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## A LEARNING-TO-LEARN PROGRAMME. TO WHAT EXTENT DOES IT MOTIVATE THE VIETNAMESE STUDENTS IN LEARNING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

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### Abstract

In this paper, I will attempt to discuss the essential elements of promoting metacognitive knowledge and skills to learners of English. There will then be a proposal of a learning-to-learn programme for young learners of English who are from ten to twelve years old in a language school and discussion of the reasons and justification for the proposal.

**Key Words:** Learning-to-Learn, Cognitive, Metacognition, Thinking Skill.

### 1. Introduction

Over the last 25 years, there has been a growing interest in promoting learner training in ELT profession. Sinclair (2000a) and Benson (2001) have suggested that, in the prolonged and complex process of learning, besides lessons learned in the classroom, there are plenty more language sources outside the classroom the learner can select to learn and practise individually; therefore, it is advisable to promote learners' learning-to-learn in order to maximise their learning potential. They have also further asserted that learners who have knowledge and awareness of metacognition tend to be more motivated and persistent in learning, thus, be more successful in learning the language.

According to Rubin (1987), children have significant capacity of thinking skills, and it appears to be crucially important to develop these skills in early life for learning success. Yet, it seems that few language teachers and textbook writers are interested in providing learning-to-learn instructions to young learners of English, due to view that children lack the capacity of reflecting and expressing their own ideas.

### 2. Literature Review

As we have been entering the age of information technology with constantly changing society, there has been a growing call for lifelong learning. In English Language Teaching profession, the need to develop learners' capacity to be more responsible and independent in their learning has been addressed by a number of researchers and language educators (Benson and Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1992; Ellis, 1999; Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Little, 1991; Nunan, 1997; Sinclair, 2000b). These researchers have argued that providing learners with learning-to-learn instructions will likely to develop learners' control over learning and thus, promote learner motivation and potential success. The above argument has been empirically supported by the findings in Noels, Pelletier, Clements and Vallerand's study (2003) which shows that there has been a directly positive relationship between the teacher's support of learner control over learning and the learner's sense of self-determination and enjoyment which enhance the learner's persistence and efforts in the prolonged and complex process of L2 learning.

#### 2.1 Definition of Learning Training

Benson and Voller (1997) comment that though there is general agreement among researchers and language educators about promoting learners' independence and responsibility in learning, various

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interpretations about their meanings and applications remain. Oxford (1990) views learning-to-learn as skills which the learners can practise to be more independent and he introduces a number of strategies for language learning.

Yet, Sinclair (2000b) argues that though these learning strategies appear to be essential in teaching learners how to learn, promoting learners' control over their learning does not merely involve teaching learning strategies, but also includes promoting learners' reflection on various factors which influence their learning and desire to learn. Expressing a similar opinion, Esch (1997) expresses his concern about the reduction of learning-to-learn to a series of techniques due to the technical possibilities to access data and information from distance.

Holding an even stronger opinion, Breen and Mann (1997) state that learning-to-learn is 'not ability to that has to be learnt but a way of being that has to be discovered or rediscovered'. However, Benson and Voller (1997) note that learners on whom self-instructional modes are imposed without sufficient guides from teachers who tend to depend more on direction of the materials used.

Thus, Sinclair (2000a) expresses the important role of teachers and the necessity of explicit instruction in promoting learning-to-learn. He states that, in order to be able to be capable of making informed decision, learners may need provision of objective instructions and encouragement from teachers in their learning. Thus, Sinclair (2000a) proposes a teacher-directed approach, in which teachers become facilitators, and supporters who provide explicit and accessible information about how to learn so that learners can be able to discover and choose suitable learning strategies for their learning. According to Sinclair (2000a):

'Learners training aims to help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best and which appropriate to their learning context, so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning'.

(Sinclair, 2000a:66)

In this definition, he recognizes that various factors, such as attitude, motivation, individual differences and affective factors can affect the language learner's success; therefore, the purpose of learning training is to develop the learner's capacity to reflect on these factors and choose suitable learning strategies for them in their own social, cultural and political contexts of learning, in order to maximise their learning potentialities.

Sinclair (2000b) also suggests that experiment activities in a learning-to-learn programme can be one of the key features that help individuals discover and determine appropriate learning strategies for them. Similarly, Underhill (2006) suggests that the purpose of reflection is not only to review the process of learning but also to seek and change the ways of doing things towards better learning skills and knowledge.

## **2.2 The main aspects of learning-to-learn**

### **2.2.1. Learning strategies**

Wenden (1991) notes that three main aspects of learner training consist of learning strategies, metacognition, and learner attitude. Learning strategies can be seen as cognitive and metacognitive tools which learners use to learn and achieve their language learning goals (Rubin, 1987). Though often subdivided into cognitive and metacognitive strategies, the two types of learning strategies often overlap and are dependent on each other for their effectiveness (Livingston, 1997).

Cognitive strategies 'operates directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning' (O' Malley and Chamot, 1990:44). In other words, cognitive strategies are used to enhance a learner to reach a particular learning goal while metacognitive strategies are used to oversee the cognitive process and ensure this particular learning goal has been attained.

### **2.2.2. Metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies**

Metacognition, simply defined as 'thinking about thinking' (Livingston, 1997), has recently been recognized as one of the key factors influencing academic success. Research has shown that students who use metacognition in educational contexts tend to be engaged and learn more and be successful in learning

(Stipek, 2002). It has been widely recognized that metacognition consists of metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation and this can be seen as an extremely powerful feature that leads learners to be more self-determined and persistent in their learning (Dornyei, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1998).

Sinclair (2000a) defines four types of metacognitive knowledge in language learning: the knowledge of person, which is the learner's knowledge of how human beings learn in general, as well as the learner's awareness of her or his own learning styles and processes; the knowledge of task, which includes the nature of task and the type of processing required to complete the task; the knowledge of learning strategies, which include cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies; and the knowledge of learning context, which is the learner's awareness of his own social, cultural and political contexts of learning.

Metacognition regulation can be described as the reflective strategies of planning, controlling and evaluating learning activities (Sinclair, 2000a; Wenden, 1998). These reflective strategies have a critical role in learning success as Sinclair (2000b) suggests reflection on various factors, which influence their learning such as attitude, motivation, individual differences and affective factors, can develop the learner's awareness about their learning process in order to discover and choose learning styles which suit them best and thus, become better learners.

Addressing similar opinion, Benson (2001) states that reflection, with its individual and social dimensions can play a key role in the development of controlling over learning as it helps learners to evaluate and revise their work in order to gain awareness about their learning process and obtain the vision about their further learning.

### **2.2.3. Learner attitude**

It is believed that learner attitude toward the L2, his role in the learning process and his capacity to learn can be crucial factors in learning success (Wenden, 1998). Benson and Voller (1997) hold a view that the learner's sense of self and his stance towards the world and the learning tasks direct his determination of engagement in the learning process. A learner who has a strong attachment with the L2 tends to take more effort in the language learning. Self-efficacy theory also explains that learner's judgement about their ability to learn direct their decision in the task choice, effort and persistence in learning (Dornyei 2001a). Scharle and Szabo (2000) also suggest that as intrinsic motivation can drive the learner's effort to learn more, teachers should encourage motivation and self-confidence. Thus, it appears to be essential to develop learners' awareness of their motivation, potential capacity and academic values, in order to set achievable learning goals to pursue and reach the goals.

### **2.3. Developing learning-to-learn in young learners of English**

Unlike a common view that young learners lack capacity of metacognition, research has shown that children have considerable ability to think and make sense of what are around them (Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 2002; Ellis, 1999). Stipek (2002) comments that though young learners possess significant degree of capacity for metacognition, it appears that few learners are aware of this ability and those who use it tend to learn more and be more creative.

Similarly, Fisher (1990) suggests that it may be essential to encourage children to value their potential for thinking and teach them the principles of reasoning and use them as a tool for learning as these metacognitive skills and knowledge are crucial to their development. Furthermore, as language learning appears to be a prolonged learning process, it is sensible to promote young learners' awareness of their learning process and learning strategies to which they can use to learn the language effectively and achieve their learning goals.

### **3. Learning-to-learn Programme for Young Learners**

In this part of my paper, I will attempt to propose a learning-to-learn programme for young learners of English in a language school and discuss the issues related to the programme.

### **3.1 The teaching context and the rationale for devising the programme**

The students are young learners, aged from ten to twelve, who have learned English for about 250 hours and attended English classes at a pre-intermediate level of English. Their English classes are often on Sunday and Saturday. Most of them started to attend English class when they were nine or ten years old because of either the pressure of parents, who think that English is an essential language for their children's future or the curiosity aroused when seeing other friends attend English classes.

Thus, though these students are quite inquiring, they do not have so much confidence in their learning and their motivation appears to be considerably fragile. As a result, this learning-to-learn programme has been devised for these young learners, as it appears to be an appropriate time for them to reflect on their learning and develop their own learning styles as they have already had some experience in learning the language. Moreover, since these learners only attend the classes on Saturday and Sunday, it is essential to promote their learning independence so that they can actively seek opportunities to practise and learn the language outside the classroom.

### **3.2. The objective of the programme**

The aims of this programme are to develop the learner's capacity for thinking. It provides the learner with opportunities to think about themselves as learners, their process and progress in learning and their attitude towards the languages; thus, with the awareness of factors related to their learning, these learners may have a stronger attachment to the language and ability to set their own language goals to pursue and achieve the goals. The programme also provides information about key features in vocabulary and some vocabulary learning strategies to encourage the learner to choose learning strategies that are most suitable for them.

### **3.3. Teacher-guided and learner-decided approach**

Sinclair and Ellis (1992) suggest that in order to promote learner development, language learners, and particularly young learners, on one hand, really need clear guidance; on the other hand, need to be given freedom and space to choose their own learning strategies and styles. Thus, they suggest a teacher-guided and learner-decided approach in teaching learners how to learn English (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Sinclair, 1996). Based on the above approach, the programme has been carefully devised in simple English in order to provide explicit and persuasive information to the young learner. Furthermore, instructors may use Vietnamese in explanation about the complex issues to ensure the learner's comprehension and learning benefit.

A clear and enjoyable approach has also taken into account in devising reflective activities throughout the whole programme in order to lead the learner step by step to develop their ability to think and evaluate their learning progress in order to be more responsible and persistent in their learning.

During the programme there are activities devised to guide the learner how to evaluate their learning process and progress. The learner is encouraged to reflect and recognize their own learning process to motivate themselves rather than compare themselves with their friends.

### **3.4. The content of the programme**

Based on Ellis and Sinclair's framework for metacognitive strategies and knowledge in 'Learning to Learn English' (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989) and Dornyei's ideas of motivation and cooperation in learning (Dornyei, 2001a; Dornyei, 2005), the programme consists of two main stages with fourteen sessions, 50 minutes each and is integrated into a sixty-four-hour English course. The first stage contains activities to develop the learner's metacognitive skills and knowledge. The second stage introduces some cognitive strategies in learning vocabulary, as learning vocabulary appears to be an area to which these young learners to be keen on learning. Though, stages are divided, activities devised to develop metacognitive and cognitive strategies and knowledge are integrated throughout the sessions for effective instructions.

The first stage of the programme includes eight sessions as follows:

- Promoting learners' expectation of learning success
- Encouraging learners to set realistic goals for their learning
- Encouraging learners to reflect on themselves to discover their types of learners and learning styles which are appropriate to them

- Providing information to learners and promoting their abilities to organize their learning
- Promoting learners' awareness of the benefit of peer cooperation in learning
- Promoting learners' awareness of the importance of doing homework and exploring resources outside the classroom for their learning
- Promoting learners' awareness of motivational changes and encouraging learners to use self-motivation strategies in learning
- Providing tools and guidance for learners to develop ability to evaluate themselves in learning

#### **3.4.1. The learner's expectation and goals**

According to Dornyei (2001a), research on expectancy of success has shown that learners do things best if they believe they can succeed. Yet, he comments that in order to be successful, this expectation of success needs to be intertwined with positive values, as learners, even with expectation of success, may not be engaged in learning tasks if they do not value the outcomes. Thus, the first and the second sessions of this programme focus on encouraging learners to think about the language they are learning, how essential it is for them and the expectation of success they have towards the outcomes in order to set realistic goals in their learning and work hard to achieve the goals.

#### **3.4.2. The learner's motivation and strategies to motivate themselves**

Motivation has been seen as one of the key features influencing learning perseverance. Yet, it appears that learners' motivation is affected by various factors and it changes from time to time (Dornyei, 2001a, 2001b, 2005). Thus, Sinclair (2006) suggests that it is sensible to help learners be aware of this changing fact and keep record of their motivation in order to find good strategies to keep themselves motivated in the complex process of learning the language. The session seven of the programme contains activities to encourage learners to reflect on their motivational processes and provide strategies to motivate themselves in order to overcome difficulties in the prolonged process of learning.

#### **3.4.3. Language knowledge and strategies in learning vocabulary**

Stage two, with six sessions, focuses on vocabulary features and strategies to remember vocabulary as follows:

- The learner's attitude about learning vocabulary
- Important features in vocabulary
- Word association and vocabulary learning strategies
- Lexical phrases and expressions, their importance in vocabulary competence and strategies to learn these features
- Learners' reflection on their styles of learning vocabulary
- Learners' reflection of the whole course

The second stage starts with reflective activities, encouraging learners to think about their attitude towards vocabulary learning and their experience in learning vocabulary (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989). In the following sessions, learners are learning vocabulary. There are also experimental activities and project-work in each session so that the learners can try to work on some strategies and discover the most suitable strategies for themselves (Sinclair, 2000b). In session five, the learners are given opportunities to reflect on strategies and knowledge about vocabulary they have learned and evaluate which strategies may be best suitable for them so that they can refer on in their learning.

Research show that there appears to be positive relation between the ability of self-assessment and self-determination, a key factor which leads to learning persistence and success (Dornyei 2001a, Noels, Pelletier, Clement and Vallerand, 2003). In the last session, learners are guided to reflect and evaluate the whole course, the benefit and progress they gain during the course and their retrospective vision about learning in order to set a new goal for their future learning.

#### **Conclusion**

The purpose of rapid changing world and the complexity of information society, with the unstoppable growth of knowledge, lead to the call for life-long learning in general. In ELT profession, the importance of promoting learning-to-learn has been widely recognized among language educators, as research

in language learning has shown that learning-to-learn helps develop learners' responsibility and independence in learning and thus, can be successful learners.

It is my belief that it is essential to teach learning-to-learn to young learners of English as it promotes their capacity for thinking and choosing what they need to learn and what they can do to achieve their learning. These skills and knowledge prove to be crucial to develop their self-determination and persistence in the complex process of language learning.

The programme has been carefully devised to encourage the learner to take more responsibility and to provide them with more freedom in making decision about their learning. Yet, my remaining concern is that it can be very challenging for teachers to change our relationship and attitude towards our learners, which appears to be one of the key factors promoting learners' responsibility in learning. It is my belief that it is necessary for teachers to 'let go' and let learners make their own decision in their learning in order to encourage them to take control over their learning and be successful learners.

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