RESEARCH REPORT

What is the impact of metacognitive talking aloud strategies with mixed ability pupils on their ability to apply their grammatical knowledge in translation, and/or interpretation of unknown literary texts?

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Abstract

Background and purpose: Developing translation skills is a very important process of language teaching and learning which students can find difficult at times. The purpose of this project is to use the 'thinking aloud' methodology to develop students' inner monologue when tackling translation tasks and literature analysis, making it more explicit whilst completing tasks and honing in more easily on misconceptions.

Aims: The aim is to explore the impact of 'thinking aloud' on the grammar understanding and literature text analysis of the pupils. It is also important to develop a methodology to tackle translation skills and literary analysis that could be used extensively with all year groups and that students could apply in future.

Study design or methodology: The teachers used research lesson study and based their study design across three observation cycles focusing on Sixth form lessons. 17 pupils were involved over three lessons, between the ages of 16 and 17. The teachers focused on using 'thinking aloud' to develop students' translation skills and literature analysis. The group was keen to use this 'thinking aloud' methodology with students with different academic ability. Prior to the lesson cycles, the teacher identified that the students would approach translation tasks according to their linguistic proficiency and also their level of confidence. Therefore, the teachers were keen to see different student approaches to the 'thinking aloud' methodology. The process involved post-lesson meeting amongst teachers to discuss findings and reflections. Students were also questioned about their reflections on the process.

Findings: Students approach translation tasks and text analysis according to their language proficiency and their level of confidence. More proficient students seemed initially reticent to use this methodology as they saw it as an unnecessary step. However, when reflecting about the lessons, all students, of all abilities, seemed to see the benefit of developing these skills both as a way of developing their translation and analytical skills as well as their oracy.

Implications for practice: All teachers agreed that they would use this approach with different year groups as a diagnostic exercise for ascertaining prior grammatical knowledge, to develop grammatical accuracy and to enhance students' oracy. This methodology has been very well received in the department when it was presented during INSET days, which will help develop a collaborative approach amongst all teachers in the department to perfect this methodology. Perhaps this could have long-lasting implications such as influencing the teacher-training of MFL trainee teachers, if taken on board by many teachers in schools.

Keywords: oracy; metacognition; thinking aloud; translation; visible talk

Context

This study was conducted in an Independent School in Hertford, England, United Kingdom. The study was conducted with 16-17 year-old students studying A level and International Baccalaureate. The focus was to observe the metacognitive strategies working with 'Thinking Out Aloud' applied to translation and literature analysis.

Motivation, focus and questions

The teachers wanted to explore the use of metacognitive strategies such as 'Thinking Aloud', , in line with the school-wide oracy strategy, to develop students' self-reflection and improve how they approach translation tasks as teachers found that often students have misconceptions of their ability to tackle translation tasks effectively as students can sometimes struggle with certain grammatical concepts. Our inspiration for 'thinking aloud' came from research by Cambridge International Teaching and Learning who explored 'metacognitive talk'. They define this as a 'person saying out loud what they are thinking while they are carrying out a task.' They go on to say, 'Learners talking out loud is sometimes viewed by teachers to be an annoyance or a distraction in the classroom. However, talking out loud can help learners to focus and monitor their cognitive processing as well as helping them to develop a deeper understanding of their own thinking processes.'

The teachers wanted to make students more analytical with their language when they translate and look at grammar in a more formal and methodical way. The teachers also applied 'Thinking Aloud' to the analysis of literature as a collaborative tool for teaching and learning literature. The teachers were interested in making students take time to approach translation tasks and literature analysis in order to avoid them rushing into translation exercises based on false assumptions of their knowledge.

The aim of this project was to develop aspects of Metacognition taken from 'Getting Started with Metacognition' from Cambridge International Teaching and Learning in order to improve students' analytical skills applied to translation and literature analysis. The teachers used the Cambridge University Community literature to perfect their background knowledge on metacognition. The teachers were interested in this aspect of metacognition that they define as, ' the learner's knowledge of different strategies that are available to them and when they are appropriate to the task (e.g. 'If I scan the text first it will help me to understand the overall meaning'). The teachers wanted the pupils to be exposed to a range of strategies that their peers may use, so as to uncover the most suitable strategy for each student. With the correct strategy, pupils are able to achieve much more. This idea was researched by Vygotsky who theorised the Zone of Proximal Development. This is defined as "the zone that lies between what a learner can achieve alone and what a learner can achieve with expert guidance."

Teachers hope that by providing pupils with this 'thinking aloud' technique, pupils are then able to achieve more, with regard to their grammar understanding or literary analysis, than they would have otherwise been able to without this specific learning technique.

Inquiry plan and activities

The Research Lesson Study involved three lesson observations focused on translation skills and literary analysis. The teachers structured the enquiry plan with lesson observation followed by

discussion meetings in which the teacher observed received feedback from the other two teachers and then the group discussed the next steps involved in lesson planning for the following lesson. Teachers had to consider different cohorts of students and different approaches related to teaching of translation techniques and analysis of literature extracts for the International Baccalaureate.

Observations of case students (including comparison with predictions).

The study involved one class of five students, and a second class of five students, and a third class of ten students. All students in each in each group were selected for the study, regardless of ability as the teachers wanted to find out what the impact of 'thinking aloud' was in students of different abilities, to develop this technique as a tool for language learning for all abilities and to develop oracy skills for students at all levels. We gathered feedback from students, some orally and some via a survey (see resource). We did have a post-lesson discussion after every lesson in order to discuss the methodology's effectiveness and next steps forward. The teachers' predictions were that there would be a certain reticence from high ability students to take steps before tackling translations while teachers predicted that perhaps lower ability students would be more open to taking a more methodical approach.

Although both the above predictions were confirmed, post-study feedback from students showed that the process was overall well received and that all students saw benefit from taking this approach as a working method.

Lesson 1

What happened?

(1) The teacher explained the concept to the pupils and elicited discussion about inner monologues
(2) The teacher modelled my own thinking aloud
(3) Pupils were put into pairs. One partner completed a translation into German (testing vocabulary and grammar that we had covered in class). The other partner had to scribe their thoughts verbatim.
(4) The group then went through the answers of the translations.
(5) Pupils were asked to reflect on the success of the process.
(6) They were set a prep to complete more translations and speak aloud their thoughts. This was modelled by me first.
(7) The teacher marked their 'thoughts allowed' and noted down any misconceptions.
(8) The teacher then went through this with them in the next lesson.

Lesson 2

What happened?

(1) The teacher started by setting out the lesson objectives and how we are going to use Thinking Aloud and apply it to translation tasks and grammatical analysis
(2) Students then completed a 'spot the error' activity in order to making them think about translation and discuss common misconceptions with each other

(3) Students then watched a video in which I modelled the translation process while thinking aloud

(4) For the next activity I divided the students into two groups, each group had to translate a different text into English analysing the grammar and looking at potential challenges

(5) Each group then presented their impressions to the other group

(6) Students stayed within the same groups to translate two different texts into Spanish analysing all aspects of the translation process and taking notes of the difficulties encountered

(7) Reflection of the whole process

The planning of the second lesson involved a translation into English as an intermediary step as a way of scaffolding for this particular group. This served as a good way of highlighting common misconceptions about translation. It was also a good way to get them to discuss grammatical items in the sentences as a stepping stone to the metacognitive task of verbalising their thinking when doing the translation into Spanish.

Lesson 3

Using metacognition to help pupils find interesting connections in unseen literary texts

Using metacognition to help pupils make interesting connections in unseen literary texts was a great way to engage them in the reading process and promote deeper thinking about the text. This is how the lesson was structured:

- The lesson started with a clear objective to make sure that pupils understood the goal of the lesson which was *to use metacognition to identify interesting connections in an unseen literary text.* The text was introduced and pupils received some background information, such as the author, genre, and time period.

- Active reading was encouraged and pupils were able to actively engage with the text by asking questions, making connections to their own experiences, and predicting what might happen next.

- Another important aspect of this lesson was monitoring comprehension: pupils were encouraged to monitor their own comprehension by checking for understanding as they read. This involved pausing periodically to summarise what they read or to clarify any confusing parts. The lesson promoted metacognition by asking pupils to reflect on their own reading experience by asking questions such as, "What connections can I make between this text and other texts I have read?" or "What personal experiences can I connect to this text?"

- It was also an example of collaborative learning as pupils worked together to discuss the text and shared their thoughts and insights. This helped pupils see the text from different perspectives and generate new ideas. At the end of the lesson, pupils were able to summarise the connections that they have made and they were invited to reflect on the metacognitive strategies they used to identify these connections.

Ethical considerations and relationships

The teachers had to explain the fact that we were trying out a new teaching method and we kindly appreciated the pupils' feedback.

Other ethical considerations included anonymising the pupils, so that pupils could not be identified. Teachers selected translation extracts that were based on the relevant syllabi and that took into account the moral, spiritual and cultural needs of the pupils.

Findings

Pupils had to fill in a survey after they had completed their Think Aloud videos.

'Did this help' refers to whether pupils believed the Thinking aloud process was useful to them.

Pupil responses to 'Did this help?'

Yes, but not really as half the time I just "knew" instead of actually thinking of the rules
Yes, I understood the cases much more!
I don't mind doing these exercises but I think going through grammar instead of rushing to translate a sentence is better in revising things such as cases
Pupil 1
14/11/2022 17:51:55

It definitely did (help) as i had to stop and think of what im writing, however i normally just write what i feel is right
Defiantly as the cases make more sense now in that particular sentence as well as how to apply them in other scenarios
It's quite hard to write and speak at the same time i would say
Pupil 2
14/11/2022 18:20:41

It helped, but not a lot because for me it comes natural
Yes
No
Pupil 3
15/11/2022 22:46:47

a bit, but generally I would prefer fluency to thorough understanding of grammar
yes, as I did the translations I was revising different grammatical structures
I would prefer traditional revision methods to this task in the future as I believe that it is of limited effectiveness
Pupil 4

Positive feedback included that it increased their understanding of the German cases, and that they had to slow down on their translations, 'as I normally write what I feel is right'.

Some pupils were negative about the process, stating that they just 'knew' the correct answer, and so didn't need to spell out each thought. This certainly was not the case. My findings were that pupils do in fact need practice at doing this. The task needs to be challenging but attainable, otherwise there is cognitive overload. There were tangible benefits: when pupils are forced to speak aloud their thoughts, they are forced to think through their thought processes behind the grammar they are applying. Due to making thinking transparent , teachers know exactly what the misconceptions are. Overall we believe that the positive responses outweigh the negative responses.

Here are some findings from the three lessons:

(1) Firstly, when pupils are forced to speak aloud their thoughts, they are forced to think through their thought processes behind the grammar/literary analysis they are applying. Due to making thinking transparent, teachers know exactly what the misconceptions are, and can support them.

(2) The more able students in the language seemed to be reticent to think aloud and wanted to go straight to translation without reflecting at all on the grammatical steps to get the correct end result. However, these pupils were actually making errors. Showing them they were making mistakes, made them more willing to engage with the task.

(3) Less able students seemed to not have confidence in their own grammatical knowledge to be able to tackle the task at first. There needs to be a good balance between challenge and attainability in the tasks.

(4) After completing the translation and literary analysis tasks students reflected on how useful this process had been and how they could apply metacognition to their practice when tackling translations and literary texts. Students' general consensus was that this methodology was a useful process that they could take forward in future.

(5) Pupils showed a lack of enthusiasm at first, but soon they engaged in the activity, encouraged by the possibility to make mistakes as the focus of the activity was to highlight the metacognitive process. It was also visible an increasing interest in the activity and in some cases, a stronger motivation.

(6) Overall, using metacognition to help pupils find interesting connections in unseen literary texts can be a highly engaging and effective way to promote deep thinking and reading comprehension. By using a combination of active reading, monitoring comprehension and collaborative learning, pupils develop strong metacognitive skills that will help them in their future reading and learning experiences.

(7) Pupils practised the skills of verbalising their thinking, therefore worked on their skills of oracy.

(8) It seems that pupils gain from being able to see the steps and thought processes going on in someone else's mind. It makes them feel less alone in their learning journey.

Changes to practice

The teachers have tried this approach with Year 9 and Year 11 and the aim is to apply this methodology to different year groups. The aim is also to improve the grammar understanding and oracy in the department. Other colleagues in the department have also started showing an interest in applying these activities in their teaching practice and have tried this with success.

With exam years, particularly in A Level, this methodology will be developed as a sequence of lessons to fine tune exam technique as well as a language learning tool with other year groups. These lessons can be used to develop the students' analytical skills and at the same time they seemed to help students further develop their oracy skills as they have to discuss how they approach translation in front of their peers. It was also interesting to challenge students' grammatical knowledge.

'Thinking aloud' will prove very useful to prepare pupils as a first step into the commentary of unseen literary texts, as it provided a possibility to share ideas and interpretations with others.

Reflective evaluation on the process

Researching this process proved to be an useful diagnostic tool for students' prior grammatical knowledge which can be implemented with classes when trying to uncover misconceptions of tricky abstract grammar concepts. Pupils seemed to enjoy the process of reading what their peers are thinking, and it was engaging for the pupils to have to write down their partner's thought process.

Students were able to look at grammar in a more methodical way and taking an analytical approach to their translation helped them fine tune their skills and develop new methods of approaching translation tasks. It was interesting to see how the more able students seemed somewhat reticent to verbalise their knowledge of basic structures as this was perceived as a superfluous, unnecessary step. However, as they encountered more difficult grammatical items and when approaching the translation of a text as a whole they saw how useful this skill is. Students worked collaboratively in a very productive way.

More time for lesson observations and meetings to discuss our impressions and findings would have been useful in perfecting new methods to approach 'thinking aloud'.

Trying out 'thinking aloud' for literature analysis also worked well with Sixth form students. The maturity and confidence of students played a part in their ability to present their analysis and reflections of different extracts. At the same time, presenting in front of their peers helped develop their oracy and presentational skills and students were supportive of each other.

Next steps

Developing this methodology as a teaching technique with different year groups is a target for the future. 'Thinking aloud' not only seemed to help develop students' analytical skills but it can be used as a very useful method to develop students' oracy. 'Thinking aloud' can also be used as a formative assessment tool for the teacher as it helped identify where students may have lacunae in their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge. We will also continue to use 'thinking aloud' with Sixth form students, who are used to the methodology, to develop the translation of more difficult passages and develop students' knowledge of certain intricacies of language such as specific idiomatic expressions that cannot be translated literally.

Supplementary materials / resources

- The teachers created PowerPoint slides to introduce the concept to our respective classes. Examples of some of these are in the Appendix.

- The teachers used the Explain Everything (https://explaineverything.com/) app to model a 'Thinking Aloud' video. Pupils did their own and uploaded these onto Google Classroom.
- The teachers provided unseen literary text and briefly explained the task.

References

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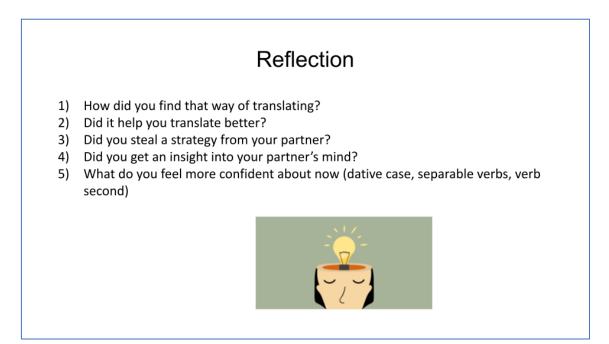
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Appendix

The teachers created PowerPoint slides to introduce the concept to our respective classes. Examples of some of these have been provided here:

Lesson 1

Reflection

1) How did you find that way of translating?
2) Did it help you translate better?
3) Did you steal a strategy from your partner?
4) Did you get an insight into your partner's mind?
5) What do you feel more confident about now (dative case, separable verbs, verb second)

Prep for Monday - Think Aloud Videos

Create an explain everything video (My example Think Aloud video) of you completing the following translations and taking **me through the grammatical steps and reasoning to make that happen.**

1) Normally the water pollution in the sea damages the animals, which is awful.
2) The problem of meat production is that is causes climate change.
3) Therefore too many factories in the world contributes to a world which is broken.

Lesson 2

Think, pair, share!
'Making Thinking Visible' - Translation

How do you approach translations?

Do you think about grammar when you tackle translations?
- We are going to translate several texts
- At the same time you translate, you will be reflecting about the challenges that you are finding
- You will also analyse all grammatical items that you will find
- In the last activity you will be taking notes of all translated grammar and the difficulties that you are finding

Encuentra los errores

More and more people are using the internet to watch their favourite programmes

- Más y más personas son usando la internet para ver sus programas favoritas.
- Más y más personas son usando la internet para ver sus programas favoritas.
- Cada vez más personas están usando (el) internet para ver sus programas favoritos.

Last year cyberbullying cases increased by a 20% amongst young people

- El año pasado ciberacoso casos incrementaba por un 20% para la joven gente.
- El año pasado ciberacoso casos incrementaba por un 20% para la joven gente.
- El año pasado los casos de ciberacoso incrementaron en un 20% entre los jóvenes.

Think, pair, share!

In groups translate into English.
- Analyse the language.
- What are the challenges that you have to consider?

Nayana, Valentine y Víctor

En 2008 solamente el 3% de internautas españoles tenían cuenta de Twitter, mientras que hoy en día el número ha aumentado hasta el 53%.

Louie y Max

En el futuro las redes sociales caminarán a la par de los avances tecnológicos y el usuario más activo de Internet aspirará a estar conectado en todo momento.

Think, pair, share!

En grupos, traducid al español y **hablad de todo el proceso de traducción**.
- Analizad el lenguaje.
- ¿Qué retos tenéis que considerar a la hora de traducir?
- Tomad notas de las dificultades.

Group 1

Spain is one of the countries with a higher rate of cyberbullying according to a recent study published by the World Health Organisation.

Group 2

According to the study young people who were victims of cyberbullying last year suffered negative effects in their mental health such as depression.

Reflection

1) How did you find that way of translating?
2) Did it help you translate better?
3) What grammatical items do you think you have to fine tune?
4) What challenges do you think you will find in translations?