

## Developing learner autonomy for oral language on the base of emergent metacognition

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**Abstract:** This paper conducted on an empirical study among 466 first-year semester diploma students of Wenzhou University, contemplates some metacognitive strategies for facilitating learners' self-autonomy for oral language learning. Oral language appropriateness and procurement within the context of globality and lifelong learning are essential to the Chinese college students. To support the improvement, we initiated a "Four-dimensional-cycle" Approach (Four-d-c Approach) to examine the result of metacognitive strategy training, and we produced a "Four-dimensional-cycle" oral communicative test. To pledge "Four-dimensional-cycle" oral communication, "the NTP English Learning Model", "the SCARF English Teaching Enlightened Procedure" and "SLS-focus Infiltration English Teaching Mode" have been in succession designed. Results of this paper are expected to provoke a depth research on how to heighten learners' self-autonomy for oral language by effectively utilizing metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experience and metacognitive monitoring.

**Key words:** oral language; learner autonomy; metacognitive strategies

### 1. Introduction

The National College English Teaching Syllabus (NCETS) requires that the foreign language proficiency of college students aim at overall-applied ability, especially the capability of two-way communication (aural-oral) with the base of pure phonetics, large vocabulary, firm grammar, appropriate context and idiomatic language; besides, the NCETS zeros in on facilitating learner autonomy and improving learner comprehensively-educated accomplishment (NCETS, 2004).

Oral Language Teaching (OLT) has recently drawn great interest of many experts and scholars. The demand of college students' casting off dumb English is becoming stronger and stranger, while our students' standard of oral language is not satisfactory. Taken the time for college students into account, we find that they usually have two periods per week for oral language practice; such a wide range of task space for improvement and so limited the time of practicing have formed a sharp contrast. It is required to cope with this inconsistency by developing learner autonomy.

#### 1.1 Learner autonomy

It was in 1997 that learner autonomy which entails the student's taking responsibility for his or her own learning was energetically advocated. Learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is also a slippery concept because it is notoriously difficult to define precisely. The rapidly expanding literature has debated, for example, whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behavior; whether it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological

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phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on complementary teacher autonomy.

Fostering learners' self-autonomy including self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-awareness, etc. is becoming one of the most important goals in language teaching, so teachers are eager to learn ways to create more chances for our learners to present their potentials. Just as Pintrich has said, "Self-regulation is an active constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment".

### 1.2 The importance of metacognition in facilitating learner autonomy

Metacognition has become so crucial a focus of cognitive research that provides the kind of information needed in ongoing lines of learning, teaching and memory research. Since Flavell, a cognitive researcher and current professor of psychology at Stanford University (1971) coined the term "metacognition" (the process of active control over one's own cognition), much research has been done to inquire into its three aspects: metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experience and metacognitive monitoring.

#### 1.2.1 The influence of metacognitive knowledge on learner autonomy for oral language teaching

Metacognitive knowledge can be described as the knowledge, awareness, and deeper understanding of one's own cognitive processes and products.

Metacognitive knowledge encompasses individual declarative knowledge (knowing what: It's a kind of judgment whether you have the ability to organize or execute or perform a certain behavior), task conditional knowledge (knowing when and why: It gives expression to learners' recognition to the difficulty and nature of the task and then decide how much energy and how much time you are to give.), and strategy procedural knowledge (knowing how: learners are clear enough to make a proper use of these strategies).

The influence of individual declarative knowledge on learner autonomy for oral language teaching embodies learners' self-efficacy in provoking the whole process of oral communication. Different people with similar skills, or the same person under different circumstances, may perform unequally, depending on fluctuations in their beliefs of personal efficacy. It proves that self-efficacy is closely and prominently correlated with learners' academic achievements. According to Mallon's 38-self-efficacy-research analysis, self-efficacy can explain about 14% the difference in the level of study. Compared with low self-efficacy learners, the high self-efficacy learners are able to show more effective tactics of oral language learning and to have much more self-control over results of oral language communication (see Figure 1).

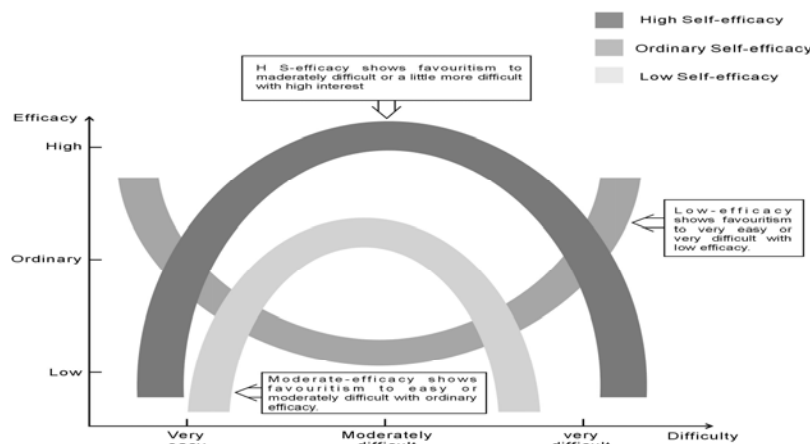


Figure 1 466 learners' self-efficacy and attraction to learn

In this analysis, we realize the main reason of learners' grades differentiate to such a degree is the metacognitive disparity. Metacognition was not born by birth but developed by training. In order to cultivate learner autonomy, we are to take into account task conditional knowledge which provides specific information about why, when, and where strategies should be applied, and strategy procedural knowledge which is about trying to make an efficient use of the information in hand, and trying to make a decision of what tactics should be used to.

### 1.2.2 The influence of metacognitive experience on learner autonomy for oral language teaching

The aforementioned analysis tells us metacognitive knowledge can be accumulated by developing experience which is in turn affected advances in intelligent information processing. The oral English class is full of opportunities for students to collaborate, so before talking, helping is necessary, such as help to discuss what to talk in small group, help to analyze how to talk, help to recall some useful words in the same semantic meaning, and then facilitate them to talk within the limited time. "To prepare more effective teachers is as well as to provide better educational services to students." "Studies of cognitive regulation regulate one's own thinking process in order to cope with changing situational demands."

### 1.2.3 The influence of metacognitive monitoring on learner autonomy for oral language teaching

Metacognitive monitoring is a process in which people monitor available information during the course of themselves thinking and then use this information to regulate subsequent memory process. In an oral English class, teachers activate students' prior knowledge before setting goals specifying what they want to talk; after discussing what they have learned, students often work in cooperative group in which each student has a specific responsibility. Students apply higher thinking strategies which help them construct meaning from what they talk and help them monitor progress.

## 2. Exploratory inquisition

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 446 first-year semester diploma students of Wenzhou University participated in the study.

### 2.2 Methodology

#### 2.2.1 Sensation-Seeking Scale (SSS)

We applied sensation-seeking scale to detect the 466 participants' psychological sensation and degree of stimulus during learning. SSS includes 14 items with A or B choice each and the criteria of score is 5 levels: 0-3 very low, 4-5 low, 6-9 moderate, 10-11 high, 11-14 very high (see Figure 2).

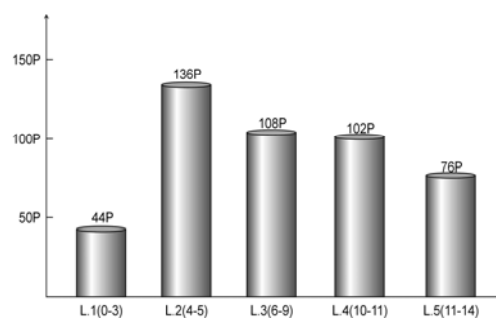


Figure 2 466 participants' five levels of Zucherman's Sensation-Seeking Scale

2.2.2 Metacognitive strategy questionnaires for English study as second language

We started using the same 20 questions from Metacognitive strategy questionnaires for English study developed by WEN Qiu-fang and DENG Xiao-fang to test the performance of the five-leveled participants (see Table 1). The content was including five parts: Language awareness, self-awareness, work out a plan, evaluation and monitoring. The evaluated procedures we adopted were judgment-oriented approaches and Likert Scales.

**Table 1 Metacognitive strategy questionnaires for English study**

Metacognition-strategy	Assessment	Number (466)	Ratio
	Well	39	.08
Improved	61	.13	
Normal	84	.18	
Low	194	.42	
Very low	88	.18	

The inquiry results above suggested that among the first-year college students only a few excellent learners were able to develop their metacognitive strategy while the vast majority, no such ability. In oral English teaching, for this reason, we should try to get a bird’s-eye view of the grammar items used in oral communication, and create proper contexts to galvanize every student to practice using what they have learned in talking. Learn words through spoken context either denotation or connotation. In oral communication, if we lay stress on fundamental principles, and give a conclusion at a proper moment, we are really helping our students fostering their metacognitive mode of speaking.

About a 10-week period of time the five levels of participants were required to take part in the four cycling activities:

- (1) 88 L1 participants received five weeks’ training from a novice learner (who are lacking in self- evaluation, self-examination and self-revisions) to an expert learner (who are more aware of errors, failures and efforts).
- (2) 194 L2 participants received a three weeks’ expert learner training.
- (3) 282 L1-2 participants are given a “four-dimensional-cycle” approach training for five weeks. Daily monitoring is the strategies taken to the task of oral communication.
- (4) 282 participants’ individual-strategy reporting the awareness with other participants of what they have done to communicate orally with others and describe what others do in order to make a successful communication.

At the termination of the training the results of the “Four-dimensional-cycle” oral communication test show that 466 participants originally divided into five levels are at present as follows Table 2:

**Table 2 “Four-dimensional-cycle” oral communication test**

Level (grade)	SS (persons)	CT (persons)	CC (persons)	PC (persons)
L5 5)	192	158	132	178
L4 (3-4)	239	294	273	288
L3 (2)	33	9	45	173
L2 (1)	2	5	14	17
L1 (0)	0	0	2	0

Notes: SS-Standard Speech; CT-Communicative Tactics; CC-Cross-cultural Communication; PC- Pragmatic Competence.

Existing in actual fact that 282 participants with a “Four-dimensional-cycle” oral communicative test, with a “from a novice learner to an expert learner training” and with a “four-dimensional-cycle approach” training were clearly as a whole making great progress in oral communication. we draw a conclusion that learner autonomy is a critical element in improving learners’ oral language and metacognitive strategies are having an important bearing on improving the quality of oral language.

### 3. Recommendations and suggested strategies for developing learner autonomy for oral language through metacognitive strategies

Some effective ways of promoting learner autonomy for oral language have been defined. Selecting learning strategies requires changes both on the learner’s part and on the teacher’s part. “Learners should change their roles from a passive storage of information into a creative appropriation of the language”, “teachers should be shifted from purveyor of information to facilitator of learning and manager of learning” and “the teachers are not just to transmit knowledge but to help the learners take increasing responsibility for their learning”.

#### 3.1 Interrelated and interacted skills

Oral language is often connected with listening, reading and writing. “When we read and write, we call upon what we know of the language orally.” The plot below displays how all four skills are related:

- (1) Spoken language: understanding, speaking
- (2) Receptive skills: listening, reading
- (3) Productive skills: speaking, writing
- (4) Written language: reading, writing

Since the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are interrelated and interacted with each other, we are to use interrelated and interacted skills in teaching oral language (see Table 3). “One skill cannot be performed without another. It is impossible to speak in a conversation if you do not listen as well.”

**Table 3 Teacher-facilitator preparation for oral language**

Performances \ Cycles	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Cycle 4
Metacognitive strategies	Goal and motivation	Access prior knowledge	Estimate time needed	What strategies work best
Cards	Card-swapping discussion (fluency)	Card-performances (appropriate)	Card-changing (communication intercourse)	Card-associations (creation)
Video clips	A form of stimulus (presentation)	Gist-getting (pretalking)	Place students into small groups (directed discussion)	Encourage students to choose questions which interest them most (talking)
Theme-based program	Theme relevant to students’ lives	Adapt materials to students’ levels	Vocabulary recycling	Two-way evaluation
Questionnaires	Elicit some ideas from the class	Make up some of these items	Work in pairs	More students collaborate to produce instructions
Weekly talk show	Topic-thought-provoking with multiple answers	Students encouraged to collaborate and assist one another with necessary expressions	Ideas-structures-vocabulary introduced discussion menu	Partner-selecting-a role play
Test	A list of topics-selecting (authentic)	Topic-self-imitation (categories)	Topic-practice with a partner(perform)	Topic-self-designed

On that account the teachers should create an autonomous atmosphere to provide proper activities for the students to show their integrative skills. “We should be looking for opportunities to knit skills together because this is what happens in real life.”

3.1.1 A teacher as an organizer

Perhaps the most important and difficult role a teacher has to play is that of an organizer. The success of many activities depends on good organization. In preparation stage, a teacher has to keep in mind what will be achieved when the activity is over. To reach certain goal and serve certain purpose, a teacher should make proper arrangements for classroom activities.

3.1.2 A teacher as a foster

J.L.M.Trim, a past vice president and honorary member of the International Association of applied linguistics, argues that “teachers of modern languages have the responsibility to equipment learners with the learning strategies they need in order to continue language learning as required by the challenge of adult life in a rapidly changing world.” Weden also recommends that learner strategies are a key to and prerequisite for learner autonomy. In another word, learners can take care of their own learning only when he has developed and made use of the strategies required for effective learning. Therefore, to achieve this goal, teachers have to help learners know what learning strategy is and how important it is in fostering autonomous learning. Of course, teachers themselves must get a general idea about all the learning strategies concerned in order to give a wise instruction and proper guidance (see Table 4).

**Table 4 Learners’ performance assessment of oral language**

Approach Meta	Standard speech	Communicative tactics	Cross-Cultural communication	Pragmatic competence
Knowledge (awareness)	Basic knowledge foundation	Relationship of the communication between teacher and student	The partner’s cultural background	Determine how your performance will be evaluated
Experience (planning)	Estimate the time and the strategies needed to learn knowledge enough for the present	The communicative activities	Make a cultural survey of what needs to happen when	Plan study time into your schedule and set priorities
Monitoring and reflecting (learning process)	Keep concentration on making up the necessary knowledge	The practice is controlled by students themselves freely	Keep track of what works and what doesn’t work	Provide your own feedback

**3.2 SCARF-English Teaching Enlightened Procedure (SCARF-ETEP) and SLS-focus infiltration English teaching mode**

“SCARF-procedure” has changed the traditionally-linear teaching pattern: greeting—warming up—reviewing—new lesson—constitution—summing—homework. Breaking with convention, “SCARF-procedure” reveals teaching chains and redesigns teaching procedures to achieve an ideal teaching result with a large capacity, a high efficiency and a rapid speed (see Figure 3).

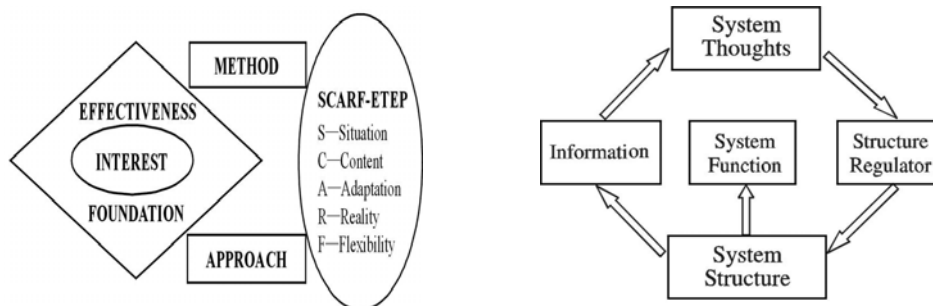


Figure 3 SCARF-English teaching enlightened procedure

System as a whole relates and interconnects elements under certain environment, objectives and functions. Consequently, the intrinsic qualities of SYSTEM are as follows: wholeness, interrelationship, multi-level, relativity and dynamic. Obtaining sufficient information about SYSTEM is to help understand a system such as the states and the ways of the states varying both from the inside structure and the outside inter-links with its environment.

In order to seek approaches of teachers' readiness for learner autonomy and teacher, a facilitator, altogether, fourteen classes of students and fourteen English intensive reading teachers were selected as testing targets. The experimental study named "SLS-focus infiltration English teaching mode" was divided into four stages:

On the initial stage, pursuing theoretical perspectives of autonomy; forming the contrast teams between 466 first-year semester diploma Wenzhou University students called "learner-autonomy experimental classes" and the other students of the school called "ordinary classes"; selecting a set of authentic teaching materials; regulating an agile, adaptable, elastic and reflective teaching mode (NTP-teaching mode)

On the second stage, compiling and composing self-access language learning materials and material application.

On the third stage, preparing and developing self-access activities both in class and out of class, such as keeping diaries, listening to the English broadcast, watching English films, doing test papers, reading English materials, memorizing new words and self-creative activities.

On the fourth stage, the questionnaire subjects were targeted, which was divided into three levels:

- Level 1: among classes in the same major of the same department;
- Level 2: between classes of one experimental class and the other classes of the same college;
- Level 3: between 14 experimental classes and the nation.

#### 4. Conclusion and counsel for further research

This paper has introduced practical use of metacognition, explored how learner autonomy is greatly improving learners' oral language and inquired into the relationship between metacognition and autonomy, between efficacy and awareness, between metacognitive knowledge, experience and monitoring. Besides recommending a "Four-d-c Approach", a "Four-dimensional-cycle" oral communicative test, "SCARF-English Teaching Enlightened Procedure" (SCARF-E-TEP) and SLS-focus infiltration English teaching mode, the paper has also put forth effective communication and collaboration and looked at individual differences among learners. Finally, the paper has demonstrated how learner autonomy and metacognitive strategies are inextricably linked to make our learning and teaching successful.

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