

The Study of the Application of Metacognitive Strategies in EFL Writing in China

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EFL writing in China is tended to be de-emphasized with the emphasis on oral proficiency in communicative approach. There is ample evidence to indicate the insufficiency in EFL writing course and the ineffectiveness of students' efforts to develop writing competence. To integrate metacognition into EFL writing instruction will benefit writing instruction by laying emphasis on both approaches to writing instruction, and to train teachers as well as students to teach and learn with metacognition, raising EFL writing instructors' self-awareness in teaching and training students to become self-regulated learners.

Keywords: metacognitive strategies, EFL writing, language teaching

EFL Writing and Teaching in Present China

EFL writing is tended to be de-emphasized with the emphasis on oral proficiency in communicative approach. And there is ample evidence to indicate the insufficiency in EFL writing course and the ineffectiveness of students' efforts to develop writing competence.

Many EFL writing instructors might agree that an English writing course is the least rewarding course for teachers and the most frustrating for students. The large class size very often discourages teachers from assigning enough homework for learners to practice and makes it impossible for teachers to notice the errors learners make beyond sentence level, not to mention conducting individual conferences with learners, which is believed to be one of the most effective strategies in EFL writing instruction.

As for the learners, they are mainly frustrated by the fact that they are making little progress in EFL writing in spite of their painstaking efforts. Writing in one's native language is a difficult task that requires a great deal of knowledge and cognitive activities. To write in the second language is even more complicated for EFL writers. Being restricted by their limited linguistic competency, EFL writers are often frustrated and overwhelmed by such problems as lacking appropriate English lexical expressions and struggling with mechanics, grammar, sentence structure, paragraph coherence, rhetorical patterns, and English writing conventions.

Moreover, because of the big-sized class and the timid and obedient nature of Chinese students, EFL students in China very often cannot obtain adequate attention and guidance from their writing teachers. In a big class, students' individual differences and needs are often ignored, and Chinese students are not used to raising questions in front of a large group of classmates. Thus, students often complain that they seem to make no progress even if they take the writing assignments seriously and do their best to compose.

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And also, it is found that teachers and students in China often fail to reflect upon and regulate strategically their teaching and learning. Some teachers, for instance, simply teach in the way they were taught without reflecting upon whether their teaching is effective, and Chinese students, who are taught to obey the superiors' orders, very often just follow their teachers' rules and fail to think over their own learning behaviors in order to monitor and regulate their cognitive learning.

This study believes that to integrate metacognition into EFL writing instruction will benefit writing instruction by laying emphasis on both approaches to writing instruction, and to train teachers as well as students to teach and learn with metacognition, raising EFL writing instructors' self-awareness in teaching and training students to become self-regulated learners.

Metacognition Theory

Most simply, metacognition is knowing about knowing, and it is most broadly defined as awareness and control of one's cognition (Baker & Brown, 1984; Flavell, 1979; 1987; Gourgey, 2001). As pointed out by Garner (1988) and Paris and Winograd (1990), since cognition includes all human mental activities, it is rather difficult to give the notion an operational definition, and researchers emphasize different aspects of it and adopt different terminology all attempting to better illustrate the concept.

Flavell (1979; 1987) discussed metacognition from the perspectives of metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experience, and emphasized the learner's metacognitive knowledge about the variables of person, task, and strategy. Brown (1978; 1987) and Baker and Brown (1984) laid more emphasis on the learner's executive control of cognition, including the regulatory activities of planning, monitoring, testing, revising, and evaluating. Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983) and Paris and Winograd (1990) proposed self-appraisal and self-management of cognition as two essential features of metacognition. They described metacognitive knowledge in terms of declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge; namely, one's cognitive self-appraisal answers questions about "what you know, how you think, and when and why to apply knowledge and strategies" (Paris & Winograd, 1990, p. 17). More recently, Schraw (2001) and Schraw and Moshman (1995) defined metacognition as knowledge and regulation of cognition; they divided the former into three kinds of awareness, i.e., declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge, and focused one's metacognitive regulation on planning, monitoring, and evaluating that help learners control their cognition.

In terms of metacognitive strategies used in learning, Oxford's (1990) divided them into three parts: centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, and evaluating your learning. Anderson's (2002) Model of Metacognition developed it into five phases: preparing and planning for effective learning, selecting and using particular strategies, monitoring strategy use, orchestrating various strategies, and evaluation strategy use and learning. In Anderson's model, language learners are expected to apply metacognitive strategies more consciously. When they exercise metacognition, they plan, evaluate, and monitor their learning activities as well as strategies used.

Metacognition and Learning

Metacognitive awareness and self-regulation are of great importance in learning because learners will be able to reflect upon and monitor their cognitive activities, and further develop and employ compensatory and corrective strategies to review and regulate the activities if they are aware of their mental activities. According to Vygotsky (1978), at an early age young children may talk to them when encountering difficulties for the

purpose of self-guidance and self-direction. The monologues help children reflect on their own behavior and plan alternative actions. As children get older, the self-directed monologues will gradually become internalized as silent, inner speech. Later, researchers have found abundant evidence to support Vygotsky's assumptions and concluded further that the children who talk to themselves, or monitor themselves in terms of metacognition, when facing a challenging task, tend to outperform those who do not think about their own cognitive behavior. This cognitive development observed by Vygotsky and other researchers thus lends strong support to the importance of teaching students how to know about and regulate their cognition.

In the last two decades, researchers have attempted to prove that making students metacognitive learners is beneficial not only in general learning but also in specific subject areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and problem solving. They have also attempted to discover the metacognitive knowledge and strategies that students need to be equipped with in order to gain metacognitive awareness and make metacognitive judgments and choices (Baker & Brown, 1984; Brown, 1978; 1987; Garner, 1988; Gourgey, 2001; Hartman, 2001a; 2001b; Paris & Winograd, 1990; Schraw, 2001). In the field of language learning, Wenden (1991) asserted that learners' metacognitive awareness played a part in the effectiveness of learning. As Wenden (1991; 2002), Cohen (1998) and Rubin (2001) have been conducting research into pedagogical effects of strategy training in all four skill areas.

In the Chinese context, learners' metacognition of language learning had been documented by such authors as Zhang (2001; 2002), using Flavell's model, for a recent review of this research and his recommendations for learner training within a Flavellian metacognitive framework. Zhang conducted another empirical study of how to implement metacognitive instruction in reading for Chinese EFL learners; and Wu (2006) confirmed Flavell's theoretical framework of metacognition with an empirical study with Chinese EFL writing students

Ever since the notion of metacognition was introduced in the late 1970s, how to become a metacognitive strategic reader has been one of the main concerns of reading researchers and instructors. Upon encountering a reading task, one needs to firstly clarify the purposes of reading and understand the task demands. Based on the information obtained in the first step, he or she then plans for the task, such as retrieving the relevant background information, setting up the goals of reading, and selecting proper strategies from his or her repertoire of reading strategies. In addition, during the process of reading, he or she must continuously monitor the ongoing activities to determine whether comprehension is occurring. A strategically competent reader continuously engages himself or herself in self-questioning to determine whether comprehension and the goals are achieved; if not, he or she is able to revise the original plan and adopt compensatory actions to achieve comprehension.

Metacognition and EFL Writing

There are two main approaches in writing research and instruction, i.e., the process approach and the product approach (cf. Hyland, 2002; Silva, 1990). The former emphasizes the writing process one undergoes during writing, while the latter focuses more on rhetorical structure and writer's written product. Their differences in focus lead to different instructional designs and objectives when they are practiced in writing classrooms. Nevertheless, as discussed by Devine (1993), integrating the theory of metacognition into writing instruction should help to diminish the boundary between the two traditional approaches, which are believed by Devine to complement each other. This is because ever since the theory of metacognition was first introduced,

efforts have been made to apply it to both L1 and L2 reading research and instruction and have shown positive results.

But compared with the amount of literature exploring the metacognitive characteristics of successful readers, there is relatively less research that investigates mature writers' metacognitive awareness even though both writing and reading are regarded as the cognitive enterprise that demands metacognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1979). Within the framework of the process approach, writing researchers have closely investigated the processes one undergoes when he or she writes. They have proposed several writing models for L1 writing such as the well-known Flower and Hayes' cognitive process theory of writing (1981), Scardamalia and Bereiter's knowledge telling and knowledge transforming models (1987), and Grabe and Kaplan's model of writing as communicative language use (1996). In addition, they discuss the differences between mature and immature writers, and further argue that L2 writing is not different from L1 writing and that the differences should exist between more skilled and less skilled writers (Leki, 1992; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). The multi-faceted findings in this line of research are the basis to examine the role metacognition plays when one writes and when one learns to write in L2. Among the few studies that intend to improve the learners' writing performance by enhancing their metacognitive knowledge, Raphael, Kirschner, and Englert's (1986) study was one of the first attempts. Their intervention programs that emphasized social context and/or text structure instruction were proved to have positive impacts on increasing the subjects' metacognitive knowledge, including all the three types of declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge. Both Kasper's (1997) and Victori's (1999) studies attempted to enhance the subjects' metacognitive knowledge in terms of the three variables of person, task, and strategy. Their findings both concluded that helping the learners to become aware of their writing processes and strategies, i.e., enhancing their metacognitive awareness, when they perform the cognitive task of writing, can improve their L2 writing performance.

In Chinese context, a lot of researches and teaching experiments have been carried out to reveal the relationship between metacognition and EFL writing. Based on the findings of an English learning questionnaire, Yang (2002) expounds the relationship between metacognition and autonomous learning in the light of the studies of cognitive psychology and applied linguistics and she proposes bringing metacognition training into College English teaching. Lu's study (2006) indicates significant statistical differences exist between successful learners and less successful learners in their application of metacognitive strategies and multi-regression analysis shows that advanced planning and selective attention metacognitive strategies are dominant factors affecting English writing.

And many metacognition-based writing training have been performed to show how metacognition benefits EFL learners with their writing. Ji's (2002) study reports a metacognitive strategy training program and investigates the effects of the training in an attempt to cultivate learner autonomy and encourage students to manage their own studies. Students were trained on four metacognitive strategies, i.e., becoming aware of learning processes, self-evaluation, establishment of objectives, and planning. The findings showed that most students' metacognitive awareness and ability to use those strategies have been enhanced. Her further study experiments (2005) change the traditional EFL writing instructive methods, with a new approach based on the frame work of metacognitive knowledge. Feedback from the participants in the experiment shows that it is a success. In Wu's (2006) attempt to examine the nature components and characteristics of metacognitive experiences in EFL writing, a variety of empirical studies are conducted: a longitudinal study, a horizontal study, and a large-scale questionnaire etc. The results show that: (1) Metacognitive experiences are of two

major types: positive and negative; (2) metacognitive experiences are related to EFL writing performance; and (3) teaching of metacognition in EFL writing may exert a positive effect on learners' metacognitive experiences.

As to the writing metacognition theory, Wu and Liu conducted a factor analysis of EFL writing metacognition. The data, based on responses to a questionnaire by 1,422 college students from 61 universities in six cities across China, show up eight factors hierarchically. They conclude that metacognition for L2 writing consists of two major components: strategy and assessment. Strategy mainly governs the writer's writing and revising efforts while assessment commands the assessing of writing problems and tasks. In their study of a Structural Equation Modeling Approach (Wu, 2006), they present a more comprehensive picture of metacognition in EFL writing with respect to its components, categorization, and functions.

All the studies mentioned above have contribute greatly for us to understand the relationship between metacognition and EFL writing and the important role it plays to help students with better performance in writing. But most of them focus on the metacognitive knowledge and the instruction of the metacognitive skills. And they do not give answers to the question of how students apply and exercise metacognitive strategies in EFL writing process. In attempt to give a dynamic description of the application of metacognitive skills in EFL writing, we are going to make the following study.

Conclusion

This study is trying to reveal how metacognitive strategies help students write in target language and how students exercise the metacognitive skills during writing process.

The application of writing metacognition will be significant in the following aspects. First, it will further verify the metacognition EFL writing theory through teaching practice. Metacognition strategy will help teachers look into "writing" and "thinking", those mind activities of writers. Second, since writing is regarded as rather a cognitive process, the application of metacognitive skills in EFL writing process will improve the language proficiency from the writer's perspective. Third, an L2 learner centered and metacognition instruction-based writing teaching model will greatly help both the teachers and learners in EFL writing.

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