Chapter 23
Metacognitive Knowledge and Language Learning in a Web-Based Distance Learning Context:
The Case of Adult EFL Learners in China

Naiyi Xie Fincham
University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, USA

Guofang Li
University of British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter reported on the construction and development of the metacognitive knowledge (MCK) about web-based distance language learning of two adult English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in China. Drawing upon theories and research in metacognition, self-regulated second/foreign language learning, and distance language learning, the authors investigated adult Chinese EFL learners' knowledge about themselves as online distance language learners, the nature and demands of online distance English learning, and how to best approach their learning in this program. They identified changes in these learners' MCK over the 16 week semester and discussed how a number of contextual factors, including the pre-determined learning structure, teacher-led instructional sessions, and peer interaction opportunities, were significant in shaping and influencing learners' adjustments and revisions of their MCK about online distance language learning. Findings from this study have important implications for the design and implementation of web-based distance language programs for adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development and integration of new media and digital technologies in second/foreign language (L2) education, technology now constitutes an important role in the ecology of learning (Lai, 2013). Not only has traditional L2 learning context been supplemented with increasing online/distance learning components, but there has also been growing demand for and availability of web-based distance education (Kostina, 2011). These technology-mediated learning environments are conducive to language learning by combining various tools with specific curricular aspects and allowing learners to choose the tools and activities that suit their learning styles and objectives (Stickler & Hampel, 2010). However, it is argued that the effectiveness of these learning environments can only be achieved if students deploy necessary metacognitive and self-regulatory processes (Azevedo, 2005). One prerequisite to effective self-regulated learning is to have an appropriate metacognitive knowledge (MCK) base – knowledge about themselves as learners, the learning task, and appropriate strategies, upon which students draw as they monitor and manage their learning (Flavell, 1979). Wenden (1998) is one of the first L2 researchers to apply Flavell's framework of MCK to language learning, and she stressed that MCK was a "neglected variable" that warranted close attention from L2 researchers and practitioners (Wenden, 2001). Since then, there has been a growing body of literature that reveal the crucial role of MCK in language learning (e.g., Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Goh, 1997; He, 2011; Kasper, 1997; Ruan, 2005; Victori, 1999; L. J. Zhang, 2010). As Chamot and O'Malley (1994) suggest:

metacognition . . . may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of individuals' attempts to learn another language and . . . explicit metacognitive knowledge about task characteristics and appropriate strategies for task solution is a major determiner of language learning effectiveness. (p. 372)

The key role of L2 learners' MCK in guiding and informing their language learning is even more salient in the distance learning context. In recent decades, China has been fast expanding its distance language programs, as increasing numbers of mature students are keen to pursue continuing education to upgrade their skills (China Central Radio and TV University [CCRTVU], 2010). Meanwhile, China's distance language programs have been undergoing reforms toward a more student-centered approach, where learners are granted more control and autonomy during the learning process to pursue personal goals regarding their English proficiency (Zhao, Chen, & Panda, 2014). However, studies show that many Chinese distance English learners have difficulty effectively adapting to and managing their distance language learning, especially at the initial phase (Chen, 2003; Hong & Jung, 2011; Jiang, Wei, & En, 2003). In particular, researchers identified low level of autonomy among novice Chinese distance language learners, citing that overall, they "could not apply their self-regulated abilities skillfully and especially lacked strategies of metacognitive monitoring", and "they were not used to rethinking or evaluating the rationality of their planning" (Zhao, et al., 2014, p. 951). Many argue that the age-old classroom-based and teacher-dependent learning culture in China has cast significant impact on students' lack of readiness for self-regulated learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Xiao & Hurd, 2007; Zhao, et al., 2014). However, others are critical about the extent to which traditional Chinese heritage culture impacts Chinese students' learning attitudes and behavior, arguing that situational factors within the immediate institutional context can better explain the differences and similarities in learners' attitudes and skills of self-directed language learning (e.g., Gan, 2009). Further, there is also evidence that as Chinese learners gain more experience with distance learning, they are able to develop new knowledge and skills of how to learn

Related Content

Information Security Risk Analysis: A Pedagogic Model Based on a Teaching Hospital
Sanjay Goeland Damira Pon (2006). *Tools for Teaching Computer Networking and Hardware Concepts (pp. 179-200).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/information-security-risk-analysis/30429

Design Agency: Diversifying Computer Science at the Intersections of Creativity and Culture
Audrey Bennett, Ron Eglash, Michael Lachneyand William Babbitt (2016). *Revolutionizing Education through Web-Based Instruction (pp. 35-56).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/design-agency/146932

Social Networking Theories and Tools to Support Connectivist Learning Activities
M. C. Pettenatiand M. E. Cigognini (2007). *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies (pp. 42-60).*
www.irma-international.org/article/social-networking-theories-tools-support/2987

One School/Two Campuses: A Socio-Technical Approach for Building the Distributed Classroom
Anne-Laure Fayard (2006). *Teaching and Learning with Virtual Teams (pp. 194-220).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/one-school-two-campuses/30062

Evaluation Method of Higher Education Teaching Reform Based on Deep Learning Analysis Technology
Taolin Zhang, Shuwen Jiaand Charoula Angeli (2024). *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/evaluation-method-of-higher-education-teaching-reform-based-on-deep-learning-analysis-technology/337604