

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Abstract

The following article attempts at shedding light on the role of metacognitive practices in second language acquisition, in particular, the role of critical thinking skills as a boosting factor for the language learning process. The article suggests using some psychological-methodological mechanisms that aim at promoting critical thinking in language learning thus attaching worth attention to the role of metacognitive practices in the field.

Keywords: metacognitive practices, foreign language, apply, intellectual traits, critical thinking, psychology.

The following article addresses one of the main and central concerns of contemporary philosophy-metacognitive practices, in this particular case, in language acquisition process. Metacognition is an indivisible element in cognitive actions, and language learning is more than a highly cognitive process. The main goal of the article is to explore and show the potential of the metacognitive practices in second language acquisition, thus clearly stating how this new approach to the second language learning has changed the former perception of the language learning process. Besides, if experts have full awareness of the concept of metacognition, it might provide them with the necessary knowledge of understanding the evolution of cognition itself. Metacognition is often defined as “thinking about one’s own thinking, the function of controlling and monitoring one’s own cognitive actions, more precisely, it refers to processes used to plan, monitor and assess one’s understanding and performance, therefore, it includes a critical awareness of one’s thinking and learning”. (Filosofskaya entsiklopediya 1964: 519-522.)

Metacognition offers a variety of strategies of learning, thinking and problem solving skills which are of great help to language learners making the learning process easier and more understandable. Metacognitive practices help learners be more successful in problem solving, creative thinking, innovative learning, it helps them reveal their competence or incompetence in reading, writing, speaking, listening or any other field, it assists them in acquiring specific skills which make them learn the language based on creative thinking, rational judgment, logic, thorough analysis. (Adams & Hamm 1996: 55-63.)

In the given article I want to put emphasis on an innovative approach to teaching a foreign language based on critical thinking and creative potential which became renowned as the basic language learning skills of the 21st century illustrating some general concepts that were behind the development of philosophy of language before. These two skills are crucial not only for people who choose languages as a major but for any other discipline and any other profession: metacognitive practices are used in every domain of knowledge and belief.

I will start the article with the claim that one of the major reasons for ineffective teaching or low efficiency in teaching students is the absence or underestimation of metacognitive practices in the second

language acquisition. Metacognitive practice is an interdisciplinary field being a combination of psychology, intelligence, autonomy, creative-critical thinking skills. But this does not necessarily mean, that if a student lacks one of them, he or she cannot rely on metacognitive skills while learning a language. In the following paper I will talk about the measures and the steps a teacher needs to take to help students develop critical thinking skills and creative potential thus making the learning process more effective and challenging in the classroom. It goes without saying that critical thinking is not typical of everybody as it's a complex made of special skills of analyzing, discussing, arguing, concluding, inferring, presenting, pondering, observing, counteracting, etc., the development of most of which can be closely related to inner speech.

Critical thinking skills are necessary for any discipline, including foreign language learning. The most important thing in the second language acquisition theory that needs mentioning is that the major goal of critical thinking is not only about learning the theories, principles and rules of the language but also perceiving and applying them appropriately which is already a big step from theory to practice. Critical thinking is a skill which makes learners aware of their problems in their thinking which never occurred to them unless they faced a problem that needed a solution. For the beginning students can be taught critical thinking skills on the theoretical domain but later it should be transferred to the practical domain. However, I think that certain psychological factors should be taken into consideration in order for students to learn critical thinking skills: students should readily or even reluctantly accept that they have a problem with their thinking and only then they can take steps to change, adapt, or transform their way of thinking. Nowadays various educational institutions provide their students with a range of interesting errands which aim at making their students think even if they hate thinking or are slow in it. In this paper I will suggest using some thinking-inducing tools or mechanisms which are used in psychology nowadays but they are worth using in language learning as well as they positively impact the foreign language learning process making it more effective and enjoyable. The nine thinking tools applied in psychology these days are worth attention and should be attached great importance to as they introduce a completely new approach to foreign language learning. They are the following:

- ☐ Use "extra" or "wasted" time
- ☐ Solve one problem a day
- ☐ Assimilate intellectual qualities
- ☐ Keep an intellectual diary
- ☐ Redefine your character
- ☐ Consent with your ego
- ☐ Redefine your perception of the world
- ☐ Get in touch with your emotions
- ☐ Analyze the influence of any group on your life.

As we see, most of the above-mentioned tasks are of psychological nature and thus, in order to have common sense and healthy criticism one needs to have psychological stability and stable mental state. Now let's see how each of the above mentioned mechanisms works in second language learning and how we can apply them appropriately in the classroom. (Lipman 1988: 38-43)

The strategy called "use your wasted time" is one of the initial phases of promoting thinking. It implies that you use the time, that you spend on having pointless conversations on the phone or in some

social websites or lying on the sofa for hours, on something more useful that can promote your thinking mechanism. You can go back to the previous day of your academic calendar, evaluate in mind all the academic acquisitions and failures of the day, discover strengths and weaknesses, reassess your mistakes. While thinking and analyzing, you can ask yourself questions like “How did I deal with this or that problem?”; “What was my mistake?”; “What would I change if I were given another chance?”; “What negative thought made me nervous?”; “What did I do to get a bit closer to my long-term learning goals?”; “Do I act in harmony with my system of values and principles?”, etc”. Each of these questions, definitely, takes some time to ponder over, but after you allocate some time to them, your thinking and behavioral patterns will gradually change.

The second tool, namely “solving a problem a day” is a very good means of developing critical and analytical skills. You can choose any academic-related problem or issue that upset you a bit and analyze all its elements in depth, asking yourself questions like “What is the nature or the gist of the problem/issue?”; “How did it hinder you from reaching your learning goals or satisfying your academic needs?”; “How can you solve the problem more easily and faster?”, and most important of all, “Is the solution to the problem in your hands or under your control?”. (Moore & Parker 1986)

The third mechanism is assimilation of intellectual patterns: it is the development of one intellectual trait every week, like clearness, accuracy, preciseness, punctuality, appropriateness, correspondance, logic, significance, etc. For instance, if the teacher wants students to focus on clearness in speaking skills class, students must be helped in understanding when exactly they had problems in communicating with this or that person, or who was unclear in their verbal cues, or while reading which fragment was not clearly perceived, or while writing what exactly they wanted to say that they couldn't. From the linguistic point of view there are different ways of teaching clearness or accuracy in language. For instance, one of the theories states - be cautious and tentative while talking and choose words carefully and try to express yourself accurately with the help of special words, then redefine the same idea or phrase in another way, give examples judging from your own experience, use metaphores, idioms, phrases, pictures, diagrams, charts to depict what you want to say in a more picturesque way. It's the best way to not only develop critical thinking skills but also to multiply the foreign language word stock.

The forth tool called “technique of keeping an intellectual diary” has its unique efficiency, if it carries a continuous and responsible character. In their diary students describe an academic-related situation which is of certain importance to them, stating in detail how they reacted to that situation, then analyze how exactly it occurred, what exactly happened there, then they try to penetrate into the issue and finally assess what exactly the situation has taught them and what they would do if they ran into it again.

The fifth intellectual trait, namely “redefine your character”, needs special attention as it's one of my favorite tools to make students more responsible, autonomous, ready to accept their mistakes. The following tool includes teaching of such traits as intellectual stubbornness, autonomy, sympathy, courage, modesty, academic readiness and many other similar traits. E.g., while teaching modesty, students should be taught to notice and most important of all, accept their own mistakes, or if students reluctantly admit being mistaken or don't accept their mistake at all applying self-defense mechanism the teacher should help students understand that their intellectual arrogance prevents them from successful and efficient academic process as they might think that teachers are keen on finding faults with their work or thinking style.

The next mechanism, called “come to agreement with your ego”, is of no less importance. This is a tool that hinders students from having an efficient language learning process. Every day students should observe their own self-centered thinking pondering over the following questions: “How it happens that I always think and draw conclusions in my favor in different circumstances; what makes me think so; have I ever been upset by some trifles; have I done something irrational or stupid because of my stubbornness; have I imposed my will on others; have I ever wanted to say something to people and I have restrained myself from saying it and that has caused my anger, and questions like these”. As soon as students reveal that their self-centered and egocentric thinking “exploit” them, they can change their thinking through systematized self-reflection and self-query with the help of some questions like “How would a rational man act in my stead?”; “What is the difference between deeds and acts of a rational man and mine?”; “Why do I think in a different way?”.

The seventh mechanism of redefining one’s perception of the world implies that all of us live in a world which is both personal and social and where every situation has definition and significance, therefore, giving definition or significance to the situation is determined not only by our attitude towards it but also by our actions in that specific situation. We can label this or that situation as something negative, whereas others can label it as something entirely positive. To be more precise, the way we perceive everything surrounding us, the way we look at our mistakes, the way we deal with a task that seems a vicious circle to us, is our choice. Some students look at their mistakes as an opportunity to learn new things, others switch on the button of self-criticism, for some students every task is a dilemma, others think of possible ways out of any catch-22 situation.

The eighth mechanism, that suggests establishing a firm relation with emotions, tries to teach students to listen to their emotions, understand the factors that caused this or that emotion. This is more psychological and works better with the combination of the mentioned mechanisms.

The last tool is the analysis of a group influence on one’s life which offers people to analyze some behavioral patterns that are encouraged or discouraged by groups which you belong to. To be more precise, one needs to analyze what is required from them, what is forbidden for them, who puts pressure on them and if so, should they accept or reject the pressure. These social groups can be embedded in teachers, classmates, other people engaged in an academic process of a student. (Tikhomirov 1984: 52)

As we see above, the psychological factor underlies almost all the mentioned nine mechanisms and all of them can undoubtedly be used to boost critical thinking skills in any domain of knowledge. It is noteworthy that people with good critical thinking skills are very creative and innovative, and it is natural, because applying the above-mentioned mechanisms after all leads to creativity. It is worth mentioning that for me one of the best methods of boosting critical thinking skills is delivering a lesson through a deductive-inductive method. It works better in grammar where any grammatical point can be introduced through this effective method. Alongside with promoting critical thinking skills the inductive-deductive method helps the teacher reveal the linguistic sensitivity and logic of students. Students start raking up the introduced materials, thoroughly observe the given examples in which they try to find general regularities and based on the latter ones they “build” the general grammatical rule. In case of the deductive method students are given the general rule after which they apply it in certain sentences or specific examples and only then practice their knowledge by doing numerous grammatical exercises. This method, in terms of promoting critical thinking skills, is more preferable mainly because it is student-

centered and not teacher-centered and it aims at engaging almost all the students in the class: students are always focused, motivated, engaged throughout the whole process of presentation and further discussion. The method has a deep motivational element in it making students think, infer, conclude, argue, analyze, draw parallels, compare, come up with original ideas, develop common sense and healthy critical thinking skills. Anyway, I think, it has only one disadvantage: it is time-consuming and some teachers might have time-management issues in class. However, teachers should develop their model of metacognitive practices because metacognition itself has multi-faceted thinking and reflective processes. For instance, preparation and planning for the learning are important metacognitive skills. Students should be thoroughly explained to what particular learning goal they need to achieve at the end of each class. Another important metacognitive skill is the choice of appropriate learning strategies and materials. For instance, second language learners should be given some context clues how to guess the meaning of the word in the sentence, how to find the main idea of the text, how to do skimming or scanning, how to find supportive details in the text, etc.

Monitoring the above-mentioned strategy use is also very important for students to stay on track with their learning goals and to see if they have managed to get slightly closer to their academic goals. As an effective monitoring strategy I suggest that the students periodically use self-query method in which they honestly ask themselves various learning-oriented questions pertaining to the academic process¹.

Evaluating one's own accomplishments is also a metacognitive skill which evaluates whether what students are doing is effective and to the point. Here students can ask themselves various questions like: "What am I trying to accomplish?"; "What is the goal of doing this task?"; "What is the gist of the text?"; "What else could I do?". All these is done in reading assignments when the teacher wants students to find the main idea of the text.

It is clear that second language acquisition is multi-faceted and has various aspects and foundations: linguistic, philosophical, cultural, socio-psychological, and none of them should be underestimated or overestimated, since all of them have their specific role and should be taken into account when learning a second language. And most important of all, metacognitive skills should be put on the instructional agenda as they have proved to empower foreign language learners giving them a chance to think about their thinking.

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¹ <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-in-everyday-life-9-strategies/512>