The Role of Metacognitive Instruction in SLA

A Response to Kendon Kurzer's "Metacognition in the Common Core State Standards" (Vol. 2, No. 2, July 2015)

Ji-Yung Jung*
Farah Akbar
Jordan Gonzalez
Teachers College, Columbia University

Through a comprehensive analysis of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and related research (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011), Kurzer (2015) shares insightful information with readers that metacognition can have a facilitative role in the CCSS-focused classroom. By definition, metacognition is "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products . . . Metacognition refers, among other things, to active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes" (Flavell, 1976, p. 232). Accordingly, increased metacognition may help students become more aware of themselves as "agents" (Kurzer, 2015, p. 35), which can "ameliorate underlying problems such as alienation, fear of failure, and perceived lack of personal relevance" (McCombs, 2000, p. 379).

Kurzer (2015) notes that such benefit of metacognition appears to be essential in language learning. Furthermore, learners seem to benefit from metacognitive instruction (MCI), which aims at "self-regulated (or autonomous) learning" (Sato & Loewen, 2018, p. 510), whereby learners "set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition" (Pintrich, as cited in Sato & Loewen, 2018, p. 510). Research has suggested several pedagogical techniques that can be used effectively in MCI, two of which are: Students can be taught strategies explicitly—i.e., how to receive corrective feedback (e.g., Kuhn & Pease, 2010; Sato & Loewen, 2018)—or encouraged to conduct self-monitoring and self-efficacy analyses—i.e., keeping language-learning journals (e.g., Kurzer, Dewey, & Belnap, 2011; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

As Kurzer (2015) acknowledges, however, the decision on which type of MCI to use needs to be made carefully, because several learner-internal and learner-external variables can interact to influence its effect. By extending the scope of review to the literature on second language acquisition (SLA), the following discussion addresses five main variables:

First, the effect of MCI may vary with the different domains of language. Studies in this line of research, including Kurzer (2015), have examined listening (e.g., Cross, 2014; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012), reading (e.g., Donndelinger, 2005; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Karimi, 2015), and writing (e.g., Joseph, 2005; Teng & Zhang, 2016), but there has been only one study to date (Sato & Loewen, 2018) that explores the learning of grammar. According to the literature (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991), second language (L2) learners tend to have attenuated sensitivity to grammar, given that they process input primarily to construct meaning (VanPatten, 1996, 2004). Thus, increased metacognition through instruction could have a positive role in L2 grammar acquisition, but the exact relationship between these two variables needs to be established by empirical research.

Second, several researchers (e.g., Sorace, 2005; Spada & Tomita, 2010) posit that not all linguistic targets serve as equal candidates for instruction. Therefore, the impact of MCI on L2 grammar needs to be examined on a more granular level, not only for the variety of syntactic constructions, but also for morphological features that are considered as the "bottleneck" to L2 acquisition (Slabakova, 2013, p. 23).

Third, as it is defined above, metacognition comprises both the knowledge and the regulation of cognition (Brown, 1987; Kurzer, 2015; Sato & Loewen, 2018). As is commonly observed in L2 acquisition, it appears to be possible that learners may have unequal control over the two components of metacognition. For example, some learners may have intact knowledge of cognition, but lack the ability to regulate the knowledge in an efficient manner. in the same way, a specific type of MCI may not tap into both components. Thus, finer grained analyses are needed to see which component of metacognition the various types of MCI can affect.

Fourth, MCI by nature tends to accompany other language-focused instruction—i.e., that in many cases, MCI should be treated as a covariate. This indicates the importance of examining the effects of MCI in relation to those of other covariates involved in the L2 classroom. For example, Sato and Loewen (2018) compared the effects of explicit strategy instruction in combination with recasts versus prompts on the learning of L2 English morphemes. Consequently, the explicit MCI in this study may well have changed the implicit nature of recasts, resulting in a conflation of the effects of combining recasts and MCI.

The final variable to consider is learner characteristics, such as proficiency levels, age, aptitude, and preferred learning strategies. Bresnan (as cited in Ellis, 2002) asserts that L2 acquisition in the early stages is primarily a matter of extracting formulas and low-scope patterns from the input, because it is often "easier to look something up than to compute it" (p. 156). In a similar vein, it is generally acknowledged that adult L2 learners tend to be better at learning syntax than are children, as the former have developed a greater capacity for rule-based, categorical thinking (e.g., Hulstijn & De Graaff, 1994). In light of these claims, it is likely that adult learners, particularly those on the higher proficiency levels, could benefit more from MCI, but this is an empirical question that needs to be investigated with a thorough research design.

Such line of research can have important pedagogical implications. In reality, L2 learning for many learners occurs after the so-called critical period, after which the capacity for naturalistic learning tapers off drastically (Lenneberg, 1967). Consequently, what can be acquired implicitly appears to be "typically quite limited," without "additional resources of consciousness and explicit learning" (Ellis, 2008, p. 119). For this, research on MCI could provide a promising alternative for L2 instruction, contributing to narrowing the gap between L2 theory and practice.

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*Corresponding author: jj226@tc.columbia.edu