Title	Developing Young Learners' Metacognitive Awareness for Speaking
Author(s)	Robbie Lee Sabnani, and Christine C.M. Goh

Developing Young Learners' Metacognitive Awareness for Speaking

<u>Introduction</u>

Speaking is pivotal to one's overall language acquisition. Learning to speak well in English is more than just attention to pronunciation and delivery. It also requires a good grasp of knowledge, skills and strategies. The real-time nature of speaking demands prompt responses and poses many challenges for language learners, especially children. Having to answer clearly and quickly can be particularly daunting for primary school students because of their limited linguistic repertoires.

Speaking instruction in many English language classrooms often includes communicative activities and pronunciation drills. While such activities present opportunities for practice, they do not directly help students in thinking about how they are learning to speak the language. Teachers therefore need to adopt an approach that can help young learners develop their speaking proficiency in a holistic manner. This is imperative as a strong oral command builds their linguistic foundations and to this end, enables their thoughtful participation in discussions to hone their academic mastery (Newton, 2018).

Such an approach would have teachers provide students with opportunities to learn about content and the language. It also offers scaffolding on planning and evaluating speaking that can help chart their overall progress. The support may be gradually withdrawn as students gain confidence and are able to structure their utterances, moving from being *other regulated* to *self-regulated* (Thornbury, 2005). This, however, will require some time, and so teachers would need to be mindful of the need to provide experiences where students feel supported as they learn to speak in a second language.

Making learners aware of the elements and processes in speaking heightens their *metacognition*, that is, thinking about their learning. In this connection, Walsh and Sattes (2015) highlight the value in eliciting students' thoughts on issues and actively engaging them in communication to enrich their capacities for meaning-making.

Teachers' guidance helps them study the requirements of their tasks, identify appropriate strategies and leverage their personal factors to manage their speaking. This is a form of direct instruction that helps make the learning of speaking visible, which was seen in the study being reported here.

This paper describes how some primary school English teachers enriched their students' personal, task and strategy knowledge for speaking. Analysis of data from classroom observations reveals the teachers' actions to hone students' introspective awareness to plan, monitor and evaluate their utterances to raise the quality of their presentations and interactions. As the learners studied the organisation of their ideas and manner of articulation, they were encouraged to think deeply about how best they could convey meaning to their listeners.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Existing Research

Metacognition

Metacognition, postulated by Flavell (1979), concerns the knowledge and control of a person's cognitive processes. In bringing mental actions under close inspection, one is able to orchestrate thinking to accomplish intended outcomes. Metacognitive knowledge dimensions include person, task and strategic knowledge. The considerations for heightening the three domains for speaking are situated in Goh & Burns' (2012) teaching speaking framework and explained below:

- Person knowledge involves a deep understanding of one's unique factors and how they affect learning, so as to contend with areas that may hamper progress. In the context of speaking, enhanced cognizance can help learners identify effective ways of conveying messages.

- Task knowledge refers to knowledge about what the assignment entails, and the effort required of the learner to achieve the desired result. For speaking, this necessitates a good grasp of the outcomes, to effectively plan for language and content to get messages across clearly.

- Strategy knowledge taps learners' repertoires of actions to raise their learning quality. In oral interactions, this knowledge helps learners address challenges before, during and after the delivery of the messages to ensure that meaning is well received.

Metacognitive awareness has been noted to improve learners' knowledge of language and approaches (Wenden, 1991) to contemplate the bases for their actions as they embark on tasks. Learners' heightened awareness enables them to transfer new strategies to a range of tasks and in so doing, increase their language learning capabilities (Griffiths, 2018). In the area of speaking, language learning strategies facilitate students in interrogating their grasp of content and language. As they examine *who* they are as learners, they think carefully about *what* they know and *how* they are going to bridge gaps to consolidate their understanding. This nuanced appreciation helps them strategize to achieve their goals.

Despite the significance of metacognition, its value for the development of young learners' competence has however been less explored in the literature. One of the more well-cited studies on metacognition in primary school students is that of Goh and Taib (2006). Ten students participated in the study which included eight specially designed listening lessons. Through listening tasks, post listening reflections and discussions, students reported on aspects of metacognitive knowledge that influenced their listening outcomes and their use of strategies to attend to comprehension difficulties.

The students improved in their listening scores after being guided on the requirements of each task and strategies they could use to complete them successfully. In their reflections, they were directed to think about areas where they had done well as well as those that were less effective. The teacher-facilitated discussion played an important part in helping them connect their metacognitive knowledge about listening to future performance.

The study supported theories that children begin developing metacognitive awareness as early as the primary school years (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993). It suggested that young students could benefit from scaffolding to enact their metacognitive knowledge to attend to learning challenges. This study on listening informed our present study on speaking in that the teachers' role is seen as important in helping young learners examine the demands of speaking.

Scaffolding could take the form of modelling, where teachers verbalise their own thinking in addressing constraints to show learners how to introspect. Killen (2016) describes teacher scaffolding to facilitate students in refining and articulating their ideas through discussion and inquiry. In scrutinizing their thinking, students can better understand their own processes for learning and acquiring knowledge. This can be followed up by teachers enacting the use of strategies to demonstrate how they could realise their intended outcomes for speaking.

The value of metacognitive reflection has also been underscored by Branigan & Donaldson (2020). They highlight the importance of helping children to think about the information presented in classroom lessons and reflect on their learning, even at an early stage of development as young primary school students. Teacher support helps them clarify complexities and in a controlled context, put into action the strategies taught. This builds students' confidence and motivates them to participate in the interaction fairly quickly.

In spite of this, the focus for speaking instruction in many classrooms still tends to be on training students to meet test requirements. The emphasis appears to be largely on the final product of speaking such as presentations for example, and less so on the acquisition of communication skills (Baker, 2014). Little is yet known about how teachers routinely engage learners during lessons in ways that may contribute to their metacognition for speaking. This paper accordingly seeks to address this gap in knowledge by examining how some experienced teachers approach speaking instruction and in which ways they explicitly raised learners' metacognitive awareness to make visible the intricate processes involved in enhancing oral competence.

The Study

Research Framework

The study examines three teachers' practices in their English language classes to develop young learners' metacognition for speaking. Specifically, it focuses on the specific input provided by the teachers and the actions carried out to deepen the metacognitive knowledge of their students. We aimed to answer the question: How do teachers provide scaffolding to develop learners' metacognition for speaking? This was further examined in three domains of metacognitive knowledge: person knowledge, task knowledge and strategy knowledge.

Data collection and analysis

The data came from lesson observations of a larger study of three teachers collected over two semesters from two co-educational primary schools in Singapore. The students comprised two classes of 40 Primary 4 students aged ten years old, and one class of 40 Primary 5 students aged eleven years old. Two teachers were from one school and the third from the

second school. The qualified English teachers each had more than 10 years of experience teaching young learners. They were recommended by their schools for their instructional skills. All lessons were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The observations showed the teachers' practices and revealed the pedagogical principles underlying their actions.

Results and Discussion

Developing person knowledge

The teachers in this study demonstrated a strong appreciation of the psychological factors for speaking. They heightened students' *person knowledge* (the "who" of speaking) by focusing on their strengths as well as areas for improvement. They also acknowledged students' challenges in responding in real-time and with large groups. They took concrete steps to address the children's fears, by putting in effort to reduce the anxiety experienced in the classrooms. For example, they encouraged students to share their thoughts and frequently assured them that it was fine to make mistakes in their language or delivery. These concerted actions saw the creation of highly conducive environments to promote classroom talk.

Excerpt 1 illustrates how 'thinking time' avenues were opened up for students to recognise their issues in managing stress and focus their attention on speaking. To assist students in bringing to the fore their personal knowledge and actively work on alleviating their anxieties, the teachers put in place structures for more confident students to automatically offer responses to keep classroom conversations going smoothly when they observed their peers at a loss for words. On other occasions, students exhibiting signs of stress were guided to organise their ideas using appropriate grammar and vocabulary and requested to re-join the interactions when they were ready.

Excerpt 1:
 S   *((S begins to share on the article he has read. He hesitates and appears to be having difficulties.))*
 T   *Give him some time. ((T asks questions to help S with his sharing of the article.))*
 T   *((After ascertaining that the S has calmed down and is ready to share)) All right, I think he is (ready). All look at me.*
 S   *((The rest of the Ss turn to look at T; S in question still appears to be having difficulties in speaking.))*
 T   *[…] Now I think it's a little stressful for ((T calls S's name)), because he is under a lot of pressure, and he has to speak. ((T requests Ss' patience.))*

The supportive structures established by the teachers were helpful in allaying students' concerns about articulating their thoughts with all their classmates. The encouragement by the teacher - well situated in the warm welcoming environment created in class - made the process of speaking less onerous, resulting in more students volunteering their ideas.

Developing task knowledge

The teachers heightened students' *task knowledge* (the "what" of speaking) by supervising the planning of content, language and discourse structuring. This helped learners envision the task requirements and effort required to deliver messages and respond appropriately.

In Excerpt 2, the teacher reiterated to her students the importance of substantiating their views about purchasing a robotic vacuum cleaner with strong reasons. She guided them on vocabulary choices and the organisation of ideas so that their utterances would be coherent, and convincing to their listeners.

Excerpt 2:
T   *((Shows students a picture of a robotic cleaner.)) Would you be interested to buy this robotic vacuum cleaner?*
S   *((Students volunteer responses. One student says she wants to buy it. Another student agrees.))*
T   *So, you are giving your personal experience, from what you have observed at home, and have used appropriate words to elaborate on the reasons. Anyone else wants to say why you want to buy it? What about not wanting to buy it?*
T   *((T responds to a student's comment about the robot being expensive and how it may not be useful if it gets rusty.)) I'm triggered to think of these three words, if you can read my mind - when something is expensive, but not really made use of. It is a ... an elephant?*
S   *((Students respond)): A white elephant.*
T   *Yes, a white elephant is an object that is very expensive. Let's say you buy a grand piano, but only for the first month you practice playing, but after that, it's not used. Now this is a good phrase that you can use to make this point. You can take it down.*

It is noteworthy that the teachers used authentic utterances from students' daily lives to help them link the new information imparted with that in their schemas, just as the teacher had connected the term "white elephant" with their understanding of an expensive item that is not being put to use. This approach of helping learners make associations with their own home and school happenings served to motivate even the more reluctant class members to practice their speaking, as they were more comfortable giving responses related to their prior experience.

The teachers' approach of using oral English texts and foregrounding its salient features for communication contrasts with other classroom practices of modelling speech on the grammar of written discourse, which Burns and Joyce (1997) argue is not ideal. The use of naturally occurring talk to teach speaking enables learners to review their own knowledge and use it for fruitful discussions. It was observed that the students' appreciation of the various processes involved, as well as the socio-cultural differences of listeners, made them more attentive to the nuances of talk.

Developing strategy knowledge

To raise the level of classroom discussions, the teachers honed students' *strategy knowledge* (the "how" of speaking) or understanding of approaches for successful oral communication. Specifically, they provided guidance on the clarity of verbal responses, pronunciation and use of voice qualities.

Excerpt 3 depicts how students' awareness was raised in analysing the descriptors for fluency and accuracy in articulation to enhance their speaking effectiveness.

Excerpt 3:
  T   *((Elicits students' assessment of their own and peers' speaking against a list of grade descriptors and marks for speaking. She then goes through the verbal and non-verbal aspects, to explain to students how they could move to the higher bands.))* How many of you remember that lesson a few days ago? You had your best speaker reading a passage aloud. And we evaluated their performance and saw how many marks they would get?
  S   *((Some answer verbally, others raise their hands.))*
  T   *((T unpacks the grade descriptors systematically and elicits from students how well they scored in the areas of clarity of expression, accurate pronunciation, and use of pace, rhythm and intonation to convey meaning effectively.))*
  T   Now after that, how many of you are more aware of what it takes to get full marks?

The teachers widened the students' repertoires before, during and after the delivery of utterances to ensure that their ideas had been well conveyed. Strengthening learners' awareness of the features of spoken interactions helped to build their knowledge to manage discourse and eliminate ineffective ways of speaking.

Through their innovative use of technology, the teachers deepened learners' knowledge of monitoring and assessing their speaking. For example, students were asked to analyse the rubrics for a speaking task on WhatsApp. They were then instructed to enlist the collaboration features of WhatsApp to peer share and review recordings of their speaking before sending their audio files for evaluation. Students' familiarity with the platform, coupled with the interesting and enjoyable nature of the assignment, dispelled their fears. This is possibly because they did not regard the activity as a task, but rather, as an extension of their routine practice in using the social media app for communication. This novel mode also gave them the flexibility of recording their voices at their own convenience and as many times as they wished, until they were satisfied with the version to be graded. Scaffolding prompts sent by the teacher through the app helped learners inspect their word choices, correct their pronunciation, and improve their delivery.

The teachers' actions to make lessons fun for their students by skilfully tapping the affordances of technology are in alignment with Becker and Roos' (2016) approach to involve young children in creative activities to sustain their interest and motivate them to engage in speaking. Furthermore, this approach affords students the comfort of contending with their speaking difficulties subtly, and in a safe space, to make them more inclined to attempt the task.

Summary of the teachers' practices to develop person, task and strategy knowledge

Collectively, the teachers' practices illuminate their view of young students as mature individuals well placed to take charge of their own development as successful learners of English. They strengthened the students' abilities to leverage their personal factors, examine demands as well as learn about effective strategies to manage their speaking. The teachers' care, concern and expert guidance facilitated the students' integration of person, task, and strategy knowledge to promote *automation*, which Thornbury (2005) puts forth as a manifestation of one's abilities to intuitively call upon linguistic devices speak well.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

This study demonstrated the central role that teachers play by providing explicit guidance to students to improve the quality and articulation of their ideas. It has emphasized the importance of teachers' actions in their English language classes to nurture their young learners' self-regulation of speaking. Moreover, it illustrates how even children at the primary school level can be led to achieve independence and fluency.

The teachers equipped their students to plan for speaking and identify ways of communicating clearly. Sabnani and Goh (2020) extol the benefits of engaging young learners in critical reflections to help them take stock of their knowledge and skills. For example, by considering how they can tap favourable prior experiences and adapt approaches that had worked well before to convey messages coherently. Students' awareness of their own learning processes, task requirements as well as effective strategies enhances meaning-making.

The findings also present several implications for professional development, classroom instruction and research:

Professional development can focus on honing teacher expertise in metacognition for speaking. Building on primary students' home and school experiences facilitates them in thinking deeply about their learning. Situating instruction in activities closely mirroring authentic interactions allows the creation of contexts that they could emulate. In this vein, engaging young learners in tasks patterned against their daily encounters presents a myriad of opportunities for practice. In fact, McCarthy and Carter (2014) recommend such scaffolded learning experiences to build children's confidence and assist them in constructing utterances.

Teachers' explicit instruction can enrich young learners' understanding of person, task, and strategy knowledge. Deepening students' self-awareness of the factors for speaking positions them to communicate effectively. Sabnani & Renandya (2019) suggest that input on language and content could alleviate the affective and cognitive demands on learners to plan and convey their ideas. In this regard, providing vivid vocabulary and prefabricated chunks for students to speak on their given topics allows them to draw from a repository they have co-created with their teachers and peers, to be able to participate in interactions right away, rather than be limited by their own language banks.

Despite this study's relatively small scope, it depicts the value of incorporating a metacognitive dimension into instruction. The findings substantiate the argument that students are indeed important contributors to their language mastery and can play a significant role in their oral development, even at very young ages. Examination of more classroom-derived data can throw light on metacognitive instruction anchored in teachers' authentic practices. Consequently, further research could explicate the detailed processes involved in young learners' engagement with input and scaffolding and how these aspects improve their English-speaking skills.

Word Count: 3634 (including references)

References

Baker, A. (2014). Exploring teachers' knowledge of second language pronunciation techniques: Teachers' cognitions, observed classroom practices, and student perceptions. *TESOL Quarterly, 48*(1): 136-163.

Becker, C., & Roos, J. (2016). An approach to creative speaking activities in the young learners' classroom. *Education Inquiry*, *7*(1): 9-26.

Branigan, H. E., & Donaldson, D. I. (2020). Teachers matter for metacognition: Facilitating metacognition in the primary school through teacher-pupil interactions. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, *38*: 1-14.

Burns, A. & H. Joyce. (1997). *Focus on Speaking*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive development inquiry. *American Psychologist, 34*(10), 906-911.

Flavell, J. H., Miller, P. H., & Miller, S. A. (1993). Cognitive development (3rd ed.). Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Goh, C., & A. Burns. (2012). *Teaching speaking: A holistic approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Goh, C., & Y. Taib. (2006). Metacognitive instruction in listening for young learners. *ELT journal*, *60*(3), 222-232.

Griffiths, C. (2018). *The strategy factor in successful language learning: The Tornado Effect* (2nd ed). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Killen, R. (2016). Effective teaching strategies: Lessons from research and practice (7th ed.). Melbourne: Cenage Learning Australia.

McCarthy, M., & R. Carter. (2014). *Language as discourse: Perspectives for language teaching*. London: Routledge.

Newton, J. M. (2018). Introduction to Speaking. In Newton, J., Ferris, D., Goh, C. Grabe, W., Stoller, F., and Vandergrift, L. (Eds.) Griffith, C., Tajeddin, Z. & Brown, A. (Eds.). *Teaching English to Second Language Learners in Academic Contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Sabnani, R. L. & Goh, C. C. M. (2020). Speaking and Good Language Teachers. In Griffith, C., Tajeddin, Z. & Brown, A. (Eds.). *Lessons from Good Language Teachers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sabnani, R. L. & Renandya, W. A. (2019). A comprehensive approach to developing L2 speaking competence. *English Language Teaching and Research, 1*(1), 16-25.

Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking*. Harlow, England: Longman.

Wenden, A.L. (1991) *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Walsh, J. A. & Sattes, B. D. (2015). *Questioning for classroom discussion: Purposeful speaking, engaged listening, deep thinking*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.