

Reflection as a Means to Develop Young Learners' Metacognition - an exploratory study

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RESUMO

O estudo experimental de investigação-ação desenvolvido como parte do meu estágio como aluna professora durante o meu mestrado em ensino de Inglês no primeiro ciclo teve como objectivo a exploração de dois ramos do termo genérico metacognição: auto-consciencialização (Quem sou eu como aprendente de uma língua?), e consciencialização cognitiva (Porquê e como aprendo uma língua?). Em segundo lugar, o estudo teve como objectivo a compreensão do papel do professor no fomento da reflexão, e em que medida esta pode sustentar a aprendizagem dos alunos. O estudo foi conduzido durante o período de cerca de dois meses e envolveu um grupo de 26 alunos do primeiro ciclo. Como metodologia de investigação, foi usada uma investigação de acção em pequena escala que implicou uma abordagem qualitativa e quantitativa na recolha de dados que consistiu num diário do professor, questionários, observação do professor e uma ficha de auto-avaliação para os alunos. Na prática de ensino foi usada a interrogação estratégica, a reflexão sobre as actividades desenvolvidas na aula através de cartões de reflexão e de sumários reflexivos promovidos pelo professor. Os resultados mostraram que com o tempo, através da reflexão, um maior número de alunos foi capaz de reconhecer os seus erros, partilhar as suas estratégias de aprendizagem com os colegas, e os alunos foram capazes de apresentar mais razões para a realização das actividades desenvolvidas em aula. Adicionalmente, o estudo demonstrou que o papel do professor é fundamental na promoção de atitudes de reflexão nos alunos.

Palavras-chave: consciencialização metacognitiva, reflexão, o papel do professor, auto-avaliação, jovens aprendentes

ABSTRACT

The exploratory action research study conducted as part of my practicum as a student teacher during the master's degree studies in teaching English at primary level aimed to explore two strands of the umbrella term, metacognitive awareness. These were self-awareness (Who am I as a language learner?) and cognitive awareness (Why and how do I learn a language?). Secondly, the study aimed to help understand the teacher's role in fostering reflection and how reflection can support students' learning. The study was conducted during a 2-month period and involved a group of 26 students at primary level. The main data collection tools consisted of a teaching journal used to note pertinent contributions from students, and student questionnaires. Classroom practice consisted of strategic questioning, reflection upon the activities carried out

during the lesson through the use of reflection cards and reflective summaries promoted by the teacher. Results showed that over time, through reflection more students were able to recognize their mistakes, share their learning strategies with their peers, and students were able to provide more reasons for the activities carried out in the classroom. Moreover, the study demonstrated that the teacher's role is fundamental in promoting students' reflective attitudes towards learning.

Keywords: metacognitive awareness, reflection, teacher's role, self-assessment, young learners

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

From an early age children are equipped with metacognitive knowledge. Wenden as cited in Cardenas (2009, p.25) defines metacognitive knowledge as “the knowledge about learning that learners of different ages and learning proficiency hold, and which influences how they face the language learning process and the expectations they have about the results of their efforts”.

Cardenas further suggests that success in language learning depends on students' knowledge about their learning processes. However, the fact that metacognitive skills can be developed among young learners is often not taken into account (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015). Cardenas (2009) suggests that learners need support in their conscious effort to develop their metacognitive knowledge. My study resulted from my ambition to exploit this area of knowledge to develop young learners' metacognition through one of the metacognitive strategies to regulate learning identified by Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), which is reflection.

1.1. HOW DID THE IDEA ORIGINATE?

In my teaching the intention to undertake a learner-centered approach to teaching aimed at fostering my students' communicative skills, as well as their autonomy, led me to promote various activities such as those suggested by Read (2007) and Slattery and Willis (2001), which entailed encouraging my students to develop projects in group, fostering pair-share, playing games and doing oral presentations. However, I felt that this work did not fully benefit my students' learning process, as they tended to overlook classroom rules, use Language 1 (L1) too often, and did not seem focused on the accomplishment of the tasks. Why? Was I abandoning my students in these tasks, by letting them work without enough guidance? Why did they not seem to take the activities seriously?

My concern led me to ponder how to best enhance the work carried out in class. The concept of metacognitive awareness shed light on my questions. I gained the belief that the work referred to above would be enhanced if students understood the reasons underlying the activities, as to take the activities seriously. In addition, I also came to understand that metacognitive awareness is inherent in the whole learning process. Thus, fostering my students' metacognitive awareness explicitly would contribute towards helping my students

understand *who* they are as learners, and *why* and *how* they learn a language, and ultimately fully benefit from all the work developed in the classroom.

1.2. AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

My aim was firstly to explore two strands of the umbrella term metacognitive awareness referred to by Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), which are, in my view, inter-related: self-awareness (*Who* am I as a language learner?) and cognitive awareness (*Why* and *how* do I learn a language? Secondly, it seemed vital to understand how teachers can foster reflection and how reflection can support students' learning. Finally, it was important to recognise what adjustments in practical terms were needed for metacognitive awareness through reflection to take place in the classroom.

How can I raise two aspects of metacognitive awareness in my students, these being self-awareness and cognitive awareness through reflection? This became the research question of this study. In practical terms, through what means could I raise my students' metacognitive awareness? Ellis and Ibrahim (2015) and Pinter (2006) suggest various ways to incorporate reflection in language lessons. Based on their practical suggestions, I developed my study as an English teacher trainee during my supervised practicum of twelve weeks¹ with a group of 26 students in year 4 primary education who have English two hours a week as a curricular subject. The present paper refers to the practicum report that has been concluded. The following section of this paper includes the theoretical background to the study. The subsequent section describes the action research and contains the context, methodology and results of the study and the last section summarises the findings of research questions, discusses results and presents the final conclusion of the study.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It is widely accepted that the new century brought changes in various areas such as social, economic and technological, and that children need to be equipped from an early age with the critical learning skills required to meet those changes. Over the last 30 years there has been a considerable growing body of literature related to the development of children as independent learners (Whitebread & Colman, 2007). According to Meyer (2010), independent learning is vital to the continuing development of high quality, lifelong learning, social equity, and cohesion in schools.

This brief review will focus on the understanding of four terms that are used, among others within the area of children's development as independent learners, and their significance in relation to young learners' language learning: learning to learn, learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and reflection, since these seem to share commonalities but differ in subtle aspects that will be shown later in this paper. In addition, it will also address the roles of reflection as a means to

¹ The practicum was arranged by Universidade Nova de Lisboa and it involved monthly meetings between the supervisor, Professor Carolyn Leslie from the university and the cooperate teacher at the school where the practicum was carried out. In these meetings the supervisor and the cooperate teacher discussed the trainee's progress.

develop young learners' metacognitive awareness and of the teacher in promoting young learners' metacognitive awareness through reflection.

2.1. WHAT IS LEARNING TO LEARN?

According to Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), *learning to learn*, defined as “an umbrella term for a wide variety of activities designed to develop metacognitive awareness and learning strategies” (p.9), referred to as an aim of curricula throughout the world, and identified by the EU as one of eight key competences (Bostrom, 2012), has always remained under investigated. Thus, due to the lack of practical guidelines it has not been implemented by teachers. Pinter (2006, p. 99) claims that the aim of fostering *learning to learn* is to “raise children’s awareness of the various factors that influence their language learning and to give them time and space to start to think for themselves”.

Ellis and Ibrahim (2015) address *learning to learn* at a practical level by providing activities and their underpinning pedagogical principles. Pinter (2006), in line with Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), also considers learning to learn in practical terms. She suggests that various aspects of *learning to learn* can be incorporated into the day-to-day practice in the language classroom without changing usual practices. Furthermore, she claims that most of the suggested techniques and ideas provided with the aim of fostering *learning to learn* principles can be adapted to all types of contexts, including large classes or mixed ability classes. Also Moon (2008) suggests a set of questions which learners should learn to ask themselves with the teacher’s help: How do I learn? What are my goals? How shall I manage my learning and how am I getting on? Read (2007, p. 286) suggests that the main aim of learning to learn at primary level is to “start children off on their own personal journey towards self-knowledge, self-reliance and independence in their learning”. The teacher’s role seems inherent to the concept.

2.2. WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?

Learner autonomy, referred to as a buzz-word of the 1990s by Dam (2004, p.1) is used “to denote learners’ active involvement in and responsibility for their own learning process”, entailing therefore an ability and willingness to acquire knowledge independently, as well as in co-operation with peers, thus indicating social skills. The author Bergen as cited in Dam (2004, p. 2) characterizes an *autonomous learner* as one who evolves “an awareness of the aims and processes of learning and is capable of the critical reflection which syllabuses and curricula frequently require but traditional pedagogical measures rarely achieve”.

Dam (2004, pp. 4-6) recommends changes that would lead to students’ ability to take charge of their own learning and to a teacher/learner-directed learning environment. The changes suggested are a shift in focus from teaching to learning, resulting in equal concern for both teachers and learners about “what to learn” and “how to learn”, and a change in learner’s role, in which the learner gains ability to define his or her own objectives to choose relevant materials and activities, and to evaluate the outcome of learning. Other suggestions are a change in the teacher’s role leading to a shift from focus on teaching to focus on learning, and a change in the evaluation entailing answering questions such as “What am I /are you/are we doing?”, “Why am I /are you/are we doing?”, “What

was good/bad? Why?”, and “What can it be used for?”. Lastly, Dam (idem) suggests that if the language classroom is considered a rich learning environment, it becomes a place where teachers and learner teach and learn from each other.

Dam (ibidem) suggests that the above changes are part of a slow and difficult process that requires effort on the part of teachers and learners in co-operation. Bajrami (2015) defines the process of becoming an autonomous learner as a dynamic one that entails the learner’s acquisition of learning strategies, which will enable him/her to gain understanding of how he/she learns, and ultimately control his/her way of learning. The literature review seems to indicate that learning to learn will lead to learner autonomy, with metacognitive awareness being the core part of the process.

2.3. WHAT IS METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS?

Metacognitive awareness is defined by Ellis and Ibrahim (2015) as the umbrella term that incorporates the following strands: self-awareness, language awareness, cognitive awareness, social awareness and intercultural awareness. What do they involve? Self-awareness refers to knowing about oneself as a language learner, language awareness entails knowing about language, cognitive awareness entails knowing about the processes of language learning, social awareness involves knowing about collaborative learning techniques, and lastly cultural awareness relates to knowing about cultural similarities and differences. In this review I will refer to two of the strands in further detail, which are self-awareness and cognitive awareness.

Self-awareness, according to Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), entails children’s better understanding of themselves as language learners; thus, their awareness of their preferences, their understanding of what affects their motivation and their ability to set and meet individual goals. Cognitive awareness is defined by Ellis and Ibrahim (2015) as what helps children understand why and how they are learning a language. This involves explaining to the children how they are going to learn the target language in class, the type of materials they are going to use and the activities they are going to do. In addition, it entails getting learners to think about how they learn, i.e., which strategies they use to help them remember, to concentrate and pay attention.

Lastly, cognitive awareness develops students’ ability to recognize how and when to review, how to monitor their learning and what they need to do next. Cardenas (2009) suggests that success in language learning depends on the extent to which learners are aware of and knowledgeable about their learning processes. However, learners’ need for guidance is necessary, as metacognitive awareness is not innate but it must be taught, as pointed by Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012). To sum up, metacognitive awareness encourages learning to learn, which leads to learner autonomy.

2.4. REFLECTION AS A LEARNING STRATEGY

What is the role of the teacher in fostering students’ reflection? Learning strategies are defined by Cardenas (2009, p. 43) as “all the tactics employed by the learner to facilitate the acquisition of a second language”. It is commonly accepted that learning strategies include metacognitive strategies, which are

used to regulate learning. Reflection is one of the metacognitive strategies. Reflective thinking is, according to Dewey as cited in Hazari (2014), a thought that entails a “conscious, thoughtful and a voluntary effort” (p.11).

Pinter (2006, p. 100) advocates the introduction of activities in the classroom that include “encouraging children to think about what they did well and why, and what they enjoyed and why”. Moreover, Pinter (*idem*) suggests that ongoing reflection boosts students’ ability to think about the reasons for doing various activities and tasks and about lessons that can be learnt from each learning experience. The same author suggests that reflection is a “natural part of effective learning” (*ibidem*) and it can follow individual activities, tasks, lessons, or can be used at the end of term or end of year. Learners can be encouraged, for example, to reflect on why and how well they interacted, whether they contributed fully, or whether they listened to their peer.

The teacher’s role is therefore considered essential in the implementation of reflection in the classroom. Hazari (2004, p. 20) suggests that “children cannot reflect on their own. Thus, the role of the teacher in promoting the reflective attitudes of children is unavoidable”. Ellis and Ibrahim (2015) offer some guidelines in order to encourage active reflection among learners. Among others, the authors suggest firstly ask questions in a clear, directed manner, using child-friendly vocabulary that encourage students to think, and trigger questions. Secondly, they suggest teachers give the learner time to think, share ideas with a peer and then discuss in a wider group or in the whole class. Thirdly, the authors suggest teachers give students two minutes to write three things they remember about something learnt in class, and fourthly, get the learners to explain how to do an activity to their peers. Ellis and Ibrahim suggest that questions such as these offer a link between teaching and learning.

2.5. SUMMARY

Fostering students’ metacognitive awareness is relevant, since it contributes towards helping them to get involved in their own learning processes. The definitions of the terms provided in this section seem to indicate that they are intertwined. In fact, metacognitive awareness, learning to learn, learner autonomy and reflection are not independent within the area of language learning. The need to guide students, and the consequent primordial role attributed to the teacher seem to be the most striking commonalities among the terms defined. Keywords in this study are metacognitive awareness which entails, as Cardenas (2009) suggests, learners being more aware of metacognitive knowledge through a conscious effort, and reflection, which serves as a means to enhance metacognitive awareness. Research mentioned above demonstrated that learners guided by the teacher grew awareness of the reflective cycle and increased efficiency in the tasks developed.

3. THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

3.1. CONTEXT

Learning English in the 3rd and 4th years is nowadays the result of the implementation of English in the Portuguese curricula by the Portuguese

government. The participants in this study were a group of 26 fourth year-students from a private school in the outskirts of Lisbon, aged between nine and ten years old. The number of boys and girls was balanced and there were no students with special educational needs. All students were native speakers of Portuguese and were learning English as their only second language. One of them had lived in an English-speaking country for two years. They had two hours of English a week. The study was carried out in the first term of the school year. Most participants had been learning English since pre-school.

Priority was given to the development of listening and speaking skills mentioned in the *Metas Curriculares de Inglês Ensino Básico, 1º Ciclo* (Bravo, Cravo & Duarte, 2015). Accordingly, classroom activities were guided by the communicative approach, which entailed fostering of real and meaningful communication, for example, learners finding out personal information about their peers through asking questions.

3.2. METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As research methodology, small scale classroom-based action research was used, which entailed a qualitative and quantitative approach to data collection. It consisted of the following (Table 1):

Table 1 - Stages, Procedures and Tools in Action Research (adapted from Burns, 2010, p. 8.)

| | |
|---|---|
| <p><u>1. Planning</u></p> <p>September</p> | <p>Identification of the problem and project design</p> |
| <p><u>2. Action</u></p> <p>&</p> <p><u>3. Observation</u></p> <p>October-December</p> | <p>Action-research strategies: first student questionnaire after consent was granted; teaching journal; strategic questioning; reflection cards; reflective summaries; teacher's observation grid; second student questionnaire, and student self-assessment.</p> |
| <p><u>4. Reflection</u></p> <p>January</p> | <p>Analysis of data and reflection on results (see section 4 of the present paper)</p> |

Through the implementation of the action research referred to above, incorporated into the day-to-day practice in the language classroom, I hoped to foster my students' metacognitive awareness through reflection.

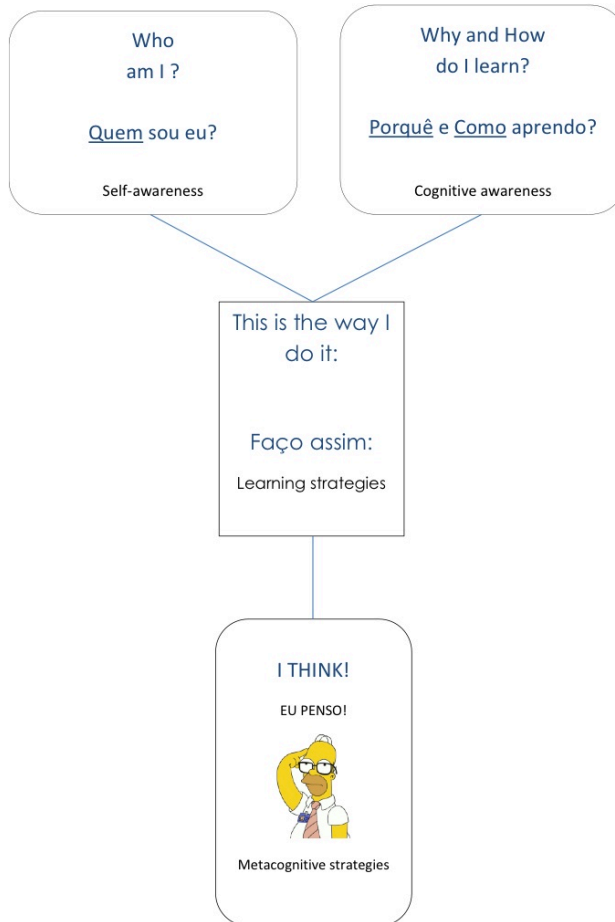






























Figure 1 - Mind map

Prior to my action the consent letters from the school’s director, and then from the students’ parents were collected. Secondly, I explained the aims of my study and the tools I would use to collect data to the students. Turek (2013, p. 9) suggests that, in order to engage young learners as active participants, “the researcher should provide meaningful, comprehensive information about the study”. Thus, I used a mind map that included the image of Homer Simpson, which is familiar and appealing to children, and child friendly words (Figure 1) as visual aids to explain my study. I then asked their consent using the consent letter (Figure 2).

Pinta

| | |
|---|---|
| A Paula explicou-me que está a fazer um estágio de Outubro a Dezembro na universidade para ser uma professora melhor. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que eu posso ajudá-la no seu estudo para a universidade. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que quer que eu perceba como eu aprendo melhor inglês. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que quer que eu perceba o que me faz gostar de aprender inglês. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que eu posso aprender a estudar melhor sozinho (a). |   |
| A Paula explicou-me o tipo de materiais que vamos usar nas aulas de inglês. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me o tipo de atividades que vamos desenvolver nas aulas de inglês. Por exemplo: questionários e fichas de autoavaliação. |   |
| | |
| A Paula explicou-me que a minha opinião vai ser importante no estudo dela. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que vai mostrar o estudo dela a muitas pessoas que também estudam sobre ensinar inglês a crianças. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que não vai mostrar o meu nome verdadeiro. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que posso deixar de participar em qualquer momento. |   |
| A Paula explicou-me que os meus pais sabem acerca do estudo da Paula. |   |
| | |
| Eu percebi o que a Paula nos explicou. |   |
| Eu aceito participar. |   |

Como a Paula não vai usar os nossos nomes verdadeiros, eu vou escolher outro nome para o estudo. O meu nome para o estudo é: _____

(posso escolher o nome de um animal, de um herói, de uma princesa, ou de uma flor)

Assinatura do aluno: _____ Data: _____. Obrigada!

Figure 2 - Consent letter

The content of the letter followed the guideline given by my supervisor. Among other indications, it was made simple for the child to understand, brief, and it referred to parents' previous permission to participate in the study.

3.3. THE FIRST QUESTIONNAIRE

In early October *The first questionnaire: getting to know my students* (Figure 3) was distributed. It included open questions, which as suggested by Bryman (2008), has the advantage of revealing respondents' levels of knowledge and understanding of issues, as the questions do not suggest any kind of answers. The analysis required the identification of patterns in students' responses followed by categorization. In addition, closed questions were included. Results of both open and closed questions were expressed as a percentage. My aim was to understand

learners' motivation to learn English, students' awareness of their own ability to improve their English and their expectations as English learners. Within the scope of my research, the aforementioned aims relate to knowing “Who am I as a learner?” and “Why and how do I learn?” which are self-awareness and cognitive awareness respectively, two strands of the umbrella term of metacognitive awareness.

| Eu gosto de estudar inglês. | Y | +/- | N |
|---|---|-----|---|
| Eu preciso de estudar inglês... | | | |
| porque os meus pais querem que eu aprenda inglês. | Y | | N |
| porque eu quero aprender inglês. | Y | | N |
| porque vai ser importante saber inglês quando eu for grande. | Y | | N |
| Eu consigo perceber o que devo estudar para melhorar no inglês. | Y | | N |
| Eu sei como vou estudar para melhorar os meus resultados no inglês. | Y | | N |
| Eu vou estudar inglês... | | | |
| sozinho (a). | Y | | N |
| com um (a) amigo (a). | Y | | N |
| com uma pessoa adulta. | Y | | N |
| Eu sei que vou melhorar o meu inglês... | | | |
| porque vou trabalhar. | Y | | N |
| porque tenho jeito para o inglês. | Y | | N |
| Eu vou aprender inglês... | | | |
| depressa com pouco trabalho. | Y | | N |
| devagar com pouco trabalho. | Y | | N |
| depressa com muito trabalho. | Y | | N |
| devagar com muito trabalho. | Y | | N |

Figure 3 - The first questionnaire: getting to know my students

3.4. MY TEACHING JOURNAL

I used qualitative data from my teaching journal developed with regular entries. Moon (2006, pp. 37-38) suggests that reflective writing in the academic context is

“likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome specified in terms of learning, action or clarification. It may be preceded by a description of the purpose and /or the subject matter of the reflection”.

Likewise, pertinent questions, responses or comments from students that occurred during the lessons were registered during the lessons. My reflections in the journal are presented as quotes related to my observations. In addition, the journal also included records of strategic questioning that I implemented in my lessons. Nunan (2001, p. 123) advocates for the use of teaching journals in language learning research claiming that journal entries “provide insights into processes of learning which would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain in any other way”.

3.5. STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

In order to guide my students in their reflection, I used regular strategic questioning, such as: “Why are we going to play this game?”, or “Why did we watch this video?”. The students were encouraged to explain why activities were done before starting, or after finishing them, through strategic questioning. That is, clear and straightforward questions were posed. Strategic questioning during the lessons was a means to foster reflection among learners and to help them to become more aware of the different ways they learnt English. Also, in the use of reflection cards, and in the writing of reflective summaries strategic questioning by the teacher played an important role, as will be discussed later.

3.6. REFLECTION CARDS

In order to foster my students’ acknowledgment of the activities that had been carried out in the lesson, I used reflection cards (Figure 4) on a regular basis. Reflection cards, as suggested by Dias and Mourão (2005), were used at the end of each lesson. The displaying of the cards went along with questions aimed at knowing if students had spoken English during the lesson, listened to music, read in English, written in English, played games, done anything creative, worked in pairs or in group, learnt and remembered new words, and what students liked best in the lesson.

I believe this use of reflection cards was central in the action part of action research as it was a means “to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and even better, improvements in practice” (Burns, 2010, p. 2). In each lesson some cards from the set were selected and students were asked questions aimed at helping them recognize the activities that had been carried out, while my trainer registered their responses as a means to collect data which was then expressed as a percentage.

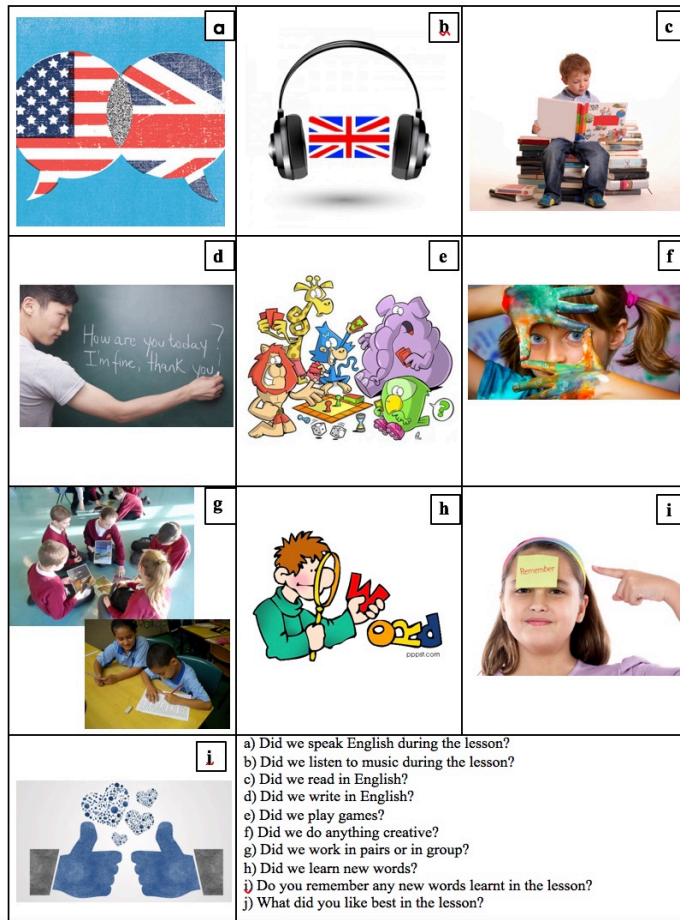


Figure 4 - Reflection cards

3.7. REFLECTIVE SUMMARIES

At the beginning of each lesson I wrote the contents to be taught on the interactive board to help students focus on the activities to be developed in the lesson. At the end of each lesson, as a substitution for the normal summary, in which students copy the summary written by the teacher, I showed the contents presented at the beginning of the lesson and I asked the students whether we had covered each topic. The contents covered were ticked, and the topics, which were not covered, were erased and the students copied the items ticked into their notebooks, which then became their summary. In this procedure students were given the opportunity to reflect on the work developed in the classroom. Moreover, in this way, and as a complement to the reflection cards, I had the

opportunity to help my students rethink, through strategic questioning, any misunderstandings that had occurred during the use of reflection cards.

3.8. THE SECOND QUESTIONNAIRE

In the middle of November *The second questionnaire: developing students' metacognitive awareness*, which included open and closed questions (Figure 5), was distributed to students. This tool gave me insights into learners' preferences regarding language skills, their belief about their ability to recognize mistakes, and their perception about the aims underlying the various activities done in class, for example, playing games. In addition, this tool clarified if they thought about English outside the English lesson, their strategies to remember the English words and whether they shared the strategies with their peers. The open questions were analyzed for patterns, and then expressed as percentages and the closed questions were quantified and expressed as percentages. The same questionnaire was distributed in the middle of December to compare results.

| | | | |
|---|-----|---------------------|-----|
| Assinala com um X Eu prefiro aprender inglês <input type="checkbox"/> a ouvir (listening) <input type="checkbox"/> a falar (speaking) <input type="checkbox"/> em todos os modos (all) <input type="checkbox"/> a ler (reading) <input type="checkbox"/> a escrever (writing) <input type="checkbox"/> não sei (I don't know) | | | |
| Rodeia o que for correto para ti | | | |
| Eu consigo reconhecer os meus erros em inglês. I can recognize my mistakes in English. | Sim | Mais ou menos | Não |
| Eu penso sobre o que aprendo em inglês fora da aula também. (I think about what I learn in English outside the classroom) | Sim | Mais ou menos | Não |
| Completa a frase Para me lembrar das palavras em inglês eu (In order to remember the words in English I) | | | |
| Rodeia o que for correto para ti | | | |
| Eu partilho com os meus colegas a minha maneira de estudar inglês. (I share the way I learn English with my peers) | Sim | Mais ou menos | Não |
| Responde à pergunta No final da aula de inglês a Paula pergunta-nos o que fizemos. Porquê? (At the end of each lesson Paula asks what activities we did. Why?) | | | |

Figure 5 - The first questionnaire: getting to know my students

4. RESULTS

This part of the article aims to present the results of my action research, aimed to raise my students' metacognitive awareness. Various research tools were used and are presented in different sections. These were first of all the first questionnaire, aimed at getting to know my students at the beginning of my action research cycle, followed by strategic questioning, reflection cards and the reflective summary that were included in the classroom practices. In addition, I used the teacher's observation grid, the teaching journal and the second questionnaire aimed at developing students' metacognitive awareness and verifying students' progress. Lastly, I used a self-assessment worksheet that followed an oral task. In this paper I present the most relevant results of the study carried out.

4.1. THE FIRST QUESTIONNAIRE: GETTING TO KNOW MY STUDENTS

As an initial stage of enquiry and before any intervention on my part, it was important to understand students' motivation in learning English, their awareness of the learning process, and their expectations as learners. For that I distributed the first questionnaire.

As shown in Table 2 (question 1), 54 % of the students felt motivated to learn English, in contrast to the low percentage of students, represented by one single student who did not like learning English. However, the percentage of students who were indifferent about learning English was still 31%, and this result was surprising, if we take into account that English teaching at primary level aims to be fun.

When asked why they needed to learn English (question 6) 92 % of students' answers related to its importance in their future, revealing an extrinsic motivation, whereas 80 % demonstrated an intrinsic motivation in learning English. Still the results indicated that half of the students were strongly influenced by their parents as they learned English because their parents wanted them to. This number could eventually relate to the percentage of students who felt indifferent about English learning, referred to above because 4th grade learners learning English is nowadays the result of the implementation of English in the Portuguese curricula by the Portuguese government, and not their choice.

An important element of students knowing about themselves as learners is, I believe, their perception of their own expectations with regard to learning (question 7). 89 % of students indicated they believed they were going to improve their English because they were going to work hard, followed by 46% who believed their improvement would result from their own aptitude to learn English. Interestingly, 67% associated these two conditions that seem ideal in language learners, which are willingness to work and aptitude. Table 2 (question 5) also shows that 89% of the students were going to study with an adult, which could indicate some lack of autonomy by the participants.

Table 2 - Getting to Know My Students

| Questions | Students' answers % | | | |
|---|---------------------|----|--------|-----------|
| | Yes | No | So, so | Not valid |
| Can choose only one answer | | | | |
| 1. I like learning English | 54 | 4 | 31 | 12 |
| 2. I can understand what I should study to improve my English | 65 | 35 | N.A. | 0 |
| 3. I know how I'm going to improve my results in English | 69 | 31 | N.A. | 0 |
| Can choose more than one answer | | | | |
| 4. I'm going to study English | | | | |
| on my own | 42 | 50 | N.A. | 8 |
| with a friend | 50 | 85 | N.A. | 8 |
| with an adult | 89 | 12 | N.A. | 0 |
| 5. I need to learn English because | | | | |
| my parents want me to | 50 | 0 | N.A. | 0 |
| I want to | 81 | 0 | N.A. | 0 |
| It's going to be important when I grow up | 92 | 0 | N.A. | 0 |
| 6. I know I'm going to improve my English because | | | | |
| I'm going to work hard | 89 | 8 | N.A. | 4 |
| I'm good at it | 46 | 50 | N.A. | 4 |

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Students' expectations with regard to learning seem, in my opinion, to relate the two strands of metacognitive awareness exploited in this study, which are self-awareness and cognitive awareness. This connection results from a combination of students' knowledge about themselves (*Who am I as a learner?*), namely their ability to study, and their own aptitude to learn English and their acknowledgment of their need to study (*How do I learn a language?*).

4.2. PRACTICES IMPLEMENTED IN THE CLASSROOM: STRATEGIC QUESTIONING, REFLECTION CARDS, AND REFLECTIVE SUMMARIES

How do we learn a language? In the present section the outcomes from activities that promoted reflection on the various ways my students learnt English are discussed. The practices implemented in the classroom were strategic questioning, use of reflection cards and the writing of a reflective summary at the end of the lesson.

Strategic questioning during the lessons was a means to foster reflection among learners. For example, I asked them in English: “Why do you think we did peer correction?” to which different answers were given by different students in L1:

“Porque é divertido!” [Because it’s fun] (Student A).

“Porque percebemos os erros dos outros!” [Because we understand other’s mistakes!] (Student B).

“Porque nos ajuda na escrita inglesa!” [Because it helps us to write in English] (Student C).

(Teaching journal, 29 September, 2016).

Strategic questioning was also used with the reflection cards and in the writing of reflective summaries.

The use of reflection cards became part of our lesson routine and with time it was welcomed by all the participants. The results (Table 3) show however, that at times 100% of students wrongly acknowledged the aims of the activities done in class. The students’ misunderstandings involved mainly speaking, writing and reading activities. Data was collected by having students raising their hands in answer to the teacher’s questions.

Table 3 - Use of Reflection Cards: Samples of Wrong Answers Given by Students

| Wrong answers | Students (%) | Lesson Dates |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| in speaking | 100 | 21/11 |
| in writing | 65 | 28/09 |
| in reading | 54 | 28/09 |

In fact, students’ misunderstandings due to their misconceptions of what “speaking”, or “writing”, or “reading” really means, made me acknowledge my role in guiding my students in their reflection. Helping students to understand what skill was developed in the different activities entailed, first of all, understanding their perceptions. For example, simply copying the date for a young learner can mean “written work”.

Then strategic use of questioning in order to lead them to acknowledge the work done was needed. Strategic questioning was: “What have we written?”, “Did you have to think in order to write?”. Also speaking was misinterpreted by students: “Some students mentioned they said the date and the lesson number, and they considered them speaking activities” (Teaching journal, 19 October, 2016). My role as a guide in students’ reflection was thus most relevant:

(...) we did our reflection time. Students raised their hands when they were asked if we had spoken in class and I helped them to acknowledge what spoken activities meant, and that in fact there hadn’t been any spoken activities in the lesson. (Teaching journal, 27 November, 2016)

My own involvement through direct and clear questions successfully helped my students to think about the activities that had been carried out and ultimately helped them to recognize how they learnt English.

Through the implementation of the reflective summaries, I had the opportunity to help my students to better understand the activities carried out in the lesson, and the language skills developed:

“I felt that the writing of the summary, which was done by acknowledging what work was done in class was a good opportunity to help students to acknowledge that in fact no written or reading activities had been done in class”. (Teaching journal, 15 October, 2016).

Students needed my help to gain understanding about what skills were worked on in each activity developed in the lesson.

4.3. THE SECOND QUESTIONNAIRE: DEVELOPING STUDENTS’ METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS

The second questionnaire was distributed on 17th November to 26 participants, and repeated on 12th December to 25 participants. Table 5 shows results that refer to self-awareness: *Who* am I as a learner? And tables 6 to 8 show results that refer to metacognitive awareness: *How* and *why* do I learn a language?

Particularly challenging for young learners is their ability to recognize their mistakes. In an initial stage of the action research, results from a closed questionnaire (Table 5, question 1) demonstrated that 8 students (31%) affirmed that they were able to recognize their mistakes, in contrast to the majority of students who felt uncertain. Later there was an increase in the number of students affirming that they were able to recognize their mistakes. Although the number of students who affirmed not to be able to recognize their mistakes did not alter, the number of students who felt uncertain increased significantly.

Table 4 - Thinking about Language Learning

| Questions | Students’ answers (% and number of students in brackets) | | | | | |
|--|---|--------|---------|----------|--------|---------|
| | November | | | December | | |
| | Yes | No | So, so | Yes | No | So, so |
| 1. I can recognise my mistakes | 31 (8) | 4 (1) | 65 (17) | 44 (11) | 4 (1) | 52 (13) |
| 2. I think about what I learn in English | 35 (9) | 15 (4) | 50 (13) | 44 (11) | 8 (2) | 48 (12) |
| 3. I share the way I learn English with my peers | 12 (3) | 27 (7) | 62 (16) | 19 (5) | 19 (5) | 62 (16) |

Table 5 - Students' Reasons for Doing Things in the Classroom

| Questions | Students' answers (%) | |
|--|-----------------------|----------|
| | November | December |
| 1. We play games in the English lesson... | | |
| I don't know | 4 | 8 |
| To learn | 46 | 28 |
| To learn and to have fun | 35 | 32 |
| To have fun | 4 | 4 |
| To interact | 8 | 8 |
| To help memorize | 4 | - |
| To learn from peers | - | 8 |
| To do something different | - | 12 |
| 2. We work in pairs because... | | |
| I don't know | 23 | 8 |
| It's a different way of learning | 4 | 8 |
| It's fun | 8 | - |
| We learn together | 65 | - |
| We learn from peers | - | 28 |
| We interact | - | 8 |
| We learn better | - | 12 |
| It's a good way to learn | - | 4 |
| Unclear answers | - | 8 |
| 3. We learn the words before we write them because... | | |
| I don't know | 12 | 8 |
| To know the words | - | 8 |
| To be able to say them correctly | 8 | 25 |
| To be able to read them | 14 | - |
| To know their meanings | 42 | 46 |
| It's the easiest way | - | 13 |
| Unclear | 23 | - |

In all, it seems that students were becoming more aware of their own mistakes (question 1). It is also shown in Table 4 that the percentage of learners who affirmed that they thought about what they learnt in English increased and the number of students who affirmed that they did not think about what they learnt decreased by nearly half (question 2). It is also shown that 7 students (27% of students) affirmed that they did not share their learning strategies in November. This number decreased a month later (question 3). However, the number of students who affirmed sharing their ways of learning remained still low. To sum up, the results seem to indicate that students were giving greater thought to their learning process by the end of the action research.

Learning awareness relates to knowing the reasons for doing activities carried out in the lesson. Table 5 shows the results provided from the open questions. It is shown that 20% of the reasons given by the students for the activities done in class at the second stage were new, which could indicate increased awareness. Interestingly, a significant percentage of students in December pointed out *learning from peers* (questions 1 and 2) as a new reason of working in pairs or in groups, acknowledging therefore that they do not only learn from the teacher, but also from their peers. Also, table 6 (question 2) shows that 12 % of students believed they learnt better when they work collaboratively, revealing thus increased self-awareness.

The majority of students pointed out that they were taught what the words meant and how they were pronounced before writing them (question 3) because they would know the meanings of the words. Also, there were a considerable number of students who understood that they would say the words correctly before trying to read them. I attribute this result to the strategic questioning regularly carried out in class.

The results mentioned are in line with the goals established by the *Metas de Aprendizagem do Inglês, 1º ciclo* (Bravo, Cravo & Duarte, 2015), which focus primarily on listening and speaking skills. In general, the number of students who did not know how to answer the questions decreased (question 3), if we compare the two stages of the action research. These results are attributed, I believe, to the regular reflection fostered in class.

As part of the routine during my teaching I used reflection cards at the end of each lesson. From the set of cards, I randomly picked some of them to use and it was my concern to include some cards and ask some questions even when I expected the answer to be “No”. As shown in Table 6, there is a striking change in students’ perception for the reasons underlying the use of reflection cards. In the first stage students believed that the aim of this activity was teacher assessment or teacher support to learning (questions 1-4).

In contrast, on the second stage results show that students believed that the aim of this activity was self-assessment (questions 5-7). This result is encouraging for teachers who intend to promote self-assessment through the use of reflective cards, as their use was accepted by the vast majority of students as a means for self-assessment. However, their use with the purpose of raising cognitive awareness entails guidance from the teacher.

Table 6 - Use of the Reflection Cards at the End of the Lesson

| At the end of the lesson Paula asks us what we did during the lesson. Why? | Students' answers (%) | |
|---|-----------------------|----------|
| | November | December |
| Teacher's assessment & Teacher support to learning | | |
| 1. She wants to know if we were attentive in class | 18 | 8 |
| 2. She wants to check whether we remember things | 32 | - |
| 3. She wants us to understand what we did in the lesson | 23 | - |
| 4. She wants us to train our memory | 18 | 8 |
| Self-assessment | | |
| 5. For us to remember what we did in class | - | 52 |
| 6. For us and Paula to remember what we did | - | 4 |
| 7. For us to reflect | - | 8 |
| Don't know / unclear answers | 9 | 12 |

5. FINAL CONCLUSION

Results show that through the introduction of regular strategic questioning, reflective cards and reflexive summaries in the classroom, as well as through the use of the questionnaires, and self-assessment, the group of 26 participants was intensively encouraged to reflect upon the way they learnt English, but less focus was given on getting students to know about themselves as learners. It is shown that in general students responded well to the activities proposed. The answers to the questionnaires showed that students became more thoughtful about their learning, and more aware about the reasons underlying certain activities carried out in the lesson. Furthermore, results triggered by the students' misunderstanding of what certain activities really mean, confirmed that teacher's crucial role in guiding young learners in their reflections.

The greatest limitation of this study was time. The two-month period, in which the action research was developed, was too short to implement more cycles of action research. A longer period of intervention would have allowed me to develop my study to related areas, namely the development of students' self-awareness through reflection, which was part of my plan. As the present study was action research, the results presented cannot be extrapolated to other classes.

The purpose of this study was to develop two aspects of students' metacognitive awareness through reflection, which were self-awareness and cognitive awareness. In the action research special focus was given to improve students' understanding about the activities carried out in the lesson and about

the reasons underlying the development of the activities, through reflection. Students revealed motivation to learn English in the lesson and responded well to the practices implemented in the classroom. As the result of the action research students gained understanding about *how* they learnt English, which led to an increase of students' metacognitive awareness through reflection.

The development of my action research required taking into account my specific context, accuracy in my observations, perseverance and regularity in my own contribution to raise my students' metacognitive awareness, and above all, my own ongoing reflection. By aiming to raise my students' self-awareness and cognitive awareness through reflection, I needed to give greater thought to *who* my students were as language learners, and *why* and *how* they learnt English. In addition, I needed to put myself in my students' shoes, which entailed understanding their perceptions about the activities carried out in the lesson and their purpose. Thus, the study was relevant for my own development as a teacher.

Especially encouraging for teachers who may wish to implement the use of reflection cards, aimed at students' own self-assessment, is students' acknowledgment over time that these cards fostered self-assessment, as students were able to remember the activities that had been carried out in the lesson. Equally important is students' full understanding of the reasons that justify the activities carried out in the English lesson. Results showed that students in the second stage of the action research had gained understanding about the reasons for doing things in the classroom.

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