Letting Students Explore What It Takes to Become a Good Communicator –
A Metacognitive Approach to Promote Language Learning

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Abstract
When it comes to teaching speaking skills in a foreign language classroom, instructing grammatical knowledge, building up vocabulary and formulated expressions, and practicing model conversations can be some of the useful teaching methods. However, we need to ask ourselves if our classroom instructions are designed to help students synthesize that fragmentary knowledge into practical knowledge for real-life conversational occasions. The conversation is a spontaneous activity affected by many elements contributed by the participants, such as their language proficiency, their relationships with each other, existing knowledge on the topic discussed, and so on. Thus, students must be trained to acquire skills that allow them to flexibly adapt to casual conversational situations in collaboration with other participants. Taking this into account, this research focuses on the metacognitive effects of an instructional method that incorporates an experiential learning framework. This method intends to foster students' practical conversational skills in English through phased collaborative reflections on their free talks with their peers. Through metacognitive reflections on their performances, students came to see for themselves what it takes to become a good communicator.

Keywords: Foreign Language Education, Metacognition, Reflective Thinking, Experiential Learning, Adaptive Expertise

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Introduction

Under the Japanese public English education system, people study English at least for 6 years in schools, however, many Japanese adults publicly say, "I can't speak English." This is because students learn about the language and are hardly ever encouraged to think critically about what such knowledge means to them. We need to provide our students with opportunities to transform their conceptual knowledge into practical knowledge through self-directed learning.

Learning a foreign language is a complicated process. If you want to master it, you need to devote thousands of hours of hard work to studying it and using it in meaningful contexts. However, when it comes to teaching a foreign language in a school setting, there are many things to consider. Students do not have an unlimited amount of time or willingness to spend studying the language. Instructing students of various backgrounds in the classroom environment requires careful planning, too. In many foreign language classrooms, lessons are often organized around subdivided grammatical items or communication skills and often taught separately in different sessions on different days. The limited number of hours available for English courses in the school curriculum can be one reason why this is done. One of the benefits of subdividing instructional items and teaching them in phases is that it can help students cognitively process learning contents. It is also easier for teachers to keep track of students' current proficiency levels and know what knowledge and skills they need extra support on. Most of all, that is considered to be the most efficient and transparent way to organize and monitor teaching in the school setting.

The biggest problem of this type of instructional style is that while teachers may believe that this fragmentary knowledge and skills will eventually come together and students will become proficient language users, students may not always share the same belief. I have overheard many students saying learning English is a pain and it means nothing to them. Some students even tell me in the fact that there is no point in studying English because they will never use it in the future. The students who say that learning English is meaningless may have many different personal reasons to feel that way. Nonetheless, too much focus on micro-level skills and knowledge and less time for synthesis of such knowledge and skills may demotivate them in English learning. Students study complex grammatical usage such as present perfect and past progressive and may study hard to get good grades on tests. But if they cannot feel how and when exactly such knowledge can be useful in the actual day-to-day situations, they will not find meaning in learning them. What happens in the textbook exercises and model conversations are applicable only in the situation they appear in the textbook. The real-life situations are more complicated and are easy to be influenced by conditions happening at that moment. How can we expect our students to see the value of learning grammar and language skills if they do not know how and when to apply them in the real world?

As English education professionals, we should think about ways for students to synthesize knowledge through self-discovery. The subdivided skills or grammatical knowledge taught in class are only useful on the conceptual level until they get to use it in a meaningful context. We need to set up times and occasions for students to experiment the language use and reflect on their mistakes and fix them at several points in their learning process in class.

Considering the above, I have designed a classroom pedagogy to help foster students' practical conversational abilities through experiential learning. In this method, students are

given multiple opportunities to synthesize the knowledge acquired in previous lessons through off-the-cuff conversations with their peers. Collaborative reflections with peers and the teacher are systematically incorporated to stimulate students' metacognitive awareness. Experiential learning using this instructional method in English language classrooms can help students think for themselves about what it takes to become a good communicator.

Literature Review

To develop foreign language proficiency, one must have plenty of opportunities to use the target language in meaningful contexts. Nation (2013) says a well-designed course must consist of 4 strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. This is to say, teaching students conceptual knowledge about the language is indeed an important part of teaching, however, students will not become a well-balanced language user if they are not given chances to experience the language use in situations that are relevant to them. This becomes especially significant when we teach students to use English as a means of communication because in real life, "people use language to talk about what they know and what they want to know more about, not to talk about language itself" (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). Experiencing language use in meaning-focused contexts also serves as an "incentive for language learning insofar as it is interesting and of some value to the learner and therefore worth learning" (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989).

Experiential learning is an instructional method suited for incorporating language-focused teaching and meaning-focused language use. Experiential learning is also explained as "learning through reflection on doing" (Felicia, 2011). It encourages the learners to put their current knowledge and skills into practice in a meaning-focused context, and later come to their realization of the gap between their actual self and their ideal self through multiple occasions of reflective thinking. When the learners reflect on their performance as a practitioner in a quasi-real-world situation, they will, like it or not, find out what they thought they had understood but had not, or they did not know at all. This encounter with the gap in their conceptual knowledge and the knowledge needed to solve the problem at hand would force them to think critically about what they now need to do to fill the gap. When learners are engaged in this process, they are acting as an 'agent' in their learning, not as passive recipients of the information provided by someone else. 'Agent' is "an individual who perceives, analyses, rejects or accepts solutions offered, makes decisions" (Swain, 2006). It is this process of learners acting as the 'agent' in their learning process that makes the synthesis of conceptual and practical knowledge possible, simply because "Knowledge is constructed, not received" (Bain, 2004).

One of the most important elements in experiential learning is the fact that learners not only try out their existing knowledge at a task, but they contemplate on their learning through multiple occasions of self-reflective thinking. Kolb's experiential learning theory (2014) sets out four stages of learning. It starts with a concrete experience, immediately followed by reflective observation, then abstract conceptualization occurs, after which active experimentation takes place. In other words, experiential learning involves a "learning cycle or spiral where the learner 'touches all the bases'– experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting–in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned." (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). When learners are given opportunities to engage in cognitive simulations like this, they visualize themselves executing activities skillfully to enhance subsequent performance (Bandura, 1989). Through the continuous

practice of this kind, learners are expected to develop adaptive expertise (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986), which enables them to flexibly generate new procedures to execute in different real-life situations. According to Dewey (1938), education is the means of social continuity of life. He suggests that the knowledge and skills acquired in one situation become "an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue" (p. 44). This means that learning is a continuous act of doing and thinking reflectively. We can see this in our simple everyday experiences such as cooking, for example. When making miso soup for the first time, an individual might put too much miso in the soup, and it becomes too salty. In the next trial, she puts less miso, but it is still a bit salty. Learning from these experiences, she would put just a little bit less miso this time. The soup turns out a lot more delicious than the one from the first trial. As such, what happened in the previous experiences are carried on to the next, and knowledge and skill are gradually refined for practical use. This is exactly why reflective thinking needs to be incorporated in the experiential learning process several times instead of just once as a concluding task. Most importantly, in experiential learning, the act of experiencing and reflective thinking are both done by the learners themselves. Learning through such self-discovery favorably affects learners' retention (Shaffer, 1989) as well.

While reflective thinking enables self-discovery, it "needs to happen in the community, in interaction with others" (Rogers, 2002), if we want our students to get the most of it. It is particularly important in an English language classroom as the main objective of learning the language is to become a proficient communicator using English. There are several reasons why reflective thinking in interaction with peers serves the best purpose. When students work in collaboration with their peers, they feel emotionally more secure than working with the teacher. As a consequence, conversational interactions occur frequently (Sato & Lyster, 2007), so there are more opportunities for fluency development (Ellis, 2005). Furthermore, when students are faced with linguistic problems in their conversation, they can put their heads together to think about the problems in collaboration and exchange their reflective thoughts to learn the language using the language (Swain & Suzuki, 2008). When support is given to the students to work interdependently with each other (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994), more capable peers will try to help others (Vygotsky, 1980) to fill the gaps in their knowledge or language proficiency. Thus, collaborative reflective thinking with peers allows for students to co-construct knowledge about the language using the language (Swain, 2000).

Method

1.   Target Population

This activity was introduced to students in a general English class at a 4-year university in the Kanto area in Japan. The class met once a week for 90 minutes for 15 weeks. There were 16 students all majoring in social welfare. Their English proficiency was more or less elementary level. The homogenous nature of the classroom population in this class worked positively for this method because students shared the same first language. Hence, students were more likely to be able to exchange their deep thoughts using the common language with their peers.

2.   Description of the Method

The 15-week course is comprised mainly of sessions for language-focused instructions and for experiential learning sessions called Free Talk, alternating each week. A topic-based textbook is used since it is easier for students to relate to topics rather than a grammar-based approach. Each unit is focused on a topic and taught in two sessions, with language-focused instructions on the first week and Free Talk on the second. During the language-focused session, students learn and practice grammar, vocabulary, and useful set phrases for the topic of the unit. The teacher gives students a list of useful set phrases for them to memorize by the following week. Students test each other's memory in pairs in the following session by reciting them. After that, they engage in Free Talk and synthesize the conceptual knowledge learned in the previous week by experimenting with its use in free conversation with the partner. Free Talk is divided into six steps.

Step 1: Talk Round 1 (4 minutes)

The first Talk Round is for students to experience if they can carry out a natural conversation for four minutes, using the knowledge learned in the previous language-focused session. Students are put into pairs and told to talk about the topic given, which is closely related to the topic focused on the previous week. The teacher tells the students to continue talking until the time is up. She tells them not to use the dictionary nor stop talking to write things down. She also tells them that they can use their first language, Japanese if they cannot continue talking due to the difficulties in expressing what they want to say in English. There are three reasons for these restrictions. Firstly, if they stop talking to check for words in the dictionary or take notes, their train of thoughts would be cut off and they would forget what they were talking about when they resume their talk. Secondly, this round is meant for the students to get many ideas out for a rich and natural conversation so that they can have many contents to work with during the following reflective stage. Thirdly, frustrations and mistakes are encouraged during the experiencing stage. The more they experience them, there will be more learning opportunities for them later.

Step 2: Collaborative Reflection 1 (20 minutes)

After four minutes of free talk in pairs, students are asked to recall their talk and write down in their log the things they said in Japanese, they wanted to say in English but could not, and they said in English but are not sure about their accuracy. Students are encouraged to use any tools available, such as the dictionary, notes from the language-focused session, and the internet. They are also told that they could ask the teacher for help if they cannot solve their problems by themselves. During this stage, students try their best in collaboration with their partners to find out how they can use the knowledge already learned and apply it to the meaningful situation happening at this moment. Through this intensive thinking, students create an abstract conceptualization of their knowledge.

Step 3: Talk Round 2 (3 minutes)

This stage is for the students to experiment with the abstract concept they have just formed through reflective thinking. During this second round of speaking, the same pairs talk about the same topic for three minutes. Again, students are instructed not to pause or take notes. This time, they are encouraged to keep the Japanese use to the minimum. Students should be able to keep the conversation going mostly in English this time.

Step 4: Collaborative Reflection 2 (20 minutes)

This stage looks very similar to Step 2. Students look back on Talk Round 2 and write down their reflective thoughts. They share their thoughts with their partners and solve the problems that came up this time together. At this stage, the teacher encourages students to push themselves a bit more by incorporating some of the useful expressions they memorized and recited earlier on into their next round of talk if they already have not done so.

Step 5: Talk Round 3 (2 minutes)

Students again talk with the same partner for two minutes. In this round of talk, the conversation is recorded to give them a little bit of pressure so that they push themselves for their best performance. Also, in this stage, two pairs are put together to form a group of four. They take turns and observe the other pair while they are talking.

Step 6: Collaborative Reflection 3 (30 minutes)

Step 6 is done concurrently with Step 5. In this step, students would take turns and observe other pairs doing Step 5. Then would then exchange feedback and reflect on their overall performances. While observing the other pair, students fill out an observation sheet to look critically at the other pair's conversations in terms of the way they communicate and the way they use English. By doing this, students are inevitably forced to look reflectively at their way of communication and the use of the English language. They then look critically at their own experience and write down reflective notes to summarize the learning they had during this experiential learning activity. This is when they are expected to experience abstract conceptualization.

Results & Discussion

1.   Metacognitive Experiences in Collaborative Reflection

Collaborative reflections force learners to use their metacognition. Metacognition can be classified into two types of categories: metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experiences (See Figure 1). Flavell (1987) defined metacognitive knowledge as one's knowledge or beliefs about the factors that affect cognitive activities. Nelson and Narens (1994) described that metacognitive experiences involve monitoring and control. They explained that monitoring takes place when the meta-level obtains information from the object-level. Some example actions involving monitoring are awareness, feeling, prediction, checking, and evaluation. Control, on the other hand, takes place when the meta-level modifies the object-level. This occurs when one is engaged in goal setting, planning, and revision.
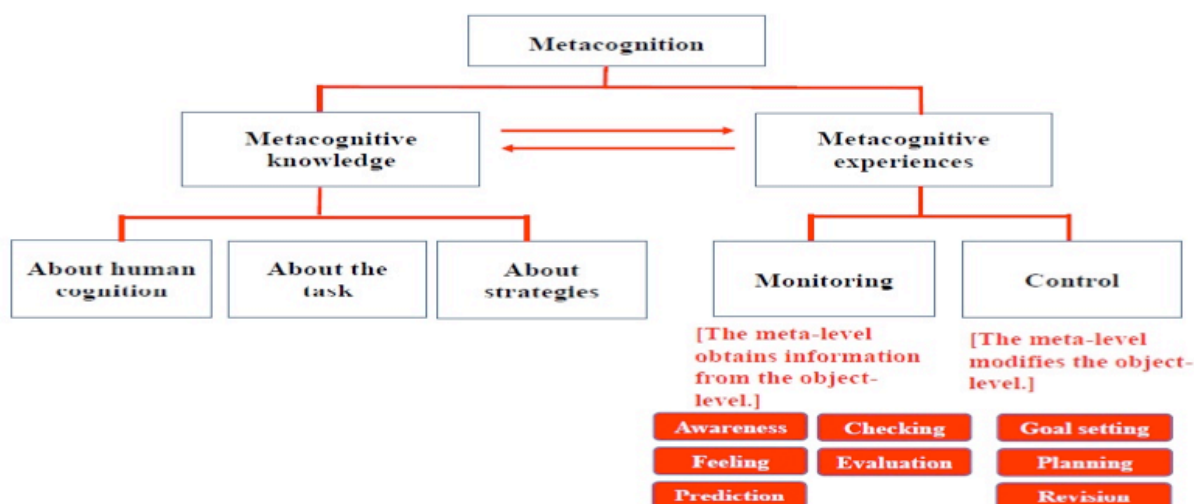
Figure 1: Metacognitive Framework

When Nelson & Naren's metacognitive experiences are applied to this speaking activity (See Table 1), we can assume that students exercise both monitoring and control in Steps 2, 4, and 6. In Step 2, students reflect on their 4-minute conversation with their partner and write down things they couldn't say in English or things they spoke but were unsure whether if they were expressed correctly. When they are doing that, we can expect that they become aware of what they need to work on the next time. This awareness is an action categorized as monitoring in the metacognitive experiences. When they check unknown words in the dictionary, they again exercise monitoring as they do the checking. Furthermore, when they recompose their English sentences to prepare for the next 4-minute talk, they exercise control as they do the planning. In Step 4, students would evaluate what went right and wrong and revise their sentences. They would also plan on how to make the conversation more natural in the next attempt. In this stage, students exercise both monitoring and control as they evaluate, revise and plan. In Step 6, students would observe another pair and exchange feedback afterward. The act of observation involves evaluation and checking. Getting feedback from peers would most likely lead them to get the awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. These learning activities involve monitoring. When they write a reflection after receiving feedback, they would objectively think about what needs to be improved in their future attempts. This goal setting is an action characterized as control.

	Learning Activity	**Metacognitive Experiences**
Collaborative Reflection (Step 2)	Write down things they couldn't say in English	Awareness (Monitor)
	Check unknown words in the dictionary	Checking (Monitor)
	Recompose their English sentences	Planning (Control)
Collaborative Reflection (Step 4)	Reflect on what went right and what went wrong	Evaluation (Monitor)
	Revise their English sentences	Revision (Control)
	Plan on how to make their conversation more natural	Planning (Control)
Collaborative Reflection	Observe performance by other pair	Evaluation (Monitor)
	Fill out the feedback sheet for the other pair	Checking (Monitor)

(Step 6)	Reflect on their performance as they listen to peer's feedback	Awareness (Monitor)
	Write a reflection and set goals for the future after receiving peer's feedback	Goal setting (Control)

Table 1. Metacognitive Experiences in Collaborative Reflection

2.   Learning Results from Collaborative Reflection

At the end of the semester, students wrote a reflection sheet about their experiences on the free talk activity. Table 2. shows what students wrote about a question of "What did you learn from observing other pairs and exchanging feedback?". Some comments were mentioned by several students. The frequency of extracted comments is indicated in the right column.

Five students wrote, "good communicators use non-verbal communication such as eye contact and body language effectively. What this indicates is that many students recognized that communication is not just a matter of language but body language also plays an important part. Some factors that facilitate communication are universal regardless of the language being spoken, and it is significant that students themselves came to this realization. If they realized that communication was not just about the language, they would feel less reluctant to communicate in English. One student wrote "by observing other pairs, I found out that a conversation can develop differently in other pairs. It was interesting because we were all talking on the same topic." This comment sums up what students should know about communication in real-life situations. That is, how a conversation develops is determined by so many different factors such as the participants' interests and existing knowledge. So when the participants change, the content of the conversation would naturally change, too. Just like a comment "I learned that conversation is a collaborative act. It takes two to make it work," indicates, every utterance each speaker makes is a contributing factor that directs the way the conversation develops. This is exactly why students need to develop adaptive expertise rather than routine expertise to become good communicators.

"What did you learn from observing other pairs and exchanging feedback?"	Extracted comments
Good communicators use non-verbal communication effectively (eye contact, body language, etc.).	5
Exchanging feedback allowed me to recognize my strengths and weaknesses objectively.	4
Conversation can develop differently in other pairs although we were all talking about the same topic.	1
Willingness to communicate feelings is more important than grammatical correctness	1
A conversation is a collaborative act and it takes two to make it work.	1
By observing other pairs, I realized what kind of responses can appear natural in a conversation.	1
A conversation can develop more naturally and smoothly if you start off with small talk before getting into the main topic.	1
I learned some ways to keep the conversation going without having unnatural pauses.	1
I learned different ways of communicating by observing other pairs.	1

Table 2. Students' Reflective Comments About Learning Results from Collaborative Reflection

Conclusion

In conclusion, while teaching grammatical knowledge, building up vocabulary and formulated expressions, and practicing model conversations can benefit students to become good English speakers, students also need to be given opportunities and instructions on how to synthesize all that knowledge. For foreign language learners, who rarely get the chance to use English outside the classroom, this free talk speaking activity can help them realize how to respond to real-life speaking situations. We saw that collaborative peer interaction can enhance students' learning as they experience metacognitive monitoring and control in their learning process. Through such metacognitive experiences, language learners would learn to think about what it takes to become good communicators. As we saw in students' reflective comments, good communication is not just about how to use grammar and vocabulary, but rather how you try to relate to others. This is something foreign language educators also need to keep in mind when planning their classroom pedagogy.

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