

The metacognitive development of adult language learners in self-directed settings: A look at a distance learning course

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Abstract: This paper presents a research design for an empirical study on the metacognitive development of adult language learners in a distance learning context. The paper describes a mixed methods design that will be used during the implementation phase of the project to elicit the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of learners during the process of learning, and to examine how the verbalization of experience, thought, and feeling drives metacognitive development.

Keywords: metacognition, metacognitive development, learner autonomy, distance learning, self-directed learning

Introduction

This paper presents a research design for a study on the metacognitive development of adult language learners learning Spanish online. The issue of how metacognition develops has been addressed in studies of language learners in both *enhanced settings* and *non-enhanced settings*. *Enhanced-settings* are learning contexts that include pedagogical interventions in the form of advising and strategy training, while *non-enhanced settings* do not include such interventions (e.g., learning outside the classroom, immersion, distance learning). Does the enhanced setting make a difference for learners' metacognitive development? And can learners in non-enhanced settings still be successful? These important questions are still open. This design of an exploratory study aims at better understanding the metacognitive development of learners in non-enhanced settings.

1. Literature Review

Prior studies on metacognitive development in self-directed settings generally support a constructivist perspective on learning. For example, studies that found positive metacognitive development [2] [6] [11] describe the process as disruptive, not linear; a process in which uncertainty (cognitive, emotional, or both) plays a critical role in moving the learning forward. Prior studies suggest that some sort of intervention, that is, some 'cueing' or 'prompting' of behavior through advising and strategy training is necessary to jumpstart metacognitive development. This finding emerges from the observation that studies of enhanced settings showed positive metacognitive development [2] [6], while some studies of non-enhanced settings [1] [3] reported lack of development. This finding would lead one to conclude that little metacognitive development occurs in non-enhanced

settings. However, this finding should be taken with caution because (1) non-enhanced studies tend not to collect longitudinal data, causing internal validity issues, and (2) one study of a non-enhanced setting where these data were collected [11] did show development. At first glance, studies seem to show that, with the exception of ‘expert’ learners, some explicit intervention in the form of learning strategy training and advising is necessary for metacognitive development, as learners tended not to develop much metacognition in non-enhanced settings [1] [3]. However, this conclusion should be taken with caution due to the one-shot, single instrument, methodologies used in non-enhanced studies. Since the study on distance learning [11] did show improvement of metacognition in a non-enhanced setting, the issue of the metacognitive development of adult language learners in settings where metacognitive interventions are not available (i.e., non-enhanced settings) should be revisited.

2. Research questions

In light of the rationale discussed above, the study will address the following questions: (1) What are the uses, thoughts, and emotions of adult language learners in non-enhanced self-directed settings, (2) What is the role of emotion in the learning process of adult language learners in non-enhanced self-directed settings? Are there emotional stages, (3) Would adult language learners in non-enhanced self-directed settings show metacognitive development? If so, what factors would contribute to this development?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A non-enhanced setting is operationalized in this study as an 8-week distance language learning course with no metacognitive enhancements such as advising or strategy training. The participants in this study are adult language learners enrolled in such a course. They are female and male and from a variety of majors. They are speakers of English learning Spanish as a foreign language. Demographic and background data will be collected via a questionnaire one week prior to the course. Upon obtaining permission from the course instructor, the researcher will visit the courses to solicit students to participate on a volunteer basis.

The study explores the behaviors of adult language learners enrolled in an 8-week non-enhanced self-directed university online course. The design consists of mixed-methods including a pre-and post- beliefs questionnaire, weekly collected reflective journals, and exit interviews.

3.2 Pre- and post-course beliefs questionnaire

Upon receiving written consent to participate from each participant, the researcher will administer a 10-item Likert scale beliefs questionnaire adapted from a prior study [2]. This pre-and post-beliefs questionnaire aims at eliciting learners’ own perceptions of their metacognitive knowledge. This tool is used to establish a knowledge baseline at the onset of the study, and capture any increases in perceived metacognitive development at the end of the 8 weeks experience.

3.3 Journals

The researcher will ask the participants to keep a reflective journal to record their behaviors (e.g., any activities, strategies they do in relation to language learning), as well as their thoughts and feelings as they go through the learning experience. There will be no restrictions on format or length of the entries in the journals, but learners will be asked to start each new entry with the date. Journals will be submitted to the researcher at the end of each week during the 8 weeks of the course. Weekly submissions are a way of reminding students to keep working on their journals on a regular basis.

3.4 Interviews

The critical incident technique [8] will be used to elicit how individuals make sense of events in their environment in the process of learning. Critical incidents will be collected by the researcher through face-to-face video-taped interviews with a convenient sample of participants. Content analysis will be applied to the interview data and participants will be added until the data reaches the point of saturation [7] [10].

4. Significance and potential impact of the study

Language learning studies on metacognition tend to overlook the role that emotional states play in the learning process. This research design looks at learning holistically, as an interplay of thought, feeling, and action, and attempts to gain a better understanding of learning as a process. Furthermore, this design improves the research methodology of studies in metacognition by collecting critical incidents to gain an in-depth understanding of what works and what does not work in the process of learning how to learn in a distance learning course.

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