

THE ROLE OF INTEREST ENHANCEMENT FOR L2 LEARNERS

By

SAMANTHA RIX

University of Northern Iowa.

ABSTRACT

This pilot study examines the role of metacognitive awareness as a motivational strategy in second language learning. The paper begins by exploring metacognitive strategies within the general language learning strategy framework, and then zooming in upon "interest enhancement" as a particular strategy that influences motivation and self-confidence. In essence, this study is embedded in the paradigm of action classroom research and was initiated in response to a particular problem found among intermediate learners in an intensive English-for-Academic Purposes program. Pre- and Post- Intervention interviews were carried out with the course instructor to define the problem and later to gather information on her perspective as to the intervention's outcome. During the Pre-intervention interview with the instructor, it was discovered that learners were unresponsive to their instructors' techniques for test review because they did not see the value of it beyond the scope of the test. To mitigate this problem, the instructor implemented the following two changes during her review sessions with the intent to increase metacognitive interest enhancement: (i) The provision of positive, overt oral feedback was provided for both correct and incorrect responses during the review; and (ii) The provision of continual reinforcement of the out-of-class importance of the language and concepts under discussion. Fourteen students (eleven Saudi Arabian, one Japanese, one Chinese, and one Rwandan) participated in the modified review session and were then asked to respond to a likert-type survey consisting of twelve questions that targeted interest enhancement on the following five sub-topics: (i) Understanding of the assignment; (ii) Level of enjoyment; (iii) Goals; (iv) Classroom atmosphere; and (v) Feedback. Results from the survey demonstrated an increase in participants' self-reported levels of interest enhancement after the instructor's modifications. The paper will conclude with specific qualitative comments taken from the instructor's post-intervention interview that suggest that the students' motivation increased as a result of metacognitive interest enhancement techniques.

Keywords: Metacognition, Interest Enhancement, Action Classroom Research, Instructor Modification, Motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching learning strategies to Second Language (L2) learners is an instrumental part of the learning process. Educators, teachers, and administrators all have different ways of implementing what they believe is the ideal way for their group of students to effectively attain the material and motivate them to continue. According to Oxford (1990), "Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential..." (pg. 1). There are many reasons behind what strategies are chosen, varying from proficiency level in both their L1 and their L2 to their ethnicity. What is chosen can affect students directly because as Oxford (1990) stated, "Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and

greater self-confidence" (pg.1). Therefore, the aim of the survey given to the fourteen international students and the post-class interview with the instructor was to find if integrating the motivational factors of setting worthwhile goals and receiving feedback by the instructor could increase student awareness of the metacognitive strategy interest enhancement.

Literature Review

For the purpose of this paper, "Learning strategies are defined as specific behaviours and thought processes used by the learner to facilitate acquisition, storage, or retrieval of information" (Park, 1997, pg. 211). As stated by Oxford (1990), "Metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their own cognition and to focus, plan, and evaluate their process" (pg. 8). Dörnyei (2010) declared

that, "Metacognitive strategies, involv[e] higher-order strategies aimed at analyzing, monitoring, evaluating, planning and organizing one's own learning process" (p. 169). So, metacognitive strategies are those in which students are aware of how they can help themselves learn and what their own processes are to accomplish goals. Oxford (1990) discussed different ways that students can use these higher-thinking strategies, such as "organizing, setting goals and objectives, identifying the purpose of a language task, planning a language task, seeking practise opportunities, self-monitoring..." (p. 326). The goal of these types of strategies would lead learners to more autonomy in their own learning process which will enhance their probability of attaining the language. According to a study done by Park (1997) involving 332 intermediate to advanced students that studied English at two different Korean universities, reported that, "among the six categories of language learning strategies, these students used metacognitive, compensation, and memory strategies more frequently than cognitive, social, and affective strategies" (pg. 214). He also stated that once these students took the SILL (a questionnaire about their language experiences) and the IBQ (an individual background questionnaire), he found that metacognitive strategies were the ones that were used with the most frequency (Park, 1997, pg. 214).

Interest enhancement is one type of metacognitive strategy that could be activated by the students to facilitate learning and in many cases is initiated by the instructor by providing some form of motivation. Interest enhancement is defined by, "increasing one's intrinsic motivation by using strategies that promote the immediate enjoyment or situational interest of an activity" (Dörnyei, 2010, pg. 114). Oxford (1990) stated that those students who believe they can do the task in front of them become motivated and therefore want to continue studying. Having a form of linguistic self-confidence is highly important as it is, "a powerful meditating process in multi-ethnic settings that affects a person's motivation to learn and use the language of the other speech community" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2001, pg. 56). One way to pique this natural curiosity would be to give students a voice in the classroom, asking their opinions, and even giving them

options with tasks would "enhance student self-determination and intrinsic motivation" (Dörnyei, 1994, pg. 278).

Motivation has a significant impact on student performance and in many cases instructors can initiate motivation through strategies such as scaffolding, goal-setting, and giving feedback. Dörnyei (2010) stated specifically that, "...teacher's motivation has significant bearings on the students' motivational disposition, and more generally, on their learning achievement" (p. 169). One type of motivation that can help student development is by setting goals. Horowitz (2008) could not stress enough the importance of students developing, "personal goals for language learning" as they were crucial for L2 development" (p.9). Dörnyei (1994) made a similar argument, stating the significance of setting small goals that are highly attainable in the near future. These goals, modelled by the instructor, but chosen by the students, increase not only personal interest in the task at hand, but can increase learner autonomy. Instructors could also increase self-confidence through goal setting by "trusting them and projecting the belief that they will achieve their goal..." (Dörnyei, 1994, p. 281).

Another way that teachers can increase L2 self-confidence is through targeted feedback. While many believe that feedback can have a negative effect on students because they worry the student will become too frustrated to continue on the task at hand, or quit altogether, feedback that is in-taked by the student in a non-threatening manner by the teacher can actually increase their L2 learning process. Targeted feedback itself is, "A response that gives a conversational partner information about whether a previous partner comment has been understood and possibly offers suggestions for improvement" (Horowitz, 2008, pg. 243). Teachers have at their discretion many forms to correct and scaffold with their students and, "if corrective feedback is sufficiently salient to enable learners to notice the gap between their interlanguage forms and the target language forms, the resulting cognitive comparison may trigger a destabilization and restructuring.." (Panova & Lyster, 2002, pg. 573). A study done by Panova and Lyster concluded

that a form of self-repair was generally more noticed by the learners. "...the analysis centered, first, on the frequency distribution of the different feedback types used by the teacher, and second, on the relationship between feedback types and learner responses to feedback" (Panova & Lyster, 2002, pg. 588). They also found that "the corrective techniques of clarification request, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback and repetition of error correlate more positively with learner uptake..." (Panova & Lyster, 2002, pp. 578). Consequently, it is important that students use their metacognitive skills along with the help of the teacher to come up with the correct answer.

Methodology

This pilot study was conducted by giving fourteen students; nine Saudi males, two Saudi females, one Japanese male, one Chinese male and one Rwandan female a survey. These were level three (lower intermediate) students in a reading and writing intensive English class at the University of Northern Iowa. They were asked about their perceptions about four main subjects; understanding of the task or assignment at hand, their interest in doing the task, how they felt about the goals set by the instructor and the feedback she gave and the overall classroom atmosphere. The task itself was set by the instructor, but was modified to fit this research.

An interview right after the class period was also given to the instructor to gain insight upon the students' answers and the perceptions of the teacher herself. It was found that the interview was very helpful in coming to the conclusions about what students thought based upon their answers.

Results

These questions are based on a five point scale. The students were told that putting a one meant they really liked that idea and five meant they don't like that idea at all. The questions were given in a random order so the students think with a fresh idea in their mind every time. They were asked to only put their ethnicity, so this study does not distinguish between males and females in the category of Saudi Arabian students. It also should be noted that the female student from Rwanda put the lowest score to each question in comparison with the other students.

• *Understanding of the Assignment*

This was the first question on the survey and the aim was to see if the students understood what their instructor needed them to focus on during the class period. The main idea was a practice test for an upcoming mid-term exam. They were to first answer the questions given, be it a "main idea" question or one that asked you to "write your definition of a word," and then consult with their partner (Table 1).

The instructor had enough experience to relay the point of the task to her student, stating that she had taught EFL in South Korea and Costa Rica for a little over two years and teaching ESL at the University of Northern Iowa for about nine months. She repeated what the task was, did not speak too quickly and gave visual cues to enhance what was being said.

• *Interest Enhancement*

Another set of questions that were given was interest enhancement. This is an important category because it is a type of metacognitive strategy that will motivate students to want to continue at the task at hand. The instructor agreed with this when asked, stating, "Yes, very important. If they are not interested, they have no motivation, and they can't engage with the material as well."

Questions four, six, seven, nine and eleven were the questions used for this survey and the percentages were as followed (Table 2).

	1	2	3	4	5
Do you understand the assignment?	50%(7)	36%(5)	7%(1)	0%(0)	7%(1)

* The number in () is the actual number of students.¹

Table 1. Analyzed the Extent to which Students Understood the Nature of the Assignment

	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoyed the assignment.	50%(7)	29%(4)	7%(1)	0%(0)	7%(1)
What I learned today is information I can use in the future.	50%(7)	36%(5)	7%(1)	0%(0)	7%(1)
I enjoy coming to class.	43%(6)	36%(5)	14%(2)	0%(0)	7%(1)
When the teacher gave us the assignment, I knew it would be fun.	36%(5)	43%(6)	14%(2)	7%(1)	0%(0)
The teacher made the assignment fun for me.	36%(5)	43%(6)	14%(2)	0%(0)	7%(1)

* The number in () is the actual number of students.²

Table 2. The Extent to which the Students were Interested in the Activity given by the Instructor was the Subject

- **Goals**

This section dealt with how the students perceived the goals conveyed by the instructor. The concept here was to see if the students felt the ideas were easily attainable and could be accomplished.

The instructor stated that, "Yes, at the beginning of the semester I have them set goals for themselves and they have to write three or four sentences of how they will achieve their goal." She did note here that she made a change during this class period, stating that, "I never thought to explicitly give them a goal for each activity. Maybe I've said it before, but not directly. Today, I tried to be more explicit." She does, though, believe that it is really important to the students to have goals because then, "they know exactly what they are shooting for and why they are doing it." She stated that she thought it was better to be "very clear about the goals." Questions two, ten and twelve on the survey were used for this section (Table 3).

- **Classroom Atmosphere**

Classroom atmosphere was another set of questions important to this research as it can greatly affect how the student perceives the task and performs it. The second question does not deal with classroom atmosphere directly, but how the learning atmosphere will transfer to a level of confidence in the real world for the students.

The instructor stated that she felt the students acted the same as they always do. "My class is great and engage well together. They like working in groups and they are not afraid to ask questions. I love that they ask questions even I don't understand the question right away." Questions three and eight were tied to this section (Table 4).

- **Feedback**

Feedback was the final type of questions I asked for this survey. How students perceive the feedback they receive

	1	2	3	4	5
The assignment did not feel very difficult for me.	7%(1)	50%(7)	29%(4)	14%(2)	0%(0)
What we had to do for the assignment was not too much.	36%(5)	35%(5)	14%(2)	7%(2)	0%(0)
I like that we did not have to do all parts of the assignment at once.	43%(6)	36%(5)	14%(2)	7%(1)	7%(1)

* The number in () is the actual number of students.³

Table 3. Examined how well the Students Understood the Goals of the Assignment given by the Instructor

	1	2	3	4	5
I feel like I can talk in class and I will not be laughed at.	29%(4)	50%(7)	14%(2)	0%(0)	7%(1)
I feel like I can speak English if I need to when I am not in class.	36%(5)	50%(7)	14%(2)	0%(0)	7%(1)

* The number in () is the actual number of students.⁴

Table 4. Analyzed if the Students Perceived the Environment they were in to be Conducive to Learning or Not

from their instructor is an integral part of how they learn and how the teacher forms her feedback affects both the students perception of the instructor and the uptake.

The instructor stated that, "Yes, feedback is important so they know where their strengths and weakness are with the skill they are learning. It can be a form of encouragement and motivation." When asked when she gives feedback of any kind she stated, "With reading, yes, because we are working on specific skills... so, they are either right or they are wrong. I'll correct them as a whole class, give them the correct answer and either have a student who chose the correct answer why or I will explain to them why the other choices are incorrect." Question five directly corresponded to this section (Table 5).

It should also be noted that the instructor stated a number of changes she made including stating directly the goals for each question and part of the activity and rotating the students to hear ideas and questions from different students. She also went into more depth with her feedback when most of the students did not come up with the correct answer. On the other hand, working in groups, going over the answer as a whole class and review the material were choices she had made in the class.

Discussion

As shown by Park (1997), students were unconsciously using metacognitive strategies created by their instructor to have a classroom atmosphere that was acceptable for learning to take place. Over three-fourths of the class in this survey agreed that they found interest in the activity and group work at hand, concluding that Dörnyei's idea that

	1	2	3	4	5
I like it when my teacher helps me say, read or write something better in English.	79%(11)	2%(14)	0%(0)	0%(0)	1%(7)

* The number in () is the actual number of students.⁵

Table 5. How Students Interpreted and Felt about the Feedback given by the Instructor was the Subject

“increasing one’s intrinsic motivation by using strategies that promote immediate enjoyment or situation interest of an activity” did take place (2010, pg. 114). The instructor also used different ways to invoke this metacognitive strategy, such as identifying the purpose of each section of the review guide, giving very specific goals and objectives and telling them how to help themselves find the information and the time constraints. These were all example strategies given by Oxford (1990). Therefore, their confidence rose as they became more relaxed and were able to concentrate on the task at hand (Oxford, 1990).

Setting worthwhile goals also helped increase their linguistic self-confidence because helped them develop personal goals for each section of the review packet for their exam (Horowitz, 2008). As the instructor noted, she had not verbally been very explicit about specific sub-goals, but felt that it did help her students with the task. At least half of the students felt, according to the study, that the assignment was not extremely difficult because the instructor set specific goals to help them focus on each section. This also increased their motivation to continue to learn because they were finding the correct answers to the questions (Dörnyei, 1994).

A final method used by the instructor that affected their motivation and linguistic self-confidence was by giving targeted feedback. Over three-fourth of the students in the class felt comfortable with the manner in which the instructor corrected errors. Instead of correcting the one student or group that answered incorrectly, she answered them as a whole, using a form of metalinguistic feedback which “...refers to either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student utterance, without explicitly providing the correct answer” (Panova & Lyster, 2002, pg. 582). In this round about style, she gave reasons as to why the other answers were incorrect and had the students explain to her and each other why the correct response was the right answer.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Findings from this study and the interview done with the instructor do support research and theories done by others who delve into the importance of second language strategies and what can affect them. These conclusions

can show that the metacognitive strategy, interest enhancement, along with setting goals and producing feedback given by the instructor to the students can increase the probability that the students will uptake and learn the material at hand. This, in turn, will increase their linguistic self-confidence.

It is important to say that without some form of interest enhancement done by the instructor, it is almost impossible for students to become motivated and without motivation there could be no increase in their linguistic L2 self. Ways to increase this might be by showing interest in the language’s culture and people and to stress on students the importance of broadening their view and possibly integrating themselves into the new society.

Teachers could pick activities that help them naturally set sub-goals, making it easier for instructors and teachers to give specific feedback which will automatically increase the probability of up-take. Some examples of this might be to make sure that at least part of any activity is completely different from one done in the recent past, make activities seem game-like such as puzzles or crosswords or having to find hidden information.

Students’ reasons for studying a foreign or second language could be called sundry. Intensively diversified with reasons ranging from personal interest, helping themselves to find a job in the future to “my parents told me so.” Whatever the reason or reasons, strategies and the way we scaffold, set goals and give feedback will affect their language capacities for growth, acquirement and attainment.

Appendix A

Questions for Instructor

- What is your background in teaching? How long have you been teaching ESL courses?
- Do you believe that it is important for students to be interested in the assignment or task in order to learn? Why or why not?
- Do you think setting attainable and worthwhile goals helps increase the chances that your students will learn the information correctly? Do you think they will remember it better?

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- Do you regularly set goals for your students for work both in and outside of the class?
- Do you think it is important for students to receive feedback that will support them in their learning process? Why or why not?
- Do you regularly correct your students? What kinds of correction do you make if you do? Why do you think that method works?
- Was the classroom atmosphere during the activity consistent with the norm? Did your students seem to behave and interact like they normally do?
- What teaching strategies did you have to change in order to accommodate my study? What teaching strategies stayed the same for you?

Appendix B

Survey for Students

Directions

The information from this survey, or the data part of the research, is to help show that there is a connection between certain classroom ideas. Your teacher will not see what you write. Please put an "x" in the box with each question or statement where you think the "x" needs to be. Please "x" both sides and write your ethnicity where I ask. Do not write anything else on the survey, do not write your name and do not talk to other students in the class. Please Ask Questions Only to Me.

Thank you!

It goes from 1 to 5. 1 means that I really like that idea and 5 means I don't like that idea at all.

1 = Really Agree 2 = Agree 3 = It's fine. 4 = Disagree 5 = Really Disagree

Ethnicity (for example; Saudi, Chinese, or Bolivian):

	1	2	3	4	5
I understand what my teacher wanted me to do.					
The assignment did not feel very difficult for me.					
I feel like I can talk in class and I will NOT be laughed at.					
I enjoyed the assignment.					
I like it when my teacher helps me say, read or write something better in English.					
What I learned today is information I can use in the future.					

It goes from 1 to 5. 1 means that I really like that idea and 5 means that I don't like it at all.
 1 = Strongly Agree 2 = Agree 3 = It's fine.
 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree

	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy coming to class.					
I feel like I can speak English if I need to when I am NOT in class.					
When the teacher gave us the assignment, I knew it would be fun.					
What we had to do for the assignment was NOT too much.					
The teacher made the assignment fun for me.					
I like that we did not have to do all parts of the assignment at once.					

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Rix is currently a Graduate Assistant at the University of Northern Iowa studying Teaching English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL). She focuses her studies on second language acquisition and specifically on how learner traits and cognitive factors can facilitate or hinder a students' ability to learn a second or third language.