

**Metacognition development in EFL learners  
in conversation sessions at a Self-Access Centre in Mexico**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to show the results of a pilot study undertaken at a Mexican Self-Access Centre in a Public University during conversation sessions, basing on the Sociocultural Theory of language learning. The purpose is to reveal some discursive data from 12 English learners while being engaged in their participations, to illustrate some metacognitive skills they developed. The study explains that language learners gain insight of their process of learning; discover some helpful strategies themselves by using the language in communication. While assessing their performance, regulation emerges, involving intentionality, control and commitment in their learning. Communicative opportunities for learners bring several positive qualities such as increasing motivation and learning attitude; as well as experiencing the use of the language and becoming more independent. Self access centers can be viewed as ideal contexts for generating communicative opportunities, promoting discussions and negotiating meaning for achieving consciousness rising; as an alternative for language learners to practice their autonomy and the target language.

**Key words:** Self-Access Centre, metacognitive skills, autonomy, awareness, group assessment

**1. Introduction**

The study here presented was undertaken at a Mexican Self-Access Centre, whose main purpose is to offer the space and resources for language practice in an independent form; that is, its main role is to provide the learners with the elements to acquire the ability to take control of their own learning (Benson et al., 2001; Holec, 1981). Language learners at the University who attend the Self-Access Centre (hereinafter SAC) take decisions in their own learning process (what to do and how to do it), which implies to take an active role in their responsibility for their learning process (Benson, 1997: 2). Developing autonomy in this context involves conscious reflection, the making decision process and learning awareness (Sinclair, B. 2000), this is to develop metacognitive skills or “learning to learn” abilities.

The term “Self-Access Centre” has come to be used to refer to the flexible resource centres encompassing facilities, resources, equipment, materials and support (Lázaro, Reinders, & Burns, 2008; Morrison, 2008) for the purpose of practicing and improving language. These offer ideal environments with a wide variety of opportunities and resources (Lazaro & Reinders, 2008); so that users can experience new ways for learning a language according to their needs, styles, strategies and own learning assets as individuals (Moore, 1992; Murray, 2011).

The mere access to SACs is not enough for learning to occur; effectiveness depends on several variables such as the learners’ attributes, how the efforts are addressed in direction of the goals, the learning opportunities to which individuals are being exposed and the efforts SACs make to provide aperture not only for individual awareness of language learning but also for group reflection, communication, shared understandings, social interaction and group assessment.

In the pursuit of the conditions above mentioned, it must be encouraged the solution of tasks in groups during conversation sessions. These environments depict suitable occasions to foster language development from a sociocultural perspective; this is, learning occurs from social interactions, and dialoguing is a form to construct one's own knowledge through communication with others (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1980). In this route, learners increase their metacognitive awareness as part of a regulatory process at various stages of their dialogues while participating in communicative tasks and assessment as it will be seen in this paper.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Sociocultural theory**

The sociocultural perspective states that learning takes place while participating in social interactions. This theory studies the complexity of interactions individuals make in a specific context (Wertsch, 1985); consciousness is mediated by collaborative dialogue and the control of higher mental abilities such as reasoning, memory and perception socially integrated and appropriated (Lantolf, 2011).

Conversation clubs in SACs create an effective context for language learning since individuals talk in provisional, exploratory ways, trying on their ideas on each other to process understandings and new knowledge. Learners mediate their thinking, which means that after interacting, people internalize what others say and then, they gain control of their individual mental processes (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Learners get easily involved in interesting topics and interact expressing themselves as co-constructing knowledge with their peers. Merrill Swain (2000) suggests that language learners co-construct linguistic knowledge while engaging in production tasks by using "collaborative dialogue", i.e., the conversation speakers are engaged in when solving a problem or building knowledge.

### **2.2 Metacognition**

Metacognition refers to the course of gaining insight of the process of learning and regulate it; this is, learning about learning or "thinking about thinking" (Flavell, 1979; Murray, 2011). A better understanding of how a person learns helps him/her to manage knowledge and use conscious strategies in different learning situations. Flavell, a developmental psychologist who first studied metacognition, defined it as the "the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of the processes in relation to the cognitive objects or data on which they bear, usually in service of some concrete goal or objective." (1979: 232)

Metacognitive development is used to stimulate learners' conscious awareness of their learning in order to take informed decisions and control over their actions. This may lead to make efficient use of their personal learning resources and strategies to achieve learning objectives.

According to some researchers in learning strategies (Chamot, 2009; Wenden, 1998), metacognition is associated to strategy training as a generated issue once the learners become aware of their learning management and take action in the different phases of the process: the planning, controlling /monitoring and evaluation. Contrary to this perspective, during this project, metacognition is inductively and socially mediated rather than being taught; taking advantage of the group dynamic adduced to the collaboration.

For the purposes of this study, metacognitive development refers to the raising awareness of the learning process with the help of a group assessment task which activates engagement of learners in reflection about the learning strategies they are using. As a tool to have metacognition, group assessment arises several positive qualities such as the fact that it increases motivation and learning attitude, engenders commitment, makes learners experience the use of language and become more independent which is ideal in the context of self-access centres.

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1 The Context**

This pilot study was accomplished during conversation sessions in a Self-Access Centre at a Mexican public University. The communicative practices that learners had at the SAC were blended with language classroom instruction at a basic level –A1<sup>1</sup> according to the CEFRL<sup>2</sup>. The instruction given in the course was based on the development of the four linguistic major skills of language (reading, writing, listening and speaking); giving emphasis to the learning of grammar and vocabulary.

The SAC is part of the Language Centre in this University, which teaches several languages such as Russian, German, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, French and English. There are various programmes offered to students from the different Schools in the University and people from the society who are interested in taking language courses. English has become the most popular course for years - at the moment, two thirds of the total population in the Centre are concentrated in this language. The English language course consists of 5 hours based in classroom instruction and 2 hours of independent practise at the Self-Access Centre weekly.

The SAC is a small resource centre with a capacity of 75 people per hour divided in 5 sections; the reading room, computer room, TV room, audio room and the conversation room. Learners taking a course in the Language Centre are required to spend a certain amount of hours to study independently at the SAC for accreditation – at least 2 hours a week; however, they decide what to do there and how they organize and apply their own resources. The users have free access to materials (books, software, audio books, recorders, games, grammatical sheets, magazines, etc) classified, adapted, and designed by the tutors in the SAC (teachers in the Language Centre). The main function of this SAC is to grant a space for learners to practise the language they are studying and promote autonomy through learning activities and materials designed for these purposes.

There is also a Tutoring section at the SAC whose main objective is to offer guidance to the users in the process of growing their independence in their learning and the activation of their awareness in language learning. However, only 1 per cent of the total population in the Centre attends a tutorial session as they do not see any use in the assistance afforded. Contrary to this, the conversation sessions appear accepted as learning spaces designed to maximize the knowledge that students are acquiring in the classroom. At the same time, it symbolizes an alternative to guide them to develop their awareness in their language learning process through activities which promote assessment of their performance.

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<sup>1</sup>A1= The first level of six standardized descriptors of language proficiency, the beginning stage.

<sup>2</sup> Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The rationale of this study is to verify if the conversation sessions can present an alternative to supply what the tutoring might offer to them; awareness for their language learning. The study intends to inquire about the following questions:

- 1) How can metacognition be developed in the SAC during conversation sessions?
- 2) Can metacognition be activated in groups?

### **3.2 Participants**

The study was held with the voluntary participation of 12 adult English language learners who were taking English classes at a basic level A1. During classes, learners are introduced into the basic linguistic skills and are mainly focused on grammatical and lexical aspects of the language. The reason why these learners decided to be present at conversation sessions was since it means an option to practice their English, improve their communicative skills, increase their self confidence and meet people with the same level of English. It is important to mention that prior to the session, learners had not met each other, they were taking courses at different times; however, they shared the same objectives towards language learning.

### **3.3 Methodology**

The students, who attended the Conversation sessions, were assigned to a team with 3 other students and were given the topic of the session, a work sheet with a task to complete and a diary format to write their reflections subsequent to the activity.

This was a descriptive, interpretative study in which learners' interactions, participations and discourses were video and audio recorded during their dialogues. At the end of the session, the tutor gave feedback of the mistakes made and corrected some common grammatical or lexical existing problems. The function of the tutor was limited to the role of an observer without interrupting the dialogues emerging in the teams.

There was a set of 4 activities performed during this research; in this paper, it is detailed a description of one of the tasks named "Reporting the news", which consisted of the following sequence of steps:

- 1) First, each member in the team was given a set of magazines, so each of the participants chose an article of their interest to read.
- 2) Then, each person identified and highlighted the main information: what happened, when and where it happened, how it happened, who was involved and why. Needless to say, there were dictionaries and a computer as reference resources to search any information if required.
- 3) Subsequently, the main information was reported to their peers once they had been grouped in teams of four people.
- 4) After the main activity, they took some time to express their reflections and comments in the diary format.
- 5) At the end of the session, they were asked to assess the activity and their progress in the group, how they felt and what would be useful to improve their performance.

In general, the tasks followed the same succession; a) once learners were assigned a team randomly, b) a work sheet with the task to perform was consigned to them, c) participants

completed the task, d) evaluated their own performance and e) finally, a tutor wrapped up the session with constructive feedback.

It is important to bear in mind that, the assessment in this specific study was encouraged to be in groups and learners were able to use the L1 (Spanish) because of the learners' low level of English.

#### **4. The results**

The tutor activated metacognition and reflection in the process of assessment by eliciting responses to the following questions:

- a) How did you feel after having finished the activity?
- b) What would have been useful for a better understanding or performance?

This activity implied the discussion in group assessment and the reflection in the diary formats. The written and verbal discourses were analyzed to reveal metacognition and awareness leading to the results below:

The use of private speech is a subjective incidence in which learners share their internal thoughts, cognition and learning regulation. The internalization of the knowledge is called "inner speech", which is unobservable but made visible, materialized and researchable by the use of "private speech"- a dialogue addressed to the self not for communication (De Guerrero, 2004, 2005; F. J. DiCamilla & Antón, 2004; McCafferty, 1992, 1994), what is even more relevant is its presence in group assessment. Private speech can be considered as a form of self-regulated learning; a couple of samples of speaking to the self and sharing with others are illustrated:

When I was reading, I found many words, new vocabulary I did not know. And then, *I said "I did not understand this or that"* and was looking up at every single word in the dictionary; but then, *I said to myself "No, the goal of the activity was to general understand the article, not to translate every word into Spanish"*.

While I was looking at the main ideas and information in the text, *I said to myself: "remember you need to search the information in the first paragraphs"*.

Another interesting observation is that the discourse is addressed towards the discovery of individual strategies. Even though these learners were not trained in learning strategies, they induced their use – this means, language learners experience the use of strategies rather than learning them, inquire, reflect and put skills into action in problem solving situations, develop their communicative competences and adapt their model of learning to other learning experiences thus they develop study habits, new expectations and vision. At this moment, the learner builds a reality that he now, controls and manipulates in a systematic and deliberate way (Little, 2012) to experience meaningful communication.

Fundamentally, by interacting, the learners discover learning strategies for a better understanding while they face language problems. There were several remarks of the discovery of reading comprehension strategies that they might apply in the future such as reading aloud, the use of reference resources in the search of new vocabulary, lexical assimilation techniques, understanding illustrations and charts, as it is shown in the examples given:

S1: I had a general idea, but I need to relate the words to the pronunciation. If I don't know how to pronounce a word, it is difficult to me. I need to read aloud and this is the way I normally understand a text.

S2: The same happened to me, I felt the same and here, there is a chart with information that helped me understand the information.

I had an idea of my article because I had listened to information about this famous person in the news; whenever I didn't know the meaning of a word, I look it up in a dictionary or in the web.

I normally relate a new word to other words in the article. Sometimes, the definition is in the same document or in the same paragraph. First, I see if the article defines the word that I don't understand.

A word can have several meanings, if I don't understand a word; I relate it to the context.

I like listening to short stories or news in internet because I can see the tapescript and it's easier for me when I listen for my understanding.

Along similar lines, reflection of some aspects of the language, awareness of how the language is used is also a demonstration of metacognition as the following discursive samples suggest:

If the word is written in capital letters, I know it is a proper noun; the name of a country, a person or a place.

So many words in a sentence made me feel anxious, so I identified the subject and the verb of each sentence in order to understand.

Educational researchers have related metacognition with successful learners and this study focuses on the discourse learners have produced in their assessment stage once they completed a task. This does not imply that they have completed the task successfully or that they will in upcoming learning events. Even though some comments, here presented, reflect certain commitment from learners to take learning decisions in the future, we cannot ensure they will take action moreover that those resolutions are appropriate for a specific situation. The discursive samples below portray another form of metacognition by conveying commitment with language learning and taking further actions in order to succeed in any other activity related.

I need to practice my reading more. I would also like to participate more next time. If I read more often, I can learn more vocabulary. The first time I see a word, can learn the meaning so the second time I see the word in another article would be familiar to me.

Next time, I will choose an article about a topic I already know, so it is not that difficult. I will read the complete text first, before trying to understand every single word.

From the data collected, there are a significant number of phrases associated with emotions; frustration and satisfaction are part of the metacognitive development that subjects are dealing with in terms of emotional regulation. Learners control their affective concerns in order to continue with their progress. Flavell (1979) also pointed out how learners' beliefs affect their performance in cognitive processes. Learners' discourse exemplifies the emotional regulation and their beliefs in how they see themselves as language speakers as well as how difficult they think the tasks are. This may affect their performance in a positive way if they consider the task challenging otherwise, they might fail in the task completion.

*It was a very difficult activity for me.* I did not understand many things in the article, while I was reading. I chose a scientific article and the vocabulary was related to science, that's why *I found it difficult.*

*I felt happy and confident.* Even though *it's been difficult to me*, I noticed I could communicate with others.

At the beginning, *I was nervous* and didn't know how to start speaking but *it turned easier when I saw my mates cheering me up to continue speaking.*

*I like these kinds of topics and the activities we are doing.* The topics were familiar to me, so speaking about these topics is normal.

I chose that article because *I thought it was going to be easier.* *It was very difficult* because I didn't know many of the words.

Even when the communicative tasks took place in the target language (English), the assessment was carried out in Spanish (L1) to stimulate more participation in the process of awareness as L1 plays an important position in the process of learning regulation (Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez-Jiménez, 2004).

## 5. Conclusions

As it was mentioned by Flavell (1979; 1987) and experienced in this study, metacognition can be activated intentionally as a way of raising awareness in the process of learning. This study has its limitations as it was restricted to the metacognitive development in learners' discourse. However, this shows that awareness in the process of learning can help develop strategies that might be suitable for future performance in learning regulation.

On the whole, self-assessment and group assessment at the SAC may be convenient forms to develop metacognition and awareness as it serves for other purposes too such as the fact that learners define their own resources (learning styles, strategies, time, strengths and weaknesses) and choose the most relevant ones in their learning experiences.

Self and group assessment is a means to judge the quality of performance on a task and integrate learning with and from others. It is important to state that tutors have a main role in this progression; they need to direct their efforts to provide learning opportunities and foster group and self evaluation that may lead the learners to reflection, awareness, discovery and the appreciation of their learning process and their valuable resources as individuals to exert their autonomy.

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