From the Amateur to the Professional in Group Discussions: Exploring the Use of Metacognitive Strategies

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Abstract
The performance of learners on group discussions is used for shortlisting candidates during campus recruitments across professional courses. The complex task requires learners to make use of several learning strategies to enhance their group discussion performance to become good discussants. Many professional courses incorporate an orientation programme in developing group discussion skills in their English course. While these programmes focus on the verbal aspects of the language, the strategies learners inherently use are often neglected. Consequently, this paper attempts to capture the metacognitive strategies which the good group discussants employ when the discussion is underway, thereby, making them adept. The data of one female and two male first year engineering students from a video recording of a round of group discussions, a strategies use questionnaire, a write up on expectations from a workshop on group discussions, and researcher's observation report of individual performance was qualitatively analyzed to identify the different metacognitive strategies and skills of group discussion which the participants inherently use. The findings suggest that good group discussants exhibit the use of certain metacognitive strategies such as 'visualization', 'activating background knowledge', and 'self-monitoring'. Since the findings of the study suggest that strategies play an important role in helping the discussant to augment performance during group discussions, the English teacher aiming to teach group discussion skills ought to focus on these as well. Therefore, this study has implications for the development of a strategies training programme to improve group discussion skills vis-a-vis metacognitive strategy use among tertiary level learners.

Keywords: Learning strategies, metacognitive strategies, Group discussions, Engineering students, Indian

Introduction

Engineering students often get placed in various companies even before the completion of their four- year course. This occurs through a campus recruitment drive which is conducted sometime during the third year across engineering institutes. In one stage of the selection process, the prospective candidates are required to participate in a round of group discussions. This phase of the selection process is especially important for better assessment of the candidates by the selection committee members of the hiring company. The assessment comprises but, may not be limited to the linguistic competence, ability to think on their feet, and the personality traits of the candidates.

While some training is imparted to these aspirants in group discussions as part of their English course, it may not be sufficient. To move from being an amateur group discussant who can barely manage to keep afloat in the face of an intense discussion, to being able to handle the pressure in a professional manner under test conditions- which the round on group discussion in effect is, greater skills are required. The discussant then needs to go beyond adhering to mere tips for performing well to actually developing an ability to think about ways of tackling the task by making use of strategies. They also need to reflect on their verbal and non-verbal group discussion behaviour as part of the process. The complexity of the group discussion task is further evidenced by the fact that it requires the discussant to not only understand and apply information already known but also, analyze, evaluate, and recreate those to suit the context of the discussion better.

Therefore, it was necessary to identify the strategies that the good group discussants, whose performance is akin to a professional's, make use of which sets them apart from the amateur, who remains tongue tied with nervousness. Consequently, the research question which drives this study is:

Which metacognitive strategies are preexisting among good group discussants?

Researching metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies have been defined in as many ways as there are theorists propagating it. But, the underlying principle has its roots in the work of John Flavell (1979), also known as the father of metacognition. He defined those as strategies to monitor the cognitive processes which an individual performs on a daily basis. In other words, the ability of the learners to think about their thinking process is known as metacognitive knowledge and the strategies used therein are known as metacognitive strategies. To quote him, "...you might believe that you (unlike your brother) should use strategy A (rather than strategy B) in task X (as contrasted with task Y)" (*ibid*). Metacognitive strategies can be further classified as planning, monitoring, and evaluating strategies. These can be used in various combinations to suit specific language learning needs. However, this paper is limited to the identification of the various strategies and does not include their further classification into the different types therein.

Metacognitive strategies have been researched upon in innumerable ways in the field of second language acquisition. A qualitative investigation was undertaken to trace

the use of metacognitive strategies during second language academic reading by Li and Munby (1996). An analysis of the data showed that the metacognitive strategies of 'translation', 'use of background knowledge', 'self- questioning', 'prediction', 'paying attention to topic sentences', 'picking out key words', and 'comparing and contrasting to L1knowledge domain' were used for understanding the academic texts better. Ghapanchi and Taheryan's study (2012) proved that metacognitive strategy use along with metacognitive knowledge and linguistic knowledge was instrumental for improving speaking skills. Tan and Tan (2010) conducted a study using audio-blogs which projected a significant improvement in oral performances after explicit instruction in metacognitive reflection. Lam (2010) used observation and stimulated recall interviews to identify the strategies which learners used during small group discussion tasks in class. My focus in this study is to trace the evidence of similar preexisting strategy use in formal group discussions which engineering students are required to participate in as part of their campus recruitment process.

Participants

The participants in the study were first year electrical engineering students between the ages of seventeen and nineteen from a private college in Kolkata. For pragmatic reasons this paper presents information from three of them- two male and one female. The pseudonyms given to them to keep their identities veiled are Afzal, Nayomi, and Raj.

Tools

The tools for data collection were video recordings of a round of group discussions which lead to the researcher's observation report of individual performance, a strategies use questionnaire, a write up on the participants' expectations from a workshop on group discussions and a round of interviews.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected over a period of three weeks. The researcher met the participants across six sessions. They were asked to participate in a round of group discussions. All the group discussions were video recorded. The researcher also maintained detailed observation notes about individual participants. Then, a questionnaire based on strategy use during group discussions was distributed to gain an insight into the participants' preexisting notions of metacognitive strategies which are prerequisites for a good group discussion. Thereafter, they were asked to write about their expectations from a workshop on group discussions. This was followed by a round of interviews to get a deeper insight about the participants' strategic behaviour during the group discussion.

Data analysis

In this section the data gathered from the three participants have been presented. In each case first the participants' understanding and use of metacognitive strategies in group discussions have been discussed followed by the verbal and the nonverbal aspects of their group discussion performances. Sources of participants' responses from the various tools have been referred to as, interviews (I), write up (W),

questionnaire (Q), and researcher's observations (RO).The codes used for the participants will therefore be AI which refers to interview response given by Afzal, NW which corresponds to Nayomi's write up, AQ indicating questionnaire response by Afzal, and RRO referring to researcher's observation of Raj's group discussion performance, and so on.

Case 1- Afzal

In the scope of understanding and using metacognitive strategies during group discussions, Afzal believed that he could enhance his performance by gathering knowledge from various sources of information such as watching news, reading books and interacting with professionals in the field. He said, "For improving my performance in group discussion regularly I will watch the debates on News Channel how the participants are performing on the issues, read regularly books and interact with the professionals in the society, talk to the participants and moderators who participated previously in group discussions" (sic) (AI). He would also try to cope with a difficult situation in the discussion by providing examples, describing phenomena better and agreeing with other participants who shared his view point during the discussion. On being explicitly asked about his use of specific strategies it was found that Afzal had some preexisting notion about six out of the ten strategies (AQ) in focus. He had some idea of the stage of the group discussion during which the strategies of 'setting goals', 'self-talk' 'prediction', 'self-monitoring', 'brainstorming', and 'selective attention' would be most useful. His beliefs were partially reflected in his performance as well. During the discussion he said, "looks like as if they are soldiers marching for a cause" (ARO) when referring to students in uniforms. This is a clear indication of the use of 'visualization', and 'activating background knowledge'. He also used 'selective attention' in the form of using keywords borrowed from other discussants such as "we are still students" to take the discussion forward.

Afzal's understanding of verbal aspects during the discussion is enumerated herewith. He took ten turns during the discussion. He spoke for a total of 98 seconds. The duration of his turns was between 40 seconds and 2 seconds of talking per turn. On an average, his speed was 120 words per minute. He was of the opinion that incorporating examples, describing situations and agreeing with others would go a long way in improving his group discussion performance. He said, "Yes obviously I will do my best in coping with the situation using strategies like, giving examples and describing about the future happening, events and agreeing with those persons performance who is supporting my views in that topic" (AI). He added that listening to the other discussants' opinions and incorporating those in his arguments would help to improve the discussion performance as well. He would also ask others to explain their points better. His beliefs were reflected in his performance as well. The points Afzal made were pertinent to the discussion. He substantiated his arguments with concrete examples. His speech also had cohesive markers and some use of language functions to indicate the different stages of the group discussion. He often used the phrase "I agree with you" (ARO) to indicate his stance. He was prompt with his responses, indicating a quick thinking mind. Moreover, the organization of his ideas was also evident from his group discussion performance. Afzal was also a team player as evidenced by his helping attitude by supplying vocabulary to discussants who got stuck mid-sentence. Nevertheless, he had a tendency of speaking fast. Also, perhaps

on account of his nervousness he gave all his points together in a single turn itself, instead of pacing them out across the discussion. He conceded his turn easily on being interrupted mid-turn. Often, perhaps on account of lack of a better word, he overused the cohesion marker "but" (ARO).

On being questioned about his non-verbal group discussion behaviour, Afzal specifically spoke about improving his eye contact among the various aspects of non-verbal communications which he wanted to make improvements in. He stated, "Overcome disabilities and have eye contact, improve my confidence level, developing my personality"(sic) (AW).He exhibited some use of gestures during the discussion. Furthermore, he looked at the participants making their points and tried to maintain eye contact when taking his turns. But, it was observed that often his gaze would turn towards the floor. He also exhibited a tendency to look straight at the camera during the discussion. This has been recorded by the researcher as well. "Looks straight into the camera. Looks away from other participants" (ARO). He indicated his agreement with others by nodding his head and was also courteous on being rebuked by the other discussants for his differing view point. This is evidenced by his response, "I agree with your point but,…".

Case 2- Nayomi

Nayomi was not very forthcoming with her responses regarding metacognitive strategy use during group discussions. She simply stated that while at the beginning she felt frightened, later on she felt "more normal" (NI). Moreover, on being explicitly asked about strategies, she simply talks about "mind mapping" (NI)and says "I'll understand the topic carefully, if any doubt, I'll ask immediately for clarity and then I will think about the topic given and gather some point in mind" (NI). She had some idea of identifying the best time for making use of only the strategy of 'self-monitoring' at the most appropriate stage of the group discussion (NQ). Her beliefs regarding strategies were partially reflected in her group discussion performance. She did not exhibit the use of many strategies. It can be inferred that at most she used some 'activating background knowledge' when providing general information about the internet rather than specific information about social media websites- which was the topic for the discussion. She said, "Like it also helps us in searching information" (NRO). This sometimes tended to take the topic away from the point of discussion. Even though she was taking a certain amount of thinking time before presenting her points, her responses were neither numerous nor adding to the discussion to a large extent.

Nayomi's verbal behavioral patterns during group discussions have been explained herewith. She took four turns and spoke for a total of 67 seconds. Her turns lasted between 33 seconds and 2 seconds talking time. Her average words per minute was 122. It was found that stating her opinion regarding the topic for discussion was of primary importance to her. Thereafter, listening to what the others had to say was necessary. Finally, being audible was important. She also wanted to give appropriate points during the discussion. In her performance her leadership skills came into the forefront as she initiated the discussion. She gave pertinent reasons in support of her arguments and was able to self-correct while the discussion was underway. On being asked to respond to a point, she readily came up with her opinion. Nayomi was in the habit of addressing individual members rather than the whole group during the

discussion. She was also forceful enough to continue her point in spite of being interrupted mid-turn. In spite of the apparent positive aspects of Nayomi's performance, she seemed to be very dominant as she was not only the initiator of the discussion, the moderator for the group, but also concluded the discussion. She was not very proactive in claiming turns for herself. Also, her turn started with the phrase "I disagree with the statement" (NRO) while initiating the discussion. She also exhibited the tendency of using "like" (NRO) as a filler.

Nayomi does not mention any non-verbal parameters whose use she would like to focus on during group discussions. She simply stated that the group discussion workshop "should enhance self-confidence" (NW). An observation of her group discussion performance revealed that she was able to use gestures to a certain extent. The note made by the researcher about this is "makes some use of gestures and the hands clasped together, fingers pointing forward resting on her knees, indicate a positive outlook towards the discussion" (NRO). She too looked straight into the camera while presenting her points and looked towards the floor when listening to others. Nayomi had a very rigid posture all through the discussion. This can be indicative of an attentive stance. She also made a slight movement on hearing another discussant making the same mistake- "hype instead of Skype" (NRO) which she had self-corrected earlier during the discussion. This shows her attentive nature. Nayomi also smiled from time to time on hearing the discussion points being made indicating a relaxed state of mind.

Case 3- Raj

At the very outset it is important to mention that Raj was uncomfortable speaking in English during the interview. Therefore, he was interviewed in Hindi. The interview was transcribed and then translated into English. The translation was cross checked with a native speaker of the language to maintain validity. Raj seemed to have numerous ideas about improving his group discussion performance. He mentioned reading, anticipating questions and finding answers to those, watching videos and observing to be important for preparing oneself for discussions. He said, "I will have to read lot of materials for practice. Anticipate questions and try to find answers to that. Watch some good GD on YouTube" (RI).He had some idea of using the strategy of 'self-monitoring', and 'selective attention' at the most appropriate stage of the group discussion (RQ). Unfortunately his group discussion performance did not reflect the use of any strategies whatsoever. He spoke only in response to what someone else had to say. His own points were almost absent. He made a move to speak only when another discussant was in the middle of his speech. Moreover, he did not exhibit any thinking- either out of the box or by analyzing and reasoning about the topic for discussion. He was in the habit of repeating the same point, "dress code is compulsory, must" (RRO) - without providing any supporting reasons.

An analysis of Raj's verbal behaviour during the group discussion suggests that he took nine turns and spoke for a total of 68 seconds. His longest turn lasted 36 seconds and the shortest was one second in duration. Nevertheless he took very long pauses during his turns. Consequently, his words per minute count was 80.He believed that thinking about the topic and planning how to counter argue would prove the most beneficial during group discussions. He said, "Just think of what I know about the subject. Think about how to counter argue for the other have discussed" (sic) (RI). In

his performance it was observed that while he started his point by acknowledging his agreement, he made a habit of reading aloud from his notes. Moreover, he lacked confidence since he readily fell silent in case of overlapping turns. He ended his argument during the discussion simply by stating "that's it" (RRO). Raj often relinquished his turn and stopped mid-sentence when unable to come up with the appropriate word. Consequently, his sentences were short. He was also unable to substantiate his points with supporting examples. Apart from one turn, all his turns were shorter than five seconds. His speech was ungrammatical, although, the other discussants seemed to be able to make sense of what he wanted to say. Furthermore, he does not exhibit a proactive nature and does not try to take a turn during a lull in the discussion. Raj's recurrent interruption while others were speaking makes him appear to have a decent amount of presence during the discussion, but in reality his contribution is negligible. He often took a turn to simply state "yes, I agree" (RRO), and then fell silent.

In his nonverbal behaviour during group discussions Raj specifically wanted to develop his body language and facial expressions in the course of a training programme on group discussions. He clearly stated, "How should be the body activity and facial expression during talking?" (sic) (RW). In his performance during the discussion it was observed that he looked at the floor for a majority of the discussion time. He sat hunched forward and the gestures which he was making were akin to confused at best. This is better known as jazz hands (adapted from dramatics).He was also very fidgety and often rubbed his face in a manner which was at times distracting for the other discussants. The slightest noise disturbed him. Towards the end of the discussion it was observed that he, "eagerly awaited getting off the stage" (RRO). This clearly indicated his uneasiness throughout the discussion period.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to identify participants' preexisting knowledge of metacognitive strategies, and the verbal and non-verbal parameters which are a marker of their group discussion performance. An analysis of the data suggests that with respect to the group discussion performance, Afzal was the most active and well balanced participant. He took the maximum turns. His duration of speech was the longest, and his words per minute count was also well balanced and falls within the normal conversational speech range. His dexterity is evidenced in both the verbal and non-verbal behaviours which he exhibited during the discussion. Furthermore, his understanding of strategies was better than Nayomi's and Raj's. The visuals which he described clearly developed out of using the strategies of 'activating background knowledge' and 'visualization'. He was also aware of this as evidenced by his responses during the interview. Therefore, Afzal was by far the best group discussant. Nayomi exhibited good communication skills and leadership abilities but her grasp of the topic desired more. Moreover, she had a tendency of dominating the discussion by dint of her speaking skills. Her awareness of the strategies was very limited as she presented some use of only 'activating background knowledge' during the discussion. A better understanding and subsequent use of the strategies could enhance her performance by improving her skills of group discussion. Raj was the least initiated group discussant. He struggled not only with the content but also with the language for expressing his opinion during the discussion. The recurrent use of the phrase "dress code is compulsory, must" (RRO) is indicative of his ability to use 'selective

attention' by borrowing it from the other discussants. Nevertheless, it must be stated that at this juncture he was unable to take the discussion forward by using it thereby, making only partial utilization of the strategy. Perhaps creating awareness about actually using the strategy would help to develop his group discussion performance.

The metacognitive strategies which the good group discussants- Afzal and Nayomi had prior knowledge of are 'activating background knowledge', 'visualization', and 'selective attention'. However, they did not make use of these consciously during the course of the discussion. Nevertheless, since all three discussants indicate a certain amount of use of the strategies it clearly indicates that awareness raising will go a long way in improving the group discussion skills of the participants across abilities. It is interesting to note that while the discussants had some idea of improving their performance by focusing on their body language, they were largely unaware of the benefits of developing their thinking skills for the betterment of their performance- although Afzal clearly stated that he would "use tricks to handle the situation" (AI). Therefore, it can be concurred that in keeping with the revised Bloom's taxonomy (cited in Huitt, 2011), at this stage the discussants were at the remembering stage of the metacognitive knowledge dimension by being able to list elements of personal learning style.

Conclusion

The results of this study have provided evidence that the participant who had the best preexisting subconscious notions about metacognitive strategies was also the one who had the best group discussion performance. Moreover, he exhibited use of the strategies to some extent during the discussion. Also, he was aware of his drawbacks and spoke at length about those. This is indicative of his ability to evaluate his performance. Since the findings of the study suggest that metacognitive strategies play an important role in helping the discussant to augment performance during group discussions, the English teacher aiming to teach group discussion skills ought to focus on these as well. Holec (1994), O'Malley and Chamot (1994), Wenden (1998), Oxford (2001), and others involved in training learners in the use of learning strategies suggest that metacognitive knowledge should be an integral part of language programmes. They maintain that students who learn to consciously monitor their own learning, and have a storehouse of strategies to use when learning becomes difficult, perform better than students who do not have such strategies. Consequently, an awareness raising programme on the different strategies which might prove beneficial for improving group discussion skills can be undertaken. This in turn will adhere to Oxford's (1990) idea when she states that, "Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence" (p.1). These will go a long way in enabling the discussants to engage better with the higher order thinking skills which are prerequisites for a good group discussion. She further elucidates the effectiveness of the metacognitive functions such as planning, evaluating, and arranging one's own learning among ESL learners. These can prove beneficial for a task like group discussion which can be sub-divided into the three stages of before discussion, during discussion, and after discussion for the convenience of the teaching-learning process. Some of the strategies which such an awareness raising programme can focus on includes, 'visualization', 'activating background knowledge', 'selective attention', 'self-evaluation', and, 'self-monitoring' among others.

Acknowledgement

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