

The Potential of Action Research in Boosting EFL Learners' Experiential Learning and Metacognition

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Abstract:

In the field of educational research, many studies are conducted by researchers in order to develop approaches and methods that inform educational practices and which can be adopted by teachers, learners or both. Action research is a type of educational research methods in which both the researcher and the participants are involved and share decision making during the different steps of the research. The action research process includes planning, action, observation, evaluation and reflection, and feedback. The present paper is a theoretical research that sheds light on the overlap that exists between action research and experiential learning, on the one hand, and metacognitive strategy instruction, on the other hand. Therefore, instead of focusing on the importance of action research for the researcher solely, emphasis is further put on the potential of action research in developing lifelong learning for EFL learners. The paper clarifies how action research engages EFL learners in experiential learning and how it boosts their metacognitive strategy use at the same time..

Keywords: Action research; experiential learning; metacognitive learning strategies; EFL learners, lifelong learning.

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to shed light on the development of learners' metacognition and experiential learning through the use of action research. Therefore, the paper is divided into four main sections. It starts with introducing the concept of metacognitive language strategy instruction as a teaching method to develop learners' metacognition, then moves to tackle briefly the principles of the experiential learning theory, together with the principles of action research. The last

section is devoted for the clarification of the connectedness of both metacognitive strategy instruction and experiential learning to action research, and how the latter would foster learners' lifelong learning and the use of various learning styles, raise learners' motivation, promote autonomy and critical thinking.

2. Metacognitive Strategy Instruction:

Metacognitive strategy instruction refers to the use of metacognitive language learning strategies in instruction, hence, a

presentation of language learning strategies (LLS) and metacognitive LLS is necessary.

2.1. Language Learning Strategies:

To define language learning strategies (LLS) has proved to be a troublesome task for researchers all over the world since the 1980s (Macaro, 2001). However, a definition of the term strategy is deemed necessary in the first place. According to Oxford (2001, p. 362), the term 'strategy' evolves from Greek and means "steps or actions generals take for the purpose of winning a war". The term was later adopted by experts in the field of education and its meaning was altered consequently (Oxford 1990, 2001). Rubin (1975) was among the first scholars to adapt the term to suit the field of language teaching and learning; she postulated that strategy may refer to "techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p. 43).

Although some researchers (eg. Wenden, 1987), claimed that LLS are of a behavioural and observable nature, others (eg. Willing, 1988) objected to this view and argued that LLS are of a cognitive unobservable nature. In a way of reconciliation, other researchers claimed that LLS can be conceptualized as both observable/ behavioural and unobservable/ cognitive (Ellis, 1997). Oxford (1990) claimed further that LLS can be also of an emotional character. Weinstein, Husman & Dirking (2000 p. 727) covered all three affordably mentioned dimensions in their definition of LLS which runs as follows "learning strategies include any thoughts,

behaviours, beliefs or emotions that facilitate the acquisition, understanding, or later transfer of new knowledge and skills ."

Echoing the definition of Weinstein, Husman & Dirking (2000), Oxford (1990) elaborated the LLS concept by listing strategy characteristics. The latter were outlined as follows:

- LLS contribute to the main goal, communicative competence .
- LLS allow learners to become more self-directed.
- LLS expand the role of the teacher.
- LLS are problem-oriented.
 - LLS are specific actions taken by the learner to tackle learning problems.
 - LLS involve beyond cognitive aspects; metacognitive, and social aspects are also included.
 - LLS support learning both directly and indirectly. Directly by using the new language per se, indirectly by using other tools that contribute to learning powerfully like planning, evaluating...
 - LLS are not always observable. They can be observable like taking notes, but the majority are unobservable because they are mental activities or because they are used outside class in informal situations .
 - LLS are often conscious. Most researchers agree that they are conscious but their use can be automatic .
 - LLS can be taught.
 - LLS are flexible, not predictable, and their use depends on the learners' choice

•LLS are influenced by a variety of factors: degree of awareness, proficiency level, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality/ethnicity, learning style, personality traits, motivation and the purpose of learning. In addition to personal beliefs about language learning and education.

•LLS are systematic; they are not incidentally discovered, they are used on the basis of previous knowledge systematically .

•LLS are finite; they have a limited number that can be determined.

2.2. Metacognitive Language Learning Strategies

Comparing good learners with slow learners, it has been realized that the effectiveness of LLS is more appropriate and helpful when it is used in a chain organized and controlled by metacognition. Therefore, focus of research in the field has been shifted from the study of isolated LLS to the use of a group of LLS to attain particular learning objectives in particular learning situations and tasks (Anderson, 2005; Gass & Selinker, 2008)

According to Anderson (2008), Metacognition refers to the awareness about thinking in a critical productive way; as such, it is the opposite of just thinking without reflection or simply memorization and rote learning. Metacognition has five components: preparing and planning for learning, selecting and using strategies, monitoring learning, orchestrating strategies and evaluating learning. It can develop over time through practice; eventually, learners

would develop their critical reflection on their own learning, make their own decisions about the learning objectives as well as strategy use. In other words, learners would reflect on their strategy use and make decisions about the use of other more appropriate ones (Anderson, 2005; 2008).

Pinter (2006) maintained that the development of metacognition and metacognitive strategies would enable learners to increase their awareness vis-à-vis what has been learned. In this sense, research showed that the ability to select appropriate LLS and to combine them effectively, relying on the tasks' demands and objectives, is what distinguishes good learners from slow ones. In other words, the ability to appropriately use metacognitive strategies makes the difference between the two types of learners (Anderson, 2008; Macaro, 2001).

Compared to other strategy categories, metacognitive strategies would result in building up stronger cognitive skills and faster learning (Anderson, 2005). Vandergrift (2002, p 559) added that the importance of metacognitive strategies stems from the fact that "they oversee, regulate, or direct the language learning task, and involve thinking about the learning process". Therefore, students who lack metacognitive strategies essentially have no direction or ability to set goals and objectives, plan their learning, monitor and evaluate their advancement, or reflect on their accomplishment and future learning perspectives (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

In the LLS classification provided by Oxford (1990), metacognitive strategies are considered as indirect strategies. They are divided into three categories: (1) centering your learning, (2) Arranging and planning your learning, (3) Evaluating your learning. Furthermore, each category embeds a number of metacognitive strategies. First, "centering your learning" covers three other strategies which are: Overviewing and linking with already known material, Paying attention, and Delaying speech production to focus on listening. Second, "Arranging and planning your learning" includes the following strategies: Finding out about language learning, Organizing, Setting goals and objectives, Identifying the purpose of a language task (purposeful listening/ reading/ speaking/ writing), Planning for a language task, and Seeking practice opportunities. Last, with "Evaluating your learning", we find two strategies which are Self-monitoring, and Self-evaluating.

2.3. Strategy-Based Instruction:

As a result to the previously indicated research about LLS, Strategy training or strategy-based instruction (SBI) sprung out as a solution to help less effective learners –and even effective learners- to deal with the daily learning problems. SBI directs teachers towards teaching "how, when, and why students should employ learning strategies to enhance their efforts at reaching language program goals" (Chen, 2007 p.20). Brown (2000, p.131) argued that the effectiveness of SBI is conditioned by understanding the strategy itself, perceiving it to be effective, and not considering its implications to be overtly

difficult. Chamot (2008) agreed that the success of SBI depends on the context in which it was carried out.

That kind of SBI that focuses on metacognitive LLS is referred to as metacognitive strategy training. The latter has attracted attention because of the importance that metacognitive LLS gained in the recent research, in addition to the fact that the use of these strategies entails the use of others.

Researchers provided various strategy training frameworks that share goals but differ in details (e.g. Oxford's Model, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot Model, 1990; Grenfell and Harris Model, 1999; Chamot et.al. Model, 1999; Cohen's Model, 1998; Weinstein et.al. Model, 2000; Macaro's Model, 2001). However, all share four common steps:

- 1 .Raising learners' awareness of strategies they are already using.
- 2 .Teacher presentation and modelling of strategies.
- 3 .Multiple practice opportunities.
- 4 .Self-evaluation of strategy effectiveness and strategy transfer.

(Rubin, Chamot, Harris and Anderson 2007, p142)

In the present paper, focus will be given to Grenfell and Harris Model (1999) and Chamot et.al. Model (1999) because they would better help in explaining the relation of action research to strategy training. Grenfell and Harris Model (1999) has six steps:

Step1. Consciousness/Awareness Raising: learners are given a task and asked to describe how they tackle it. By discussing strategies they use, learners are encouraged to reflect on their learning. Teachers should raise learners' motivation by explaining that their learning difficulties are due to the lack of appropriate strategy use.

Step2. Modelling: although learners discuss and share the strategies they use, there are other strategies they do not know and which should be introduced and modelled by the teacher.

Step3.General practice: after introducing a new strategy, learners should practice it in different tasks and activities to be automatised. They should practice strategies in combination with each other.

Step4. Action planning; goal setting and monitoring: to be able to decide about and plan coming action to attain personal goals. Learners should be helped by the teacher to identify appropriate strategies to be used in particular tasks. It is the role of the teacher to guide learners' action planning and goal setting to reach feasible goals .

Step5. Focused practice and fading out reminders: after a multiple and controlled practice, teachers' directions and checklists are removed progressively to make learners rely on their developed strategy repertoire without teachers' aid.

Step 6 .Evaluating strategy acquisition and recommencing the cycle: learners evaluate their learning, strategy acquisition and use. They decide whether they achieve their goals or not. If they successfully attain their goals, they plan -together with the teacher– for new goals and start the cycle again. If not, they try to find out why and what should be done, and plan for further action to solve the problem.

Chamot et.al. (1999) developed a metacognitive model that "organizes LLS according to the metacognitive processes of planning, monitoring, problem solving and evaluating" (Chamot et.al. 1999, p10). The four processes are not linear, they have a recursive nature and their use depends on the task demands. The model provides a number of strategies that correspond to each process, in addition to some remembering strategies, summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Overview of the Metacognitive Model Strategies

Planning Strategies	Monitoring Strategies	Problem solving strategies	Evaluating Strategies	Remembering Strategies
Set goals directed-attention activate-background knowledge	-Ask if it makes sense -selectively attend -deduction /	-inference -substitute -ask questions to clarify - use	-Verify predictions and guesses -summarize -check goals -evaluate	-Imagine with keyword -group/ classify -transfer/ cognates

-predict	induction	resources	yourself
-	-personalize /		-evaluate
organization	contextualize		your
al	-take notes		strategies
planning	-Use imagery		
-self-management	-manipulate		
	act		
	out		
	-self-talk		
	- cooperate		

3. Experiential Learning

The concept of experiential learning, introduced by Dewey and Lewin then Rogers (1969-1983), was reconsidered and developed by Kolb (1984). Kolb & Kolb (2005 p 194) claimed that experiential learning theory is built on six propositions :

1. Learning is a process not an outcome; therefore, learners should be engaged in the process and provided with feedback on the effectiveness of their efforts.
2. All learning is relearning; learners' background knowledge should be tested to be linked and integrated with new more sophisticated ideas.
3. Learning requires reflection and conflict resolution; learners should be able to act and reflect flexibly towards differences, conflicts, and disagreement.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world; learners are involved in the process of learning not only cognitively but also affectively and behaviourally.

5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment; learning is the result of balancing processes of assimilation and accommodation.

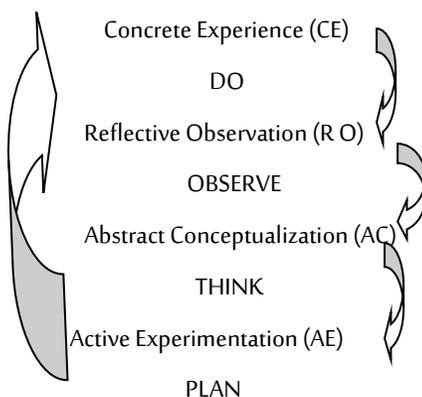
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

According to the experiential theory, learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984 cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2005 p 194). Grasping knowledge takes place through two modes: Concrete experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC), while transforming experience occurs through Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). In other words, the learning process is a cycle with four stages : concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Concrete experience provides the basis for observations and reflections, the latter are filtered and incorporated into abstract concepts that guide action. The result of

this process can be tested and direct the creation of new experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This cycle can start at any stage depending on the learning context, and can also be repeated as much as learners need but the stages should be followed in sequence. Because learners may go through the cycle several times, it may best be thought of as a spiral of cycles (Healy & Jenkins, 2000). Thus, experience alone is not sufficient; learners need also reflection, conceptualization or thinking, and action (Guilherme, Glaser and Garcia, 2009).

Guilherme, Glaser and Garcia (2009 p.200) claimed that experiential learning stressed the needs of learners who are required to build new experiences on their own previous ones. As a result, the learners feel personally involved in the learning process; they have to make responsible contributions, as they develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. The experiential learning theory (ELT) is shortly summarized in the following figure.

Figure1. Kolb's experiential learning cycle (adapted from Jenkins 1998 Cited in Healy & Jenkins, 2000).



-Concrete Experience: Where the learner is actively experiencing an

activity (e.g., a laboratory session, field class (

-Reflective Observation: Where the learner is consciously reflecting back on that experience

-Abstract Conceptualization: Where the learner is being presented with/or trying to conceptualise a theory or model of what is (to be) observed

-Active Experimentation: Where the learner is trying to plan how to test a model or theory or plan for a forthcoming experience

4. Action Research

Wallace (1998, p. 01) defined action research as "the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspects of professional practice". Such kind of research is popular in educational settings, and it has some key features. It is conducted by researchers who are involved in the study with the aim of improving the participants' practice through planning, action, observation, evaluation and reflection, and feedback. The process is cyclic and can restart at any point, and it is often referred to as the 'action-reflection cycle' that constitute of the following steps: observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006 p 9.)

Action research should not be done by professional researchers, but it is conducted by practitioners themselves (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Their main

aim is to gain a better understanding of the educational environment together with enhancing the effectiveness of the teaching process (Dörnyei, 2007). Henceforth, practitioners engaged in action research should:

- take stock of what is going on
- identify a concern
- think of a possible way forward
- try it out
- monitor the action by gathering data to show what is happening
- evaluate progress by establishing procedures for making judgements about what is happening
- test the validity of accounts of learning
- modify practice in the light of the evaluation (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006 pp 8-9.)

Action research has a collaborative nature, and it applies eclectic methodology as it frequently uses case studies (Cohen et.al., 2005). However, generalizing the obtained findings is not a major concern of action research (Wallace, 1998.)

5. Action Research and Metacognitive Strategy Instruction

Metacognitive language learning strategies include Overviewing and linking with already known material, Organizing, Setting goals and objectives, Planning, Seeking practice opportunities, Self monitoring, and Self evaluating. The involvement in action research is one way to practice these strategies –since action research necessitate their use- which is the

aim of metacognitive strategy training. These strategies are unconscious, but with training, learners become conscious and aware of their use and able to use them in other learning contexts. Accordingly, both action research and SBI aim at enhancing learners' practices and effort effectiveness.

Furthermore, a close examination of the models of metacognitive strategy instruction proposed by Grenfell and Harris (1999) and Chamot et.al. (1999) reveals that the two models organize the instruction in a number of steps or stages as follows:

- a) Consciousness and Awareness raising/ Activating background knowledge.
- b) Modeling/ Monitoring
- c) Action Planning/ Planning
- d) Practice/ Problem solving
- e) Evaluation and recommencing the cycle.

These steps go hand in hand with the stages of action research and which include: observe, reflect, act, evaluate and modify, and move to new directions. This similarity leads us to say that action research principles and practices overlap with those of metacognitive strategy instruction. Henceforth, it can be claimed that action research can help learners get the benefits gained from a metacognitive strategy training.

Metacognitive strategy based instruction is claimed to enhance learning, to promote learner autonomy, to raise motivation, and to help learners stretch beyond the learning

style. These can be as well the result of taking part in action research.

6. Action Research and Experiential Learning

A comparison between the principle of action research and ELT results in finding out that for both:

- ☐ Learners are involved in the process of learning cognitively, affectively and behaviourally.
- ☐ Learners' background knowledge should be tested first, to be followed by action.
- ☐ Reflection and feedback are required.
- ☐ The aim is to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching/ learning process.
- ☐ Learning is a cyclic process that can start at any stage depending on the context.
- ☐ Learning occurs through stages: planning, action, observation, evaluation and reflection, and feedback and modification.

Experiential learning helps learners stretch beyond their learning style, it helps in establishing a pedagogy that aims at a lifelong learning and that develop learners' critical thinking. Because the practices of action research liken those of ELT, it can be synthesized that action research is a way towards lifelong learning, critical thinking and stretching beyond the learning style.

In a nutshell, the fact that action research shares the principles, the practices, the steps and stages with both metacognitive training and experiential learning leads to the conclusion that action research helps

learners' to develop their metacognition , on the one hand, and provides them with an opportunity for experiential learning, on the other. Based on this close relation, it can be claimed that action research is beneficial for learners because it may enhance learning, promote learner autonomy, raise motivation, and help learners stretch beyond their learning style. In addition to that, it results in a lifelong learning and develops learners' critical thinking.

7. Conclusion

The present paper unveiled the importance of action research, not for researchers/practitioners, but also for learners in order to give them a reason for participating in such a kind of research. Learners generally complain about being given extra tasks to be done, or going through new methods of teaching because they are ignorant and they do not know that they will gain a lot. Henceforth, the present paper tried to clarify how learners would profit from action research. We came to conclude that since action research likens metacognitive training and experiential learning in practices, it would share similar impact on learners. The latter includes enhancing lifelong learning, stretching beyond the learning style, raising motivation, promoting autonomy and critical thinking. However, these claims still need empirical research to be supported.

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