Moving Beyond Content Comprehension to Language Acquisition: A Case for Metacognition in Second Language Listening Instruction

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Abstract
Metacognition has been defined in simple terms as ‘thinking about the processes of thinking’. While thinking itself is a complex process, thinking about thinking becomes more elusive. But if a teacher painstakingly investigates the role of metacognition, and trains the learners too in that direction, such an effort may be worth rewarding because of the added advantages it may contribute to learning a second language in particular and studying subjects in general. This article proposes the needs and modes of incorporating metacognition in the context of teaching listening. Conventional training in listening stops with helping learners arrive at the content of what they have listened to. The input is processed exclusively for filtering fragments of contents for reproduction later and mastery of the target language is minimal in this approach. When metacognition is employed, the learner moves beyond comprehending the content, and reflects on the roots and routes of the learning processes.

Keywords: metacognition, cognition, comprehension, signposting, cohesive and coherence devices

Introduction
Teachers generally orient their teaching towards the cognitive development of their learners, and language teachers may insist on the learners’ linguistic development, too. In spite of the bulk of theory and research in education, teaching mostly takes care of transmitting
knowledge. Helping the learner in constructing knowledge on their own is yet to become an integral item on the teaching agenda, worldwide. Metacognition can contribute considerably towards constructing knowledge. Therefore, only those stakeholders in education, a few teachers included, who are able to move beyond the level of addressing the issues related to the cognitive development of the learners, think seriously about the potentials of metacognitive awareness and strategies. The majority remain complacent with the learner’s cognitive development, as the objective of schooling. Since the Indian education system still depends heavily on listening in the early stages (and reading at later stages), mastery of the language must be marked as more important, since mastery of language can easily lead the learner to the mastery of the contents of any subject.

The Roots of Metacognition and its Entry into Pedagogy

Though metacognition is an innate gift to human beings, scientific approaches to metacognition is a recent addition to psychological studies. Though not explicitly stated, streams of thinking leading to metacognition existed as early as the late nineteenth century. William James (1890), inspired by studies in philosophy and psychology traced the sources of the concept of self and how it led to the knowing of oneself. The inquiry into how metacognition helps learners in their academic performance is most widely attributed to the pioneering work of the American cognitive psychologist John Flavell (1979), who built on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and in particular, his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the 1970s, John Flavell, developed a model of how metacognition regulated an individual’s knowledge of oneself, the world and others’ knowledge about oneself.

Metacognition Defined

Considering the mysterious structuring and functioning of the human mind, and the complexities inherent in the available parts or aspects of the human mind for scientific analysis, any definition of its function is likely to be incomplete or imperfect. Cognition is one such area in which scholars may agree to disagree on definitions, and at the same time are free to improve on one another. Therefore, none of the following definitions of metacognition claim to be the final word; scientific perfection is still awaited.
Metacognition refers to one’s knowledge concerning one’s own progressive processes and products or anything related to them. Metacognition refers, among other things, to active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes in relation to the cognitive objects or data on which they bear, usually in the service of some concrete goal or objective (Flavell, 1976, p. 232).

Flavell illustrates the psychological construct of metacognition as one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes or anything related to them. Metacognition, or “thinking about thinking” in layman’s terms, is well established as an internal, psychological process necessary for effective learning and problem solving (Flavell, 1979). Following Flavell, the study of metacognition entered the domain of psychology, and naturally narrowed down into educational psychology, as well. It was found that learners who were good at the knowledge and application of metacognitive skills were more likely to become successful learners than learners who were led by conventional teacher guidance and parental support.

Surveying the literature of the recent past, Goh and Meng defend the entry of the psychological construct into the pedagogy of a second language.

Studies suggest that language learners have definite beliefs about ways of learning a language (Wenden 1986, 1991; Wenden & Rubin 1987), and that they are also capable of becoming aware of their mental processes (O’Malley & Chamot, 1989). This awareness, and these beliefs, are collectively called ‘metacognitive knowledge’, defined by Flavell (1979), who invented the term ‘metacognition’, as consisting primarily of an understanding or perception of the ways different factors act and interact to affect the course and outcome of cognitive enterprises. (1997, pp. 1-2).

**Working Definition**

The key concept that runs through all the definitions and explanations seems to be self-regulation. Metacognition is a system of mind-mapping of the past, undertaken in the present, for applying later to shape better performance in future. Zimmerman and Moylan (2009) propose a model of metacognition at work in learners with three phases, namely the forethought phase, the performance phase, and the self-reflection phase.

The forethought phase refers to learning processes and sources of
motivation that precede efforts to learn and influence students’ preparation and willingness to self-regulate their learning. The performance phase involves processes that occur during learning and affect concentration and performance, and the self-reflection phase involves processes that follow learning efforts but influence a learner’s reactions to that experience. These self-reflections, in turn, influence forethought regarding subsequent learning efforts, which completes the self-regulatory cycle. (p. 300)

This mind-mapping gets triggered from reflection, a non-voluntary psychological process. When a non-voluntary, natural, and instinctual inner operation is deliberately brought back from the inner realm of the mind and put to use under manipulated conditions to serve specific purposes, it may result in two ways. First, it may operate the natural way, or it may follow a different way under the pressure of imposed conditions. In the former, findings can be used for further applications as such, whereas in the latter, the findings can still be used, but with caution. However, as the good old wise saying goes, our own mistakes happen to be eventually our best teachers. Therefore, any attempt in reverting to the past occasionally in academics, career, or profession is a desirable mode of refining oneself.

Metacognition when applied to learning, manifests in the form of the learner’s awareness of the skills and strategies used in a particular task, their merits and weaknesses, how each of such strategies helped in performing better, or why a particular strategy didn’t work, etc.

Measures of study behaviours, also called study skills, strategies, or techniques can serve as diagnostic tools to help instructors identify students in need of additional help, as well as providing students with a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and, correspondingly, ways to optimize their learning. (Gurung et al., 2010, p. 28)

**Metacognition in the Context of Listening Instruction**

The choice of metacognitive framework thus justified; the area chosen for applying it in this article too needs a rationale for proceeding further. Listening is perhaps the most abstract of all the four language skills: and therefore, the least analysed and the most misunderstood by teachers. It is the most essentially needed mode of learning from the part of the learner, since the mainstay of learning any subject in the curriculum—languages included—is listening to a teacher talk in the early classes and
to lectures, later.

Though the spoken idiom gained prominence over written language since the beginning of the twentieth century as advocated by the structuralists, it was only in the second half, that listening skills started getting recognition in the SL classes (Brown, G., 2006). The concern hitherto had been on the accuracy of pronunciation, since it was believed that making oneself understood in a foreign country was the major concern in those days of international travel, trade, and communication. But, Wilga Rivers (1968), asserting the role of listening states that understanding what is being said to a person, or talked around him or her was more important than making oneself understood in an English-speaking community.

‘Self’-Based and Metacognition-Based Inquiries

Quoting Kluwe (1982), the editors of the Handbook of Metacognition in Education (2009) point out in their introductory chapter that a sense of agency acts as the driving force behind successful students taking charge of their own learning. This initiative results from self-awareness, self-determination, and self-direction. The successful learner, as a self-aware agent, is a conglomeration of many ‘selves’:

The diversity of the construct of self-concept can be illustrated by the numerous “selves” that have been studied: minimal self, physical self, mental self, spiritual self, narrative self, extended self, ecological self, dialogical self, autobiographical self, moral self, historical self, perceived self, remembering self, remembered self, automatic self, amnesiac self, enacted self, cognitive self, and working self. (Hacker et al., 2009, p. 1).

If this flow of intertwined ‘selves’ leads to the notion agency, another current derives from metacognition and runs parallel to the former, which too flows in the direction of agency. The latter flow consists of

...comprehending the world and knowing that we comprehend, self-regulating and monitoring our thoughts, evaluating our current cognitive status in pursuit of self-imposed goals, revising our goals in light of developing cognitive and affective states, motivating ourselves, developing strategies and heuristics to make ourselves more capable of adapting to changing situations, and understanding others to gain understanding of ourselves (Hacker et al., 2009, p. 1).
From Passive Hearing to Conceptualization

The age-old belief that listening is a passive skill is too narrow to accommodate the complexities involved in it. Rost (1990) defined listening comprehension as “essentially an inferential process based on the perception of cues rather than straightforward matching of sound to meaning” (p. 33). The long processes taking place in a very short time, that too at short notice or no notice adds to the complexity. The listener’s ability to arrive at the speaker’s intended meaning is much dependent on and restricted to this time gap, whereas in the case of reading (the other passive skill) a lot of time is available for the learner to get prepared to receive the new input. The fact that the input once received is no more available for further retrieval since the spoken input is once for all, adds to the difficulty in listening. The learner has to store the linguistic form instantly and start match-making between the cluster of sounds and the message encoded in them.

It is a ‘miles to go’ business for the learner to reach the stage of conceptualization starting from passive hearing with interim stages such as active hearing, listening, comprehending and internalizing. Though partial conceptualization may take place at each of the interim stages, a self-regulatory learner is expected to have more or less full conceptualization for academic purposes. For example, when a teacher reports the experiment just finished, the learner must be vigilant to the time-indicating words the teacher has used—whether A and B took place simultaneously, or A after B, or B after A, continuously, continually, at regular or irregular intervals and so on.

Rationale for Proposing a Form-Focused Approach to L2 Listening

Critiquing Stephen D. Krashen’s Input hypothesis, Rod Ellis (2008) presents the gaps and silences in Krashen’s arguments that contemporary theorists point out. One among them is the nature of the comprehensible input. The learner may not depend only on one mode, argue Faerch and Kasper (1986), one is a top-down mode in which the learner may prioritize contextual clues and background knowledge for meaning making, whereas in a bottom-up mode, the learner may heavily depend on the linguistic aspect of the input. They point out that in the former case, meaning making may be slightly easier and faster, but not much additional language is added as top-up. In the same way, citing Sharwood Smith (1986), Ellis points out that the input has a dual function to fulfil,
namely comprehension of the message and acquisition of the language. In the case of the latter, the learner’s interlanguage moves forward.

SL instruction in general has been focusing on the comprehension of meaning, but recent studies argue for a form-focused instruction. Drawing attention to the significance of consciousness raising (CR) (Rutherford & Smith, 1985), and the role of noticing (Schmidt, 1990) it has been proposed that inviting the learner’s attention to the forms of the target language, and at the same time, giving prime importance to meaning-grasping would be a better way of instruction.

According to Rutherford & Smith (1985), the term consciousness-raising (CR) refers to the intentional effort to attract the learners’ attention especially to the formal features of the target language and it aims to attract the learners’ attention to the existing gap between their interlanguage system and the native speakers’ rules of the foreign language. In the CR approach, learners can structure their interlanguage system (Rutherford, 1987) and it facilitates the process of noticing, hypothesizing how language works, structuring the knowledge of language system. (Fatemipour & Hemmati, 2015)

Pointing to the danger of stopping with meaning comprehension in listening, and stressing the need for extending the objective of listening to acquisition, Schmidt (2001) argues that learners are to be encouraged to ‘notice’ the form of the target language. This noticing is expected to incorporate the newly noticed items into the learner’s interlanguage. Schmidt (2001) distinguishes between input (what the learner hears) and intake (that part of the input that the learner notices). In order for listening to lead to language acquisition and not simply to comprehension, it is argued that learners need both to notice the formal features of the input as well as have opportunities to try to incorporate new language items in their linguistic repertoire (Richards, 2007, p. 151).

Similarly, Christine Goh (2010) argues for an approach to instruction in SL listening that is

...grounded in the concept of metacognition, which encompasses both knowledge about and control over learning processes... By using materials based on a principled and systematic metacognitive approach, we are enabling learners to comprehend listening texts more effectively while at the same time guiding them in taking greater control of their listening development. (p. 179)
Metacognitive knowledge or strategies have not been discussed much in the context of ESL listening instruction, since teaching has been oriented towards enabling learners to grasp the message in the target language. What was grasped was expected to be reproduced later. As a result, the focus has always been on the product.

Hypothesis

Most of the studies combining metacognition and listening have chosen adult or advanced learners as their subjects (Goh, C. 2010., Goh, C., & C. Meng (1997). This article, on the other hand, has chosen the beginners of English as a second language for proposing a framework integrating metacognition into listening tasks.

Taking the dual function of the comprehensible input—content embeddedness and language enhancement, as the take off point, this article proposes to signpost the input with cohesive and coherence devices or, in layman’s parlance, linking words and phrases. The paper hypothesizes that (i) if the comprehensible input is punctuated with adequate linking words and phrases, and (ii) if those cohesive and coherence devices are used as signposts along with the support of non-verbal cues such as voice modulation, gestures, facial expressions, eye movements and body language, listening comprehension of the learner in a second language can considerably be enhanced, and later this enhancement can be transformed into the learner’s metacognitive awareness of the routes he/she has passed through to attain that enhanced position.

Signposting Cohesive and Coherence Devices in the Listening Texts for Early Stages

As stated at the outset, neither teachers nor educated parents are aware of the rich potential of metacognition in learning—a natural endowment in children. Research and theorization in this area have not yet become popular either. The available resources in the field pertain to students of higher classes, mainly adolescents who are at least vaguely aware of the role of the mind in learning. Even a recent and comprehensive study conducted by Christine Goh (2010) focuses on adult learners. Children in lower classes are neither aware of nor bothered about the processes of learning; for them what matters is the product in the form of answers
to questions that fetch them approval from the teacher, and marks and grades in tests.

Therefore, this article focuses on the less trodden road of metacognitive awareness in younger learners and their use of strategies in learning. An outline of a process-based, meaning-oriented, and at the same time, form-focused task for developing listening comprehension has been outlined below. The task is expected to lead the learner beyond comprehending the message; but acquiring meaningful chunks of the target language. It is expected to take care of enhancing the learner’s metacognitive knowledge as well as his use of metacognitive strategies. The task uses coherence devices for signposting the key points leading to metalinguistic awareness and application.

Small tasks for listening for two to three minutes duration have been designed with one cluster of coherence or cohesive devices highlighted in each. The other clusters or individual linking words may remain unattended in that particular task. For example, time-indicating words and phrases which sequence events such as first, second, then, after that and phrases indicating duration such as the whole day, during that time, meanwhile etc., may be taken as one cluster in a task. Though several other linking words may be present in the passage as input, they may not be emphasized as intake for the time being. Linking phrases of reason-result (since, because, because of, so, therefore, etc.) may get emphasized in another task, while those indicating contradiction (but, though, even though, on the other hand, etc…) may be the focus of yet another task.

**Conclusion**

Though we have reached an era of ‘post method’, after traversing through many methods and approaches, the significance of teaching listening in the second language class has not diminished. On the other hand, research and practice have shown that a carefully planned listening task in a second language can promote metacognitive awareness among young learners. This awareness, again guided by a well-informed teacher, enables the learner to monitor his or her study behaviours and enhance learning output.

**A Sample Listening Task for Beginners of ESL**

As proposed earlier, a two-minute listening task has been designed
for the early stage of ESL learners, which incorporates in it, content grasping, language enhancement, cognitive development, creativity and metacognitive awareness.

The Wise Frogs
That summer was long and hard. It hadn’t rained for long. “What shall we do now?’ Mittu frog asked her friend Kittu frog.
“All the lakes and ponds have dried up. We will die without water,” continued Kittu. He too was really sad.
Both of them set out in search of water. One day they found a well. They climbed up the wall and looked down into the well.
They became very happy. There was enough water there.
“We are saved. We can jump into the well and live there!’ said Kittu.
But, Mittu thought for a while. She said, “Wait, if we jump into the well, how can we come out?”
“Why should we come out? We may have enough water there. We can live there happily.” Kittu argued. He was always like that. Sometimes, he would get angry for no reason.
Mittu looked at her friend and said, “If this well also dries up, we can’t come out and we will die there”.
Now Kittu also realized the danger.

Questions
(a) For enhancing content mastery
   (i) How many frogs were there?
   (ii) Where were they living?
   (iii) Why were they in trouble?
   (iv) When we saw them later they were happy. When was it?
   (v) Who thought about a danger?
   (vi) What was that danger in future? (heavy rain/ no friends/ summer may become worse)

(b) For promoting critical thinking
   (i) Two frogs were there. Were they both males or females?
   (ii) Was the well very deep?
(iii) Why do you think so?
(iv) “Mittu thought for a while” - What was she thinking about?
(v) Who is wiser—Kittu or Mittu?
(vi) Why do you think so?

(c) For developing metacognitive awareness

(i) There was no rain for long. When? (Before that summer, during that summer or after that summer)
(ii) How long did the friends travel? One day/ Two days/ Several days?
(iii) Why do you think so?
(iv) How old could the frogs be? (a few months/ less than one year/ more than one year)
(v) Why do you think so?
(vi) Had the frogs been travelling before we met them at the beginning of the story?
(vii) If your answer is ‘Yes’, which part of the sentence supports your answer?
(viii) If your answer is ‘No’, why do you think so?

(d) For enabling learners to apply metacognitive strategies

(i) Try to tell a story that you have heard from your parents or grandparents. You may use the words written on the board.
   Group 1. Linking words and phrases indicating time such as once, one day, first, then, in the evening, now, after that, later, finally, in the end.
   Group 2. Linking words and phrases indicating place such as in a village, there, in the middle, a little away, close to, next to.

(ii) The story is repeated below, but in a slightly different way. Find out at least five differences.

   Two frogs Kittu and Mittu went for a walk in the evening. It was raining heavily, and they enjoyed walking in the rain. They came to a well. It was full of water. They looked at each other smilingly. "Shall we jump into the well", asked Kittu. "The pond in which we live now may go dry in summer. This well is deeper, and there will be enough water in summer, too," added. Kittu, getting ready to jump into the well.

   "Wait, wait", said Mittu. She thought for a while and continued: "Suppose this well too turns dry in summer, how are we going to
get out? We may die there.”
Kittu looked at Mittu for some time and shook hands with her.
“Come, let’s go back to our pond”, he said.

(e) For promoting creative thinking

Stop reading the story with the sentences, “But, Mittu thought for a while. She said.” Now, complete the story in your own words. In the present story, Mittu foresees a danger. You may think of many other dangers or problems.

References


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