

The role of metacognition and its implication in teaching EFL reading comprehension

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present the role of metacognition and its implication in teaching EFL reading comprehension. Metacognition, an awareness of one's cognitive process, plays an important role in explaining and describing the reading processes. The role of metacognition, both knowledge and strategies, will be described in teaching and learning of reading and its effects on the successful teaching and learning of reading. Students' metacognition will shape their beliefs and attitudes toward their reading process which in turn influence their behaviors and success in reading comprehension.

Keywords: *Metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive strategies, EFL reading.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered the most important skill in promoting a literate society. Simply, a literate society is indicated by one's reading ability. In the digital era, reading ability becomes a key factor in accessing any information. The access of information may be effective and efficient if it is supported by good reading skills. Burn et al. (1996) add that reading ability is vital to help the readers easily and comprehensively access the information and achieve the reading goal. In this case, the readers are demanded to be a smart reader and a good reader. The readers need to consider critically and accurately the information they receive about the texts around them (Cioffi, 1992 in Roe et al., 1995). This means that the reading ability of the readers needs to be supported by reading strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, to help them to comprehend the texts accurately and critically. Those reading strategies will direct the readers to be critical readers. Roe et al. (1995) state that critical readers learn to question what they read; the suspending judgement, evaluate, and decide. Critical readers may evaluate content logically and objectively, suspend their judgment while gathering the necessary information. Meanwhile, to gather the necessary information from different texts, the readers need effective and efficient strategies in their reading activities.

The good readers not only employ reading strategies, but they need to plan, control, and monitor and evaluate their reading abilities. According to Wilson and Bai

(2010), the students do not only know content knowledge but also they must know how to learn. Knowing how to read is considered as the process of activating metacognition of the readers. Metacognition refers to the ability of the readers in planning, controlling, monitoring and evaluating their acquired reading ability. The acquired reading ability is cognitive knowledge and strategies. Cognitive skill of the readers, for example; organizing schema into a short term and long term memory should be supported by the metacognitive skill which involves how to control and monitor the one's cognition. The metacognitive strategies assist the readers to become successful readers. In the academic field, metacognition become one of the vital skills and it can be integrated in the curriculum (Acedo & Hughes, 2014). Promoting metacognition of students as well as their cognition in language learning process should be implemented in the early stage. Therefore, this paper tries to describe the theoretical and practical contributions of metacognition, both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies, in EFL reading comprehension with different contexts and settings.

Metacognitive Knowledge and Metacognitive Strategies

A simple term of metacognition is described as “thinking about thinking” and cognition about cognition. Metacognition can be one's ability to control their mental processes in learning activities. The metacognition refers one' belief, planning before action, thinking process, and strategies of language learning (Flavell, 1979), the human ability to be conscious of one's mental processes (Nelson, 1996). According to Flavell (1979), metacognition is divided into two parts namely metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experiences or regulation. Metacognitive knowledge is “the knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them” and metacognitive skills is “the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes” (Flavell, 1979: 232). As knowledge, metacognition refers to acquired knowledge about cognitive processes and it can be used to control the process of cognition while as experience/regulation metacognition refers to the use of metacognitive strategies (Brown, 1987 in Livingston, 2003).

Flavell (1979) divided metacognitive knowledge into three categories: person/self-knowledge, task knowledge, and strategy knowledge. The person knowledge means one's belief about intra-individual knowledge, inter-individual knowledge, and universal knowledge. Oz (2005) stated that person knowledge is the overall understanding of learners about how they learn and process information. It may refer to learners' awareness of their specific thinking and learning process. Furthermore, person knowledge can be the influence of cognitive and affective factors (age, language aptitude, personality, motivation) on learning in general and learners' learning experience in specific (Wenden, 1991 in Hauck, 2005).

Task knowledge is learners' awareness of characteristics of the specific task, and how to manage and understand it (Oz, 2005). This knowledge is simply categorized on task purpose, task type, and task demand (Flavell, 1979). Furthermore, Wenden (1991 in Hauck, 2005) explained that task knowledge involves four aspects namely knowledge about the

purpose of a task, knowledge about task demands, knowledge about the nature/characteristic of the task, and awareness of the need for deliberate learning.

Strategy knowledge is awareness of learners in applying metacognitive strategies during attending to a task. The most appropriate strategies for learners will promote successful completion of a task (Oz, 2005) and it includes learners' knowledge about cognitive and metacognitive strategies, when and where it is appropriate to use such strategies (Livingston, 1997). In this part, Wenden (1991, in Hauck, 2005) adds that knowledge about strategy or strategic knowledge depends on whether the focus is on the learner, the learning task, or the process of learning.

All categories of metacognitive knowledge of Flavell (1979) are prior to the cognitive process of learning. Wenden (1998) states that metacognition is a form of cognition and a high-level thinking process that involves active control over the cognitive process. Metacognition helps the students to be aware of their learning process and the use of different strategies that meet requirements of different learning tasks and situation. Metacognitive knowledge can be static and strategic (Brown, 1981). Static knowledge is cognition domain of person, while strategic knowledge refers to individual strategy to regulate and modify the progress of a cognitive activity as it happens. Then, Brown et al. (1983) classify the metacognition into knowledge and strategies. As knowledge, metacognition refers to information learners acquire about their learning, and as strategies, it covers general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning.

On the other hand, Oxford (2002) believes that the processes of connecting new information to the old one, selecting deliberate thinking strategies, planning, monitoring, and evaluating thinking are the basic metacognitive strategies. All processes direct the students to regulate and oversee learning activities such as controlling learning conscious, planning and selecting strategies, correcting errors, analyzing the effectiveness of learning strategies, monitoring the process of learning, and changing learning behaviors and strategies when necessary (Ridley et al., 1992). In addition, metacognitive strategies are general skills in which the students manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning (Wenden, 1998), self-management of cognitive knowledge and control of cognition (White, 1995), and the combination of learning and language use strategies—language learning strategies (Cohen, 1998).

As language learning strategies, O'Malley & Chamot (1990) classify learning and strategies into metacognitive (planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity), cognitive (organization, inferencing, summarizing, etc.) and social (cooperation, questioning, self-talk) strategies. In this case, the metacognitive strategy is one of the strategies which commonly used by learners, especially in language learning both in EFL and ESL context. The metacognitive strategy is an indirect strategy on language learning processes. The students may use this strategy if they have enough cognitive knowledge about the subject. For example, in EFL reading, the students who have metacognitive strategies or metacognitive knowledge indicate that they have good cognitive knowledge. Meanwhile, the researches on metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategy commonly compare between successful and less successful readers. The successful

readers with metacognitive knowledge and strategy indicate that they have good cognitive knowledge. It indicates that successful readers and less successful readers have different metacognitive knowledge and strategies and successful students mostly have good reading achievement.

Several studies have investigated the effect and relationship of using different metacognitive knowledge, awareness and strategies in EFL reading contexts across gender and grade. The studies were intended to find out the metacognitive awareness, strategies, and knowledge of high, moderate and low students in reading comprehension. For example, Zhang (2010) reported that successful readers have more metacognitive knowledge than less successful readers in EFL reading. Metacognitive knowledge and reading comprehension have a strong relationship in term of person, task, and strategy knowledge.

Other categories of metacognition have investigated by Zhang & Wu (2009) and Henter (2012). Their studies assess metacognitive awareness and reading strategy of EFL students. The findings showed that metacognitive awareness can improve students' ability in reading in which students who have a high-frequency level used the global, problem-solving, and support strategies. As result the main effect for strategies and the main effect for learners' proficiency were significant. The high-proficiency students outperformed the intermediate group and the low-proficiency students in two categories of reading strategies: global and problem-solving.

In the same vein, Akkakoson's (2012) study described the positive relationship between metacognitive strategy training for EFL reading and the learners' awareness of lesson content and strategic nature. The positive relationship has improved students' reading proficiency in English. Similarly, the metacognitive strategy also helps students to enhance their critical thinking (Ku & Ho, 2010). Those studies revealed differences in metacognitive strategies between students who performed well on critical thinking tasks and those who performed less well. High performers displayed distinctly better abilities to plan for specific steps in thinking and to revise their task approach after identifying problems. The great readers are also more active engagement by connections to relevant prior knowledge to understand the meaning of the texts, investigating answers of questions and engaging intratextual cross-checking to confirm their comprehension (Nam, Leavell, & Maher, 2014).

Researches of metacognitive awareness of reading strategies are focused on pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. Pinninti (2016) reported the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies in India by ninth grade students (13-14 years old). The study is intended to develop strategic reading through scaffolding, collaboration and reflection. The results of the study revealed that in pre-reading strategies most students used previewing and predicting. The high frequency of these strategies suggested that they are highly useful and effective in identifying and predicting the main idea of the passage. In while-reading strategies, underlining unfamiliar words and rereading difficult sentences are mostly used by students. It indicated that the students might have preferred these strategies because they generally assist readers to solve the problems while comprehending a passage. The last strategies mostly used by students in post-reading strategies are discussing with

friends and recalling summary. Most of the students showed that peer members prefer sharing, confirming, and clarifying their comprehension with their friends about the content of the passage. Meanwhile, the study implicated that reading teachers may raise their students' awareness of the most frequently used reading strategies to assist them to become successful and effective readers.

In academic contexts, EFL readers apply variations of reading strategies when they got problems during reading academic materials. Nam & Page (2014) and Fitriasia (2015) expressed that the university students' mostly apply metacognitive approaches specifically problem-solving reading strategies. These strategies cover specific actions such paying closer attention to reading materials, getting back on track when the concentration is lost, stopping from time to time to think, re-reading the texts to increase comprehension, guessing meaning based on context, and adjusting reading speed in accordance with the difficulty level of texts. The study is in line with Mokhtari and Riechard (2002) who develop MARSI in identifying metacognitive awareness of reading strategies included global, problem-solving, and support reading strategies. They confirmed that when students read reading materials in school, these strategies influence their comprehension.

The Pedagogical Contributions of Metacognition in EFL Reading

Metacognition, both knowledge and strategies, play an important role in EFL reading that implicates to the ways students are taught in the classroom. The metacognitive knowledge and strategies clearly contribute to the students' learning achievement, especially reading comprehension. The theoretical and practical contributions of previous theories and practices in EFL context should be considered by the teachers in designing, preparing, and delivering effective language instruction programs, or lesson. Therefore, the teaching reading in EFL context can be started from developing students' metacognitive knowledge and strategies of reading. The development of students' metacognitive and strategies can help students in having a higher level of autonomy in language learning especially in reading comprehension.

The contribution of metacognition in language teaching or classroom instruction can be classified into three parts.

1. Increasing students' awareness of metacognitive knowledge.

To increase awareness of students, the teachers need to consider how to help students become effective and self-regulated or autonomous students. In developing effective and self-regulated students, the teachers may explore their students' person knowledge/self-knowledge. According to Zhang (2010), exploring person knowledge of students can be done through various steps. First, the teachers can gather and find the students' motivation, goals, aspirations and beliefs about the effectiveness of EFL reading and attitudes towards foreign language. Second, the teachers should involve students in various reading activities and asking them how they completed their reading. Third, the teachers should build up students' self-confidence and self-efficacy and help them to realize their potential as EFL readers. Fourth, the teachers must know the students' real problem in reading comprehension and help them to overcome problems.

Other ways of building up students' awareness of metacognitive knowledge, Brown (1987) offered three metacognitive reading strategy awareness namely; declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and conditional knowledge. In declarative knowledge, the students are directed to know themselves as EFL readers and what elements affect their performance, while procedural knowledge refers to know how to do the thing. In this case, the students know how to read and how to solve their problems in reading activities. Hence, conditional knowledge is students' knowledge about when and why to apply their cognitive actions. Meaning that students select various strategies that are appropriate for each situation in their reading activities.

2. Reinforcing students' knowledge about the task.

Knowledge about task is also important in promoting the success of students in reading comprehension. The teachers must share the useful strategies that can improve their knowledge about task. The teacher can guide students to recognize the differences between first language and foreign language, introduce reading strategy in relation to a particular text type and language training, and help students set reading goals (Zhang, 2010). Reinforcing students' knowledge about task should also consider the appropriate strategy in approaching different tasks and the teachers (Pintrich, 2002) must develop students' knowledge about the "when" and "why" of using strategies appropriately because not all strategies are appropriate for all situations and tasks. Therefore, in the classroom activities the teachers can enrich students with various kinds of texts, while out of classroom activities the students are encouraged do extracurricular reading materials, such as English magazines, newspapers, short stories, articles, etc. The extracurricular reading activities can boarden their cultural knowledge and increase students' reading interest (Zhang, Yin, and Wang, 2011).

3. Empowering strategy knowledge of students.

Strategy knowledge of students in reading comprehension is described as metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies of reading cover conscious process of controlling learning, planning and choosing general and specific strategies, monitoring the learning progress, solving problems of learning, switching appropriate learning behaviours and strategies, and evaluating strategies (Ridley et al., 1992; Cohen, 1998; Yayli, 2010).

To strengthen strategy knowledge of students in EFL reading, Zhang (2010) proposed the following activities. Firstly, the teacher may implement explicit instructions of reading strategies in which the students have familiar with. Secondly, the teachers should discuss continuously about the usefulness of reading strategies. Thirdly, the teachers may combine reading-strategy instructions with various language-based activities. Fourthly, the teachers can help students how to use reading strategies and how to solve problems in real reading tasks. Finally, the teachers should be the problem solvers of students' reading problems.

All activities mentioned above will be useful for successful teaching reading in EFL context by some requirements. First, the teachers should have qualified competencies in reading comprehension. Second, the teachers should have enough metacognitive

knowledge and metacognitive strategies about EFL reading. Third, the teachers should have reading strategies and know how to implement those strategies in various reading tasks.

CONCLUSION

Metacognition, both knowledge and strategies, is essential to promote successful students in EFL reading. Metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies have played an important role in planning, controlling and evaluating the cognitive domain of students. Metacognitive knowledge is as basic knowledge and metacognitive strategies are as an implementation of metacognitive knowledge. Therefore, this paper offers some possible future studies in relation to components of metacognitive knowledge (person, task, and strategy) and component of metacognitive strategies (planning, controlling, and evaluating) in enhancing students' reading comprehension. The future studies may focus on investigating the relationship among components of metacognitive knowledge and strategies in EFL reading across culture, participant, age, and gender.

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