

Metacognition in Enhancing Students' Writing Skills

Les Stratégies D'écritures a Travers L'enseignement Metacognitif

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ABSTRACT:

This study tends to find appropriate solutions to promote writing strategies. Students output is still poor though writing play a determinant role in learning, A tentative answer to the research question that concerns reasons behind the poor production of students is their lack of using metacognitive strategies and inability to learn how to learn. This work aims at testing the use of metacognitive strategies in learning for the sake of developing the quality of students' written product. Two data collection tools are used, the interview for teachers of written expression and the diary for second year English students at Relizane University.

keywords; metacognitive strategies; writing; strategies.

RÉSUMÉ

Le but vital de ce travail est d'attirer l'attention des étudiants et enseignants vers la métacognition et d'encourager la production écrite des étudiants. Cette étude tend à trouver les solutions appropriées pour promouvoir les stratégies de l'écriture. Les résultats des étudiants sont encore insuffisants à travers la production écrite qui joue un rôle déterminant dans l'enseignement ; les résultats étant encore insuffisants. Une tentative de réponse à la question de recherche concerne les raisons de la pauvreté de la production écrite des étudiants, le manque d'utilisation des stratégies métacognitives, et leur inhabilité à comprendre comment comprendre. Cela développe leur réflexion critique dans l'apprentissage pour développer la qualité de leur production écrite.

Mots clés : métacognition; production écrite; stratégies.

1. Introduction:

EFL students lack the use of metacognitive strategies that develop their reflective and critical thinking in learning. The gap is still huge when it comes to their output, most of students do not have a clear strategy for conducting a learning task either in speaking or in writing and they do not know exactly how to learn effectively.

This research aims at achieving a number of objectives. First and for most, it aims to understand the mechanism of the brain and how it functions. Then, raising both, teachers' awareness as well as students' awareness about metacognition and its role in teaching-learning process. Another purpose is to enable learners to become strategic and think about their own thinking process and opening new doors by providing EFL learners with a list of appropriate language learning strategies in general, and metacognitive strategies in particular to write their essays. This study aims at testing the use of metacognitive strategies in learning to enhance the quality of students' written product. Two data tools are used to collect data. The First data tool is interviewing teachers of written expression at Ahmed Zabana University – Relizane. Those teachers are chosen for the sake of clarifying from their teaching experience a number of issues raised in teaching writing. While the second tool is the diary of twenty students from second year English class.

2. Metacognition

2.1 Definition and Components

According to Oxford Dictionary refers to “*the awareness and the understanding of one's own thought processes*”. In another words its is a higher-order thinking that enables understanding, analysis, and control of one's cognitive processes, especially when engaged in learning. Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology (2009), the 1st edition, provides more details about metacognition explaining that it refers mainly to “*the awareness of or knowledge about one's own thought processes and knowledge which allows conscious changes in mental strategy toward solving problems and understanding new things*” (p., 307). Oxford Reference¹ online holds that metacognition can be also applied to regulation of cognitive functions, including planning, checking, or monitoring. Writings on metacognition can be traced back at least as far as De Anima and the Parva Naturalia of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC), and the phenomenon was brought to prominence during the 1970s largely by the US psychologist Flavell who focused his attention especially on the developmental aspects of metacognition. A simple definition may holds that metacognition is the ability to self-monitor one's own thinking. The integration of metacognition into this research field stems from the work of cognitive psychologist around the relationship between thinking and learning.

“It is at least conceivable that the ideas currently brewing in this area could someday be parlayed into a method of teaching children (and adults) to make wise and thoughtful life decisions as well as to comprehend and learn better in formal educational settings” (Flavell, 1979, p. 910). Flavell, was expecting a spreading interest among psychologists and educators in the concept of “metacognition” within the last several years.

The theory of metacognition was first introduced by Flavell in the early 1970s. Flavell (1976) defined metacognition as, “*... one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them...*” (p.232). Metacognition also includes “*the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes in relation to the cognitive objects or data on which they bear, usually in the service of some concrete goal or objective*” (Flavell, 1976, p.232). Simply speaking, metacognition is often defined as “*thinking about thinking*”. Although one is able to reflect on his own cognitive experiences, there is still much debate over exactly what metacognition is. One reason for this confusion is the fact that there are several terms interchangeably used to describe the same basic phenomenon (e.g., self-regulation, executive control), or an aspect of that phenomenon (e.g., meta-memory). In other words people have knowledge about their cognitive processes and the use of this knowledge to choose the most appropriate strategy for, or dealing with solving-problem strategies. The particular problem could be as simple as remembering a

¹ <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100152784>

telephone number or as complex as writing a research report. Regardless of what the task is, as people progress, they monitor and regulate their activities. For example, when writing a research report, they need to know about a number of very complex skills (e.g., extracting important information from a variety of sources, integrating and evaluating findings, and revising the required written document). Flavell (1978) offered the example of how metacognition interacts with cognition by describing when people have a metacognitive experience while reading something seems unclear or vague, so they make a cognitive action which is reviewing and checking again; then they sense another metacognitive experience when it still confusing and improper, when people set a goal to accomplish and they start by a simple cognitive action which is skimming parts of it to know some initial knowledge about what is coming next, this is also referred to as another metacognitive experience.

Briefly, metacognitive processes refer to the control processes that guide our cognitive processes and lead to effective use of cognitive strategies. Though the concept of metacognition is relatively “new”, it can be viewed within much the same framework as the model of cognitive processing proposed by many more traditional information-processing theorists. For example, Miller, Galanter and Pribram (1960) argued that behaviour is guided by the information of “plans” (i.e., a hierarchy of instructions that controls the order in which a sequence of operations is performed). The mature individual has many more plans available than the one being performed and is capable of rapid alternation between plans. The individual also has images (i.e., accumulated, organised knowledge about self and world) that are used to select a fitting plan. Miller and his colleagues suggested that learning only occurs when the person has some kind of a plan. Furthermore, a plan will not be achieved *“without intent to learn, that is to say, without executing a metaplan for constructing a plan that will guide recall”* (p.129). It is those metaplans, then, that produce alternative plans.

2.2 Metacognitive Strategies

Derry (1986), regarded learning strategies as *“a collection of cognitive or mental tactics that are used by an individual in a particular learning situation to facilitate learning”* (p.1). Strategies have been described in different categories, however, most involved ones are cognitive, metacognitive, resource management or social-affective strategies. The cognitive category for example covers strategies concerning the retrieving, encoding, understanding and storing of information. While the metacognitive category includes activities like planning, regulating, monitoring and adjusting cognitive processes, as Wenden (1991) stated *“the metacognitive, self-management, self-regulation or self-direction strategies are those by which learners oversee and manage their own learning”*, (p.25), and regarding resource management category which is a collection of strategies that involve the control of resources like time, effort and support.

Fleming and Walls (1998) explained that good learners are always in charge of their own learning and use a set of strategies which enable them to activate their cognitive functioning when planning, monitoring, managing and reflecting on the process of learning a second/foreign language. They also find that metacognitive strategies are closely related to the development of learning autonomy. Students need to be shown how to be flexible and enriched with ideas about knowledge in learning strategy use and what to do. Certainly, the tasks of learning a foreign/second language require well developed metacognition by which people are aware of their knowledge and can control and regulate that knowledge in order to achieve a particular goal.

The implementation of learning strategies has been grouped into two schools of thought. One has investigated training in strategies that were found to be effective for learning or for better learning. The second has studied the transfer of effective strategies with metacognitive components to students. These studies include all or some components such as declarative (*“what the strategy is”* and *“why the strategy should be learned”*), procedural (*“how to use the strategy”*) and conditional knowledge (*“When and Where to use the strategy”* and *“how to evaluate its effectiveness”*) in instruction either explicitly or implicitly (Carrell et al., 2001, pp. 235-239).

Metacognitive strategies, called self-directed learning skills in the methodology literature, or regulatory skills in the cognitive psychology literature, refer to executive processes that govern and direct other thought processes when planning, monitoring, evaluating, and regulating solution activity (Brown, 1987, p.79; Flavell, 1987). According to the interaction of these processes in metacognition theory, cognitive and emotional awareness retrieved from the monitoring or evaluating process is further interpreted, supervised and/or commanded by “a central processor”. In other words, this executive controller i.e., the voice of person's mind that controls one's thoughts and makes decisions about how much further processing is necessary for future performance. This is procedural knowledge that is reportable and accessible to either consciousness or automation. The Metacognitive strategies investigated in this study cover any category of learning strategies, i.e., cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective, that is used in the four metacognitive processes of planning, monitoring, problem-solving and evaluation.

Based on Flavell's work (1981), Kihlstrom² (2013) presented that existing metacognitive knowledge refers to the understandings of declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge, about the world, a person's cognitive and affective states and activities, tasks and strategies that are stored in one's long term memory. Thought processes at the cognitive level involve the knowledge and strategies required to achieve the cognitive goals such as tackling a task or a problem. Affective states and activities are concerned with emotions, attitudes and the beliefs a person holds and how they respond to situations. Metacognitive thought processes are those directed at strategy acquisition and controlling the knowledge and strategies represented in long term memory and in cognitive thought as well as in the external situation, in this case the task/problem. They include monitoring, evaluating, problem-solving and planning processes. The ineffective use or the absence of monitoring processes can impair one's success by leading to inappropriate regulation processes and brings about inactive planning, ineffective problem solving and unsatisfactory performance. Consequently one lacks the self-efficacy, interest and intrinsic motivation that are the potential factors for success.

Koriat (2002), stated that “*incorrect beliefs people hold, a lack of and/or an inability to exploit cognitive and metacognitive strategies eventually result in “illusions”*” (p. 273). “Illusions” are misunderstood knowledge that will be stored in one's working or long-term memory waiting to be transferred to other tasks. They, in turn, lead to false beliefs, inadequate knowledge, and other inappropriate regulation processes. In order to encourage learning, therefore, the investigation of learners' existing metacognitive knowledge has merit. While Brown (1981) argued that there are two kinds of metacognitive knowledge, static and strategic. She regarded static knowledge as the verbalisable things people state about cognition. Strategic knowledge, by comparison, is the steps individuals take to regulate and modify the progress of a cognitive activity as it is occurring. While acknowledging that there might be a host of specific strategies to regulate particular cognitive activities, she does suggest a list of general strategies that are present in almost all forms of cognitive activity. Later, Brown, Bransford, Ferrera, and Campion (1983) considered these general metacognitive strategies to be accordingly, planning (figuring out how to proceed); these tasks that help the learner plan the use of strategies and the processing of information. These kind of activities enable the learner to activate vital aspects of prior knowledge that may make the organising and comprehending of the material easier. Then, monitoring (taking stock of how well one has progressed towards a goal in the cognitive activity); these activities are seen as a basic aspect of material with which they are engaged and integrating it with prior knowledge. And lastly, self-regulation (checking and correcting as they proceed on a task). These activities are assumed to help the learner to develop their performance and are related to monitoring activities.

Students need to have a solid understanding about why they are thinking a certain way to learn something, their awareness about metacognition is so much required in learning. Flavell (1985)

² http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/GSI_2011.htm

wrote *“School and other life experiences do not advance the child's metacognitive development as fast or as far as might be desirable, and there is a growing feeling that we should try to find ways to teach it more directly and systematically”* (p. 263).

Livingston (1997) affirmed that metacognition helps learners to be more productive, and it is also attributed to higher order thinking which includes active control over the cognitive processes operated in learning such as planning how to approach a given learning task, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating progress toward the completion of a task, those particular activities are profoundly connected with metacognitive mechanism. The effect of metacognition on the process of learning is hugely determinant, that is why it is important to study metacognitive activity and development to ascertain the very best ways students should be taught how adequately they can use their cognitive resources and reinvest their passive materials through metacognitive control and regulation. The discussion up to this point has presented an identification of the basic elements of thinking.

3. Writing

Writing is an effective skill which helps people to express their thoughts through words in a meaningful form. According to Grossmann (2009), *“Writing can take many forms, including anything from a shopping list, acting as an aide-memoire, through letters, both formal and informal, to academic texts like this essay.”* (p.3). Harmer (1998) noted that writing is a basic skill, students should know how to write letters, how to put reports together. Moreover, they should know how to write using electronic media. So, Harmer (1998) emphasised writing as important as speaking, listening and reading (p.79-80). *“Writing displays a variety of features which can be observed within the sentence at the level of grammar, and beyond the sentence at the level of text structure.”* (Nunan, 1999, p. 275). Halliday (1985) also outlined three main purposes for writing, namely “action” (including public signs, product labels, etc), “information” (including newspapers and magazines etc) and “entertainment” (including comic strips, novels, newspaper features etc) (as cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 275).

Writing, especially in a foreign language, is one of the most difficult skills in learning and practicing the language. Sokolik (2003) presents writing as a mixture of physical and mental acts. This is through conveying ideas and thoughts into words and the mental act of thinking, producing and constructing those ideas into paragraphs. Writing is also viewed as a process as Hyland (2003:23) states writing as “a sociocognitive activity which involves skills in planning and drafting as well as knowledge of language, contexts and audiences.”

Writing is a complicated process through which writers convey their thoughts. It includes a number of phases starting with planning, writing, revising and then editing. This mechanism is recursive. Writers can go back and forth from the first step to the last when it is required to organise, include more details or remove unnecessary ones. This productive skill needs another major element including strategies and an organised way of thinking; therefore, writing is not only one task but a series of interrelated tasks. It uses a number of complex processes that merge to create ideas. Weigle (2002) mentions that writing is a set of skills gained from much practice and experience. Furthermore, writing and critical thinking are firmly linked together, so students should realise that employing reasoning skill is also necessary for producing a quality piece of writing. Reasoning skills play a vital role in determining relevant ideas for essays and classifying them in an organised way. Ur (1999) explains that writing aims mainly at expressing ideas, communicating meanings and sending a message to the reader; thus, the ideas become the important aspect of the writing.

Writing skill cannot be grasped easily either you write in the first language or the foreign one, writers face troubles. Teachers should be creative enough to provoke students' thinking and inspire their ideas while they practice writing. Due to restricted English language knowledge, students studying English as a foreign language are more concerned with language rather than content

when composing essays. The reason why content in some students' essays is less interesting and not well organised.

Incompetent writers should learn and follow different writing process steps which play a crucial role in facilitating the whole work as well as enhancing the quality their written output. As Zamel (1982) explains that competence in composing process was more important than linguistic competence in the ability to write proficiently in English. In addition, Zamel also completes that students' writing would progress when they understood and experienced composing as a process.

The writing process has a great relevance on influence on students' production, so they should understand it very well in order to promote their writing abilities. The importance of understanding the writing process. Myles (2002) shed light on the writing process importance as he explains that students writing in second language have to acquire proficiency in the use of language and writing strategies, techniques as well as skills. She also adds that it is the act of composing and constructing that can create problems for students.

Raimes (2005) proposes that the writing process is a number of phases starting with planning, drafting and revising while Purdue University (2005) suggests that the writing process includes invention, collection, organisation, drafting, revising and proofreading.

In addition, Brandon (2005:30) states that "The writing process consists of a set of strategies that will help you proceed from idea or purpose to the final statement of a paragraph or an essay." He presents the writing process of only three main steps namely prewriting; organising and developing support; and writing, revising and editing. However, Trimmer (2004) affirms that the writing process involves four stages: planning, drafting, revising and designing.

Though there are a number of concepts and patterns used for the writing process suggested by different academics, the core elements are similar. They are as follows: prewriting, writing, revising and editing.

3. 1 Data Collection and Analysis

This study follows respectively the quantitative approach in collecting and analysing data that are collected mainly through three tools. The First data tool is interviewing teachers of oral and written expression in University of Relizane. While the second tool is diary designed for second year English students. It is worth pointing out that the target behind choosing those specific category of students to be the case of this study is that they are more familiar with the kind of questions this research mainly raised; not only concerning their level of mastery of English language but also their ability and to understand what the researcher really wants to find as answers, simply building a kind of harmony between the sample's outcomes and the researcher's objectives.

Five (5) teachers of writing at the University of Relizane, the teachers were selected to gather information about the way they teach this productive skill and their perspective in teaching writing moreover the kind of materials they usually implement. In order to gather data, for this research students were chosen selectively; the researcher opted for twenty second year English students in the Department of English at Relizane University. This work examines students' diaries with various aspects regarding their abilities, strategies as well as difficulties.

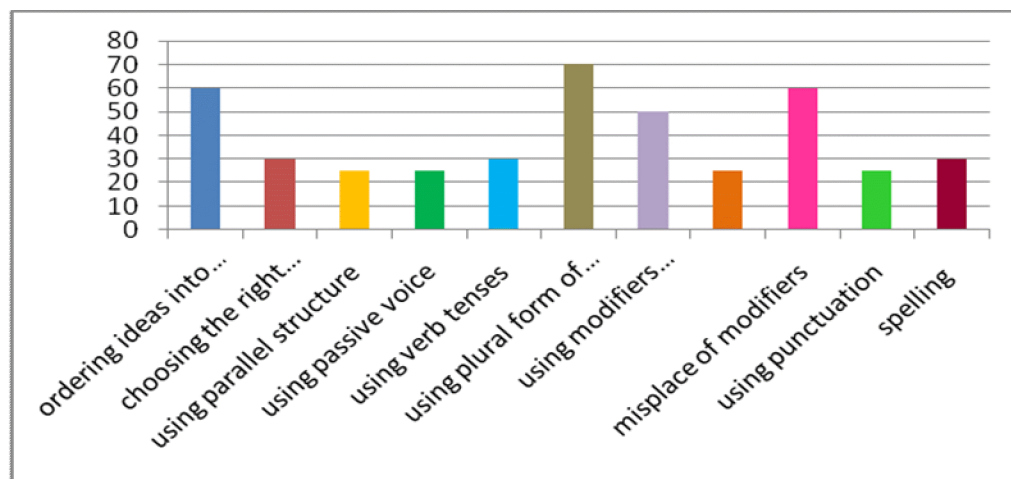


Figure 3.7 : Difficulties in Writing Essays in English Language

Figure 3.7 demonstrates that there are a number of difficulties in writing essays in English language encountered by second year English students at writing classes such as using parallel structure, using passive voice, using modifiers, and misplaced modifiers. Students tend to forget putting verbs into appropriate tenses or forget the form of verb in the tense used.

Another major difficulty among students is choosing the right words. The result agrees with Bacha (2002) who reports that Arabic students studying English as a second language had problem in lacking of lexical variety. Translating from Arabic to English tends to cause errors in writing as there is always first language interference. Grabe and Kaplan (1996:143) and Myles (2002) state that limited knowledge of vocabulary, language structure and content constrains a second language writer's performance. This difficulty might result from using Arabic-English dictionary when the students composed essays. Since there are many words offered for a meaning searched for and some dictionaries do not give any examples, it is difficult for students to choose the right word for the context.

To develop students thinking has the potential to change a generation. The very basic assumption underlying teaching metacognition is that it helps activate the learners' repertoire, develop their sense of autonomy and enrich their learning experience. Findings show that 2nd year English students are not satisfied with their writing skills, they rarely reflect on their learning tasks or be more responsible for their English learning. Students feel unable to select the appropriate strategies, organise their knowledge, engage in more practice activities and so on. Except some of students who are able to take control of their learning and think regularly about how they think in certain situation, to consider what they know and what they do not know so that they may work on it. Though learners are self-motivated, they are still unaware of how to learn effectively. The students' writing abilities it is more tragic, they lack the skill of writing properly, especially when it comes to academic writing and drafting academic essays. Statistics in the real world are frustrating, there is a lack of reading, students nearly pick up a book and read it, there is a lack of interest, a lack of practice too. Besides the negative transfer of knowledge. So many things must be corrected.

The study finds evidence that learning through metacognition and shaping a good thinkers is decisive and key factor to enhance students' writing skills and raise their awareness about learning how to learn. Students should be taught how to speak and how to write, as well as how to be aware of their communicative goals. What would make metacognitive strategies seem worth teaching is definitely its contribution to regulate, stimulate and provoke students' minds, thus, they become more strategic in conducting any learning task. Good thinkers think about their own thinking, and teachers' aim, is to help students become good thinkers. Good thinking should be taught in the classroom which involves three elements, strategies, metacognition, and knowledge. When we introduce metacognitive activities in the process of English language learning, we are giving

students the opportunity to take initiative role in their own learning, so that to be responsible and able of taking charge of their own learning. The aim from designing the questionnaires was to raise EFL learners awareness about the necessity to introduce much more classroom reflecting and thinking activities in language teaching, especially in master degree, for the simple reason that students are going to graduate with any kind of responsibility and ability to carry on learning or teaching after the end of their academic learning. One can add a very expressing idea that writing is the aid to lifelong learning, the conduit to which self-expression might flourish.

Practice is one of the best ways to improve writing skills and it is the teacher task to create positive and cooperative learning opportunities, boosting and supporting students to write freely forgetting about marks. Teachers could provoke students' thinking through different pre-writing strategies. Most students used the Internet as a major source of information to get fact and statistics, while teachers should emphasise on the role of quotations as a great source of ideas which students ignore most of the time. Free writing and writing journals are good strategies to express ideas freely regardless of making mistakes, this also helps students in avoiding blocking while they are asked to start writing and may enrich their thoughts to generate better and build their self esteem in writing. In order to enhance writing skills students can be inspired to form reading habit. Reading may open new doors of knowledge in particular subject area.

Being confident in writing is such an critical aspect that facilitate getting started in writing and wasting too much time thinking. Free writing and brainstorming for a limited period of time will provide new ideas and prepare students to correct errors later. Being aware that the purpose of writing is to communicate a message is a great step toward effective writing. For low proficiency students who find these techniques too difficult, teachers can help them with oral dictation to familiarise writing fast and build confidence. Nevertheless, using talk-write method can be effective by establishing the basis for students to talk what they want to write. It will also give students time to rethink what they have prepared for writing.

While planning, supporting students to take into consideration readers' knowledge is a necessary element for enhancing their performance. Students do not consider the readers' knowledge at this stage. It very important for teachers to create activities or assignments that shape special readers other than the teachers themselves so that students have a definite context for writing. Shared knowledge between themselves and the readers should be taken into consideration and adapt the content and strategies to be suitable for the targeted readers. It helps in deciding suitable content and approach for each writing task to reach the reader's expectation.

During the writing stage students might plan their essays in Arabic language. In this regard different studies found that planning in the first language helps generate content and reduce obstacles on their composing though the languages are of different families. But teachers should draw their students' attention to the different system of the two languages and make them aware of their variation. Word order, for example, is a clear difference between Arabic and English. Students can learn better and also enrich their vocabulary if they are encouraged to use English-English dictionary when they translate as they can learn structure and the usage of words from explanation and examples in the dictionary.

Providing constructive feedback on content and form separately is an effective element so that students could organise ideas and focus on form singly. Discussion between teacher and student is recommended for revising the content. Yet, teachers should be completely aware that their task is to direct students through the process, but not to force their ideas on students. Teachers' comments should regard organisation, students' logic to help students develop as writers and thinkers.

Teachers should support peer communication as they comment on each other papers and give their feedback. This is a good strategy to read critically and learn to share opinions and accept other people's comments. Moreover, students should focus on the elements that they need to regard and give much interest. This way can also develop students' critical thinking skills.

Difficulties in writing essays in English are different, as students have problems in using verb tenses and selecting the right word for the context. Instead of teaching grammar typically by drilling grammar points in class, teachers can propose web sites about grammar revisions and writing tips that provide several explanation and activities for students to practice. Students should be prepared to develop and evaluate their outline that will facilitate for them to write effectively and select strategies to deal with emergent difficulties during their writing. It is crucial for teachers to provide a positive space for students to practice their writing, this will create an effective attitudes towards writing.

4. Conclusion:

This research is conducted in the field of psychology, particularly, stresses the area of metacognition with all its parameters related to essay writing strategies. The researcher aims at providing a set of strategies, plans, and recommendations that may help students to enhance their essays.

The gap is still huge when it comes to writing, students face many problems in the process and lack its basic principles and rules. Relevant question raises here, why do students become unable to write in English? struggling when they are asked to construct a simple paragraph, why do students regard writing essay in English as so demanding skill? or why is the process of writing overlooked so often? Through the use of interview with teachers and the questionnaire designed for students and the diaries of second year English students, research data were collected.

This study confirms that using metacognitive strategies in teaching and learning encourage students' motivation and ability to learn independently. These positive learning experiences will help them see difficulties, obstacles, weaknesses or failure as challenges which can be overcome by using appropriate strategies in learning. These findings support the explicit teaching of metacognitive strategies, the creation of autonomous learning environments and improvement in strategy use for English students. This will enhance the required independent learning in English and improved their writings.

Through engaging in metacognition in learning, students can shape the organised mind that enables them to learn effectively and produce creatively, and train them to use their thinking tools adequately in order to build a solid understanding of the world around them. Students are all the time learning but never learn how to learn, how to structure knowledge and how to organise their thinking better. While metacognition enables students to self-correct, to self-edit and stresses the fact that learning is a way of doing and improving. If students want to enhance their writing skills, they should regard the metacognitive strategies and produce innovatively.

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