomy

The analysis of the data collected from the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ) revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) in the mean gain scores between the experimental group ($M=12.4$, $SD=3.1$) and the control group ($M=2.7$, $SD=4.2$). This indicates that the explicit metacognitive strategy instruction intervention had a strong positive effect on students' perceptions and experience of their own autonomy.

Qualitative Results: Emergence of Self-Regulatory Behaviours

The thematic analysis of the reflection papers and interviews revealed three key themes:

1. **Enhanced Strategic Awareness:** The analysis shows that students moved from vague descriptions ("I practiced") to specific strategies ("I recorded myself speaking to check my pronunciation of past tense verbs (-ed endings)").

2. **Increased Self-Correction:** The reflection paper entries showed a marked increase in students' ability to identify their own errors and attempt to make corrections (e.g., "I keep saying 'although...but...' I know this is wrong from my monitoring checklist. I will try to use just 'although'").

3. **Proactive Planning:** It also shows that the students began to articulate clear, personal goals beyond class requirements (e.g., "This week my goal is to learn five new phrases for agreeing and disagreeing to use in our debate").

These findings align with the theory of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002), demonstrating that the intervention successfully supported students in internalizing the forethought, performance, and self-reflection cycle.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides convincing evidence that learner autonomy is not merely a product of time or exposure but can be actively cultivated through explicit, embedded metacognitive strategy instruction. This means that students who received explicit metacognitive strategy instruction not only reported feeling more autonomous but also demonstrated the practical skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

Implications for Educational Practice and Language Pedagogy

The implications for educational practice and language pedagogy are:

1. **Curriculum Design:** Metacognitive strategy instruction should be incorporated into the English Language curriculum as a teaching strategy and pedagogy for English.

2. **Teacher Education:** Pre- and in-service teacher training programs must develop teachers' knowledge and skills to teach how to learn along with what to learn.

3. **Assessment:** Reflective practices, like reflection papers and self-assessments, should be regularly used as teaching and learning tools for evaluating the development of metacognition and autonomy.

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