

Listening Comprehension Ability and the Use of Listening Strategies by Iranian Pre-intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

Listening is an essential aspect of communicative competence and one of the most frequently used language skill (Richards, 2008). The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between listening strategy used by Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners and their listening comprehension. To have a homogeneous group, a group of 56 male pre-intermediate EFL learners among a total number of 178 junior high-school students, who were studying in a high-school in Iran, were chosen by implementing Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Then a Listening Comprehension Test adapted from Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) was used to assess participants' listening comprehension. Listening strategy use was also assessed by a Listening Strategy Questionnaire by Chen (2010). The translated version of questionnaire (to Persian) was used to make sure that students would understand the questions well enough and answer them appropriately. After gathering the data, a one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data the results of which revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the listening strategies (meta-cognitive, cognitive and, socio-affective) employed by Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners and their listening comprehension ability. Results revealed that cognitive strategies were used more frequently by participants who outperformed other participants of the study in listening comprehension.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension, Listening Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Socio-affective Strategies, PET

INTRODUCTION

English is the official language in a large number of countries, although it is not the most spoken language in the world. Approximately two billion people use English to communicate all around the world. Therefore, English is important for all people to

communicate. Among the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, listening plays a vital role in the acquisition of English. Research has shown that in daily life, forty to fifty percent of people's communication time is spent on listening (Vandergrift, 1999). Moreover, based on Krashen's input hypothesis, listening provides a comprehensible input for learners in communication, which assists people's understanding of the communicational information (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Therefore, for students who learn English as a second or a foreign language (SL or FL), it is necessary to improve their learning abilities of listening; as Feyten (1991) has pointed out listening comprehension is an important skill in second or foreign language acquisition.

Language learning strategies are defined as specific methods or techniques used by individual learners to facilitate the comprehension, retention, retrieval and application of information for language learning and acquisition (Oxford, 1990). There are some learner's differences that affect their language learning and their choice of strategies (Azumi, 2008; Martinez, 1996). Learning strategies are "the specific thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Among the strategies, O'Malley and Chamot's (1990, 1985) cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective strategies, that are based on cognitive theory (Liu, 2008), seems to be the basic and three main category of strategies. It should be mentioned that although there are other strategies with other names (Griffith, 2004), but they are not different in nature. They are just different in their names and in their classification that different researchers used them according to their survey's aims.

Cognitive strategies are behaviors, techniques, or actions used by learners to facilitate acquisition of knowledge or a skill. They are directly related to the performance of certain learning tasks e.g., elaboration, inference, and translation. Metacognitive learning strategies are those that involve knowing about learning and controlling learning through planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning activity. The social-affective strategies are a collection of strategies that involve the control of resources, time, effort and support. For instance, 'question for clarification' and 'cooperation' are among the social-affective strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

In the past two decades, dozens of studies have contributed to our understanding of strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners at the level of adults, college/university students, and secondary students but very limited studies have been performed in Iran concerning the strategies employed by Iranian young adult students in relation to listening proficiency levels. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the relationship between strategies employed by Iranian junior high-school students and their listening comprehension.

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the listening comprehension strategies used more frequently by Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners?

- What is the relationship between the listening strategy that Iranian pre-intermediate learners use and their listening comprehension ability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening comprehension is important for language learning in general and FL learning in particular because it allows learners to internalize language items through exposure to the target language (Brown, 2001). Scholars agree that effective language learning cannot occur without receiving sufficient language input (Krashen, 1985; Peterson, 2001). Listening is a main avenue of such input. Long ago, listening was thought of as a passive skill (Jung, 2003; Vandergrift, 2004). Recently, this view has been replaced by a more accurate view that listening is an active process that entails listeners' constructing meaning by interacting with the material being listened to (Bentley & Bacon, 1996; Nunan, 1998; Holden, 2004). This recent conception is reflected in the definition of listening offered by O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989, p. 19), "listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement." With the advent of this recent view and the interest placed on learner variables, language learning strategies in general and strategy use within specific language skills in particular began to capture researchers' interest. This movement began by researchers' exploring strategies used by successful language learners on the belief that successful learners use strategies which, if identified and described, can be taught to less successful learners to better their learning. Listening research of this type has produced several, but similar taxonomies of listening strategies.

A large proportion of second and foreign language research findings indicated that listening is the most important skill for language learning, because it is the most widely used language skill in normal daily life (Morley, 2001; Rost, 2001). Listening is not only the first of the language skills developed, it is also the skill most frequently used in the classroom. In a language classroom, listening ability plays a significant role in the development of other language skills.

Researchers such as Tarone (1980), O'Malley et al. (1985), Oxford (1990), Goh (2000) along with many others have examined a wide variety of issues related to learning strategies. Chamot (1987) stated "learning strategies are techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistics and content area information" (P.71). Oxford (1990) added "strategies are especially important for language learning, because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence" (p.10).

Research into strategic listening has focused on identifying and classifying strategies used by learners, especially good ones, when involved in the listening process (e.g. Vandergrift, 1997, 2003; Goh, 2002; Liu, 2008). A second trend has investigated the frequency of listening strategies in different groups of language learners (e.g. Piamsai,

2005; Bidabadi & Yamat, 2011; Tavakoli, Shahraki, & Rezazadeh, 2012; Rahimia & Katala, 2012). A third line of research has examined the relationship between strategy use and such variable as listening comprehension, anxiety, and self-efficacy (e.g. Chen, 2007; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Liu, 2008; Mohseny & Raeisi, 2009; Rahimi & Abedini, 2009; Golchi, 2012; Serraj & Noordin, 2013; Tsai, 2013). A fourth research trend has tested the reflection of strategy instruction on listening achievement and other factors that relate to the listening process (e.g., Carrier, 2003; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Cross, 2009; Coşkun, 2010; Rahimi & Katal, 2013; Bozorgian & Pillay, 2013; Rasouli, Mollakhan, & Karbalaee, 2013; Dousti & Abolfathiasl, 2013; Yekta, Jahandar, & Khodabandehlou, 2013). The area of listening strategy use still captures researchers' interest everywhere in the world.

As reported by Schwartz (1998, p. 7) strategic listening can be defined "as the process of being aware of listening processes, having a repertoire of listening strategies, and knowing which one works best with which listening tasks." The author adds "using various listening strategies in combination and varying the combination with the listening task, being flexible in the use of strategies, using both bottom-up and top-down strategies, and planning, monitoring, and evaluating before, during and after listening" as strategic listening (Schwartz, 1998, p. 7).

Some researchers such as O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper, (1989), Vandergrift (1997), Goh (2002), Vandergrift (2003) and Liu (2008) among others investigated the relationship between listening strategy employed by students and their listening abilities. They focused on mental processes of listeners (perception, parsing and utilization). They believe that more-proficient listeners are able to focus on what is being heard, to plan what to listen for; whereas less proficient listeners would utilize strategies randomly (Liu, 2008).

In Iran, the learners of foreign language mostly do not feel strength in listening. They are always concerned about lack of understanding the native speakers in real situation, in movies or while listening to authentic news through radio (Hatch & Faraday, 2008).

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the current study included 56 male Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners who were studying in Sama junior high-school, Shahreza, Iran. The participants were selected from among 178 students at the 7th and 8th grades (which are first or second grade of junior high school) by administrating the OPT. Pre-intermediate EFL learners were chosen because the number of learners at this level of English proficiency seems to be more among junior high-school students in comparison to other English proficiency levels.

Instruments

Three instruments, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a Listening Comprehension Test, and a Listening Strategy Questionnaire, were used for collecting data in the present study.

The Oxford Placement Test

Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004), which is a standardized test of Oxford University to determine EFL learners' proficiency level and make the participants homogenized, was used to identify the participants English proficiency level.

Listening Comprehension Test

For assessing the listening ability of participants Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET), which is an English language examination provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment, was used. The listening part of this test contains 25 questions in four different parts. Recorded materials included announcements, interviews and discussions about everyday life. The test was taken from Cambridge Preliminary English Test3 (2003).

This test was selected among all standard tests because it demonstrates language proficiency at Level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) that fits our participants' level of proficiency best.

Listening Strategy Questionnaire

To elicit strategies (cognitive, metacognitive or socio-affective) that participants used, Listening Comprehension Strategy Questionnaire by Chen (2010) was administered. The questionnaire adapted from Vandergrift (1997) and Goh (2002), contains 36 questions in separated parts. The questionnaire was translated into Persian by researchers and the Persian version of it was distributed among participants.

Procedure

After administering the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) among 178 students of Sama Junior High-School in Shahreza, Iran, 53 participants at pre-intermediate level of English proficiency were chosen.

Then, Listening Comprehension Test which was taken from Cambridge Preliminary English Test3 (2003) was administered. PET contains 25 listening questions in four parts and needed 35 minutes to answer.

At the next step, on the same day and in the same location, 53 questionnaires on listening comprehension strategies were distributed among the same participants. That questionnaire was by Chen (2010) which was translated into Persian by the researchers because of the participants English proficiency level and to prevent problems that may occur in understanding the questions.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the instruments were coded for statistical treatment. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 15) was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to obtain patterns of strategy use.

Then, in order to find answers to the research questions, the results obtained from the listening comprehension test and the proficiency test were analyzed. A one-way ANOVA was computed to explore the difference between strategy use and listening comprehension.

RESULTS

The results of listening comprehension strategy questionnaire were analyzed to find out which strategy was used more in each group. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of each group's use of different strategies.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of Listening Comprehension Strategy Questionnaire among group A, B, and C

	Groups	Cognitive	Metacognitive	Socio-affective
Rate	A	65.76%	22.44%	11.80%
	B	28.12%	57.92%	13.96%
	C	27.57%	14.43%	58.00%

As the table shows in group A, cognitive strategy (65.76%) was used more in comparison with the other two strategies (metacognitive 22.44% and socio-affective 11.80%); and, in group A cognitive strategy was used more than the other groups (B and C) who used cognitive strategy 28.12% and 27.57% each respectively. In Group B, students in comparison with other groups and the other strategies used metacognitive (57.92%) more and in group C, students used more socio-affective (58%) strategy in comparison with the other two strategies of this group and also in comparison with the use of this strategy in other groups (A and B).

The results of participants' performance on PET were analyzed and they were divided into three groups based on their scores on PET. The first one (Group A) obtained scores between 14 to 16. The second one (Group B), obtained scores between 17-19, and the third one (Group C) obtained scores between 20 to 24, as displayed in the following table.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of PET among pre-intermediate students

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
A: 14-16	31	21.2581	1.54850	.27812	20.00	24.00
B: 17-19	16	18.3750	.95743	.23936	17.00	19.00
C: 20-24	6	15.3333	.81650	.33333	14.00	16.00
Total	53	19.7170	2.42881	.33362	14.00	24.00

As indicated in Table 2, the mean score of group A, who used cognitive strategy more frequently, is higher than group B who used metacognitive strategy and group C who used socio-affective strategy more frequently. Also, the mean score of group B in comparison with group C is higher. The total mean score of the participants in group A is 21.25 and higher in comparison to the mean score of group B (18.37) and group C (15.33).

In order to find out whether the differences in the participants' on PET is statistically significant strategies, a series of one way ANOVAs were conducted to compare different groups' mean score. As displayed in Table 3, analysis of the one-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference among groups' mean score ($F=61.14$, $p<.0001$).

Table 3. The Result of One Way ANOVA between Two Groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	217.736	2	108.868	61.149	.000
Within Groups	89.019	50	1.780		
Total	306.755	52			

For further analysis, a Tukey test was run to identify between group comparisons. These analyses showed that group A that used cognitive strategy more frequently is significantly ($p < 0.001$) better than the other two groups that used metacognitive strategies and socio-affective more frequently respectively. The effect of second most frequent listening strategy, which is metacognitive, on listening comprehension ability of Group B is significantly better than that of socio-affective strategy on listening comprehension ability of Group C. Table 4 displays the results of multiple comparisons of groups.

Table 4. Results of Multiple Comparisons of One Way ANOVA

Groups (I)	Groups (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
A	B	2.88306*	.41074	.000	1.8910	3.8752
	C	5.92473*	.59511	.000	4.4873	7.3622
B	A	-2.88306*	.41074	.000	-3.8752	-1.8910
	C	3.04167*	.63875	.000	1.4988	4.5845
C	A	-5.92473*	.59511	.000	-7.3622	-4.4873
	B	-3.04167*	.63875	.000	-4.5845	-1.4988

DISCUSSION

This study explored the pattern of listening strategy use among a group of Iranian pre-intermediate in Sama high school in Shahreza, Iran. Regarding the first research question, descriptive statistics of the Listening Strategy Questionnaire revealed that participants who used cognitive strategies more frequently than metacognitive and socio-affective strategies outperformed the other participants. One explanation is that cognitive strategies require less formal instruction to be learned and mastered, and through the development of language skills learners become more competent in using cognitive strategies due to unconscious use of cognitive strategies based on their

common sense. Therefore, the frequent use of cognitive strategies may lead to better performance in general and in listening skill in particular, as in our study.

The cognitive and metacognitive strategies registered as the second and third most frequent strategy used by the participants whose performance on listening comprehension test were significantly better than those of other participants. One explanation is that metacognitive and socio-affective strategies need to be taught to EFL students. In Iran, Riazi (2007), emphasized the important role of the instructor in encouraging the use of social and affective strategies compared to the other types of strategies.

As for the second question of the study, the findings of the present study showed a statistically significant relation between students' strategic listening and their listening comprehension performance. The results of present study support Goh and Kwah (1997) which revealed that students regularly employ more cognitive strategies first then they use metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension and rarely utilize socio-affective strategies.

This is also in line with other studies, in which high users of overall, cognitive and metacognitive strategies outperformed low users in listening comprehension (e.g., Goh, 2002; Vandergrift, 2003; Mohseny & Raeisi, 2009; Bidabadi & Yamat, 2011; Afshar & Hamzavi, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the relationship between strategies used by Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners and their listening comprehension. The results showed a significant difference among mean scores of participants who used cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies differently. The results indicated that more frequently use of cognitive strategy causes more success in listening comprehension. The second strategy after cognitive was metacognitive whose users achieved satisfactory success; and, the last one was socio-affective whose users obtained scores that were significantly lower than those of the other two groups whose participants used cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently.

It follows that teaching strategies to students is so important for them be more familiar with different strategies and to know that which one is more useful in listening comprehension. In other words, teachers are advised to encourage their learners to identify the strategies they use while engaged in listening activities and inform them of the techniques which seem to be more appropriate for their language proficiency level. As Fleming and Walls (1998) contend, an understanding and awareness of learning strategies on the part of teachers as well as students can provide valuable insights into the process of language learning and teaching.

This study is not a perfect and free-from-fault study as it is the case in most studies. One limitation is the number of participants that makes the readers generalize the results cautiously. Moreover, in this study, only male students were selected. Further studies can, therefore, be conducted on a larger sample of participants including both male and female learners

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APPENDIX

Listening Comprehension Strategy Questionnaire (Persian Form)

Adapted from Vandergrift (1997) and Goh (2002)

پرسشنامه راهکارهای درک شنیداری زبان خارجی انگلیسی

چه کاری انجام می‌دهید زمانی که در کلاس و یا خارج از کلاس به یک مکالمه می‌نشینید و سعی می‌کنید تا متوجه شوید؟ لطفاً با زدن علامت ۱- در گزینه ای که به بهترین شکل حالت شما را در مورد هر سوال نشان می‌دهد، به سوالات زیر پاسخ دهید. صداقت و دقت شما در جواب به این سوالات بسیار اهمیت دارد. هیچ جواب صد حقیقی برای این سوالات وجود ندارد. لطفاً طوری جواب دهید که بهترین روش حال حاضر شما را در گوش دادن به یک مکالمه ی انگلیسی نشان دهد.

جواب به هر سوال بر اساس یک انتخاب 5 گزینه ای به شرح زیر می باشد:

گزینه 1: تقریباً هرگز گزینه 2: بندرت گزینه 3: گاهی اوقات گزینه 4: معمولاً گزینه 5: تقریباً همیشه

5	4	3	2	1	قسمت اول: روش Metacognitive
					قیقه از اینکه به مکالمه گوش کنم:
					1. من در ابتدا معاون تمرین را می‌خواهم.
					2. لغات و کلمات مهم مربوط به این موضوع را مرور می‌کنم.
					3. در ذهن برنامه ای برای آنکه چگونه سوال به گوش کنم دارم.
					در حالی که به مکالمه گوش می‌کنم، کارای زیر را انجام می‌دهم:
					4. با دقت گوش می‌کنم تا بطور واضح متوجه شوم چیزی گفته می‌شود.
					5. زمانی که ذهنم از مطلب دور می‌شود، سریعاً به خود را باز متمرکز می‌کنم.
					6. زمانی قسمتی که متوجه نمی‌شوم، سعی می‌کنم به دیگر قسمت ها همچنان گوش کنم.
					7. قیقه از اینس می‌کنم متوجه شوم، سعی می‌کنم که تا به جنبه ای خاصی از مطلب (مثلاً کلمات کلیدی آشنا، استرس کلمه یا بلندی صدا) گوش کنم.
					8. سعی می‌کنم با دقت برای موضوع یا حالت سال و گوش کنم.
					9. از خود می‌پرسم که چه چیز گوش می‌کنم یا چه چیزی شده مجتهده ام.
					10. زمانی که می‌کنم چیزی را متوجه نشده ام، بررسی می‌کنم که بامولیت سوال همخوانی داشته باشد.
					11. زمانی که می‌کنم چیزی را متوجه شده ام، با اطلاعات عمومی خودم مقایسه می‌کنم.
					12. اگر متوجه شود که اطلاعات صحیح نیست بستم برداشتم از سوال را تنظیم می‌کنم.
					13. سعی می‌کنم با سرعت پیش برم و کس العمل سریع در موارد لازم نشان میدم.
					بدان اینکه به مکالمه گوش کردم:
					14. مشکلاتم در مورد لیستینگ را بازگو می‌کنم، مثلاً لغات کلیدی فهمیده نمی‌شود یا میزان تمرکز کافی نبود.
					15. میزان فهم را از یابی می‌کنم، به رای مثال توانستم 80 درصد متن را بفهمم.
					16. راهکار بکار برده ام برای فهم مطلب را از یابی می‌کنم و به راهکارهای دیگر که می‌توانست کم کند فکر می‌کردم، برای مثال، کمترین کلمات از آشنای درگیر می‌شود.

قسمت دوم: روش Cognitive					
زمانی که به مکالمه گوش میدهم برای درک بهتر:					
					17. در ابتدا برای ایده کلی لیستینگ آن را گوش میدهم.
					18. زمانی که چیزی را موجه نمیشوم، از سرخ ای ه متن، ماندن: کلمات آشنا، صدای ه پس زمینه، بلدی صدا، استفاده می‌کنم تا ی نهم را حدس بزنم.
					19. زمانی که چیزی را متوجه نمیشوم، از اطلاعات تصاویر یا اصطلاحاتی که گویکا دندر میبرد، استفاده می‌کنم تا معاذ را حدس بزنم.
					20. از تجربه و لمع دربار ه ی موضوع استفاده می‌کنم تا به معاذ برسم.
					21. از دانمش در زبان انگ لیسی استفاده می‌کنم تا به معاذ برسم. (برای مثال، آا مکنیا کلمه صفت است یا اسم)
					22. قبل از اینکه چیزی بشنوم، سد می‌کنم حدس بزنم چیز قرار است گفته شود.
					23. از چیزی ش ه‌کیده ام استفاده می‌کنم تا مطلبی بعدی را حدس بزنم.
					24. از تصاویر ذی‌نه یا واقع ی استفاده می‌کنم تا در فهم مطلب به من کمک کند.
					25. میتوانم برخی از کلمات کل یدیرا در ذهنم مجسم کنم.
					26. سیع می‌کنم به هر کلمه یا جزییات گوش کنم.
					27. قبل از سیع برای هی‌دهن همه مطالب، ابتدا برخی از کلمات سخت را به فارسی ترجمه می‌کنم.
					28. قبل از سیع برای فمیدهن کل مطلب، کل جمله را ابتدا به فارسی ترجمه می‌کنم.
					29. زمانی که کلای هم را میشنوم که درکش نمی‌کنم، زیاد سیع نمی‌کنم تا معانیش را متوجه شوم.
					30. زمانی که کلای هم را میشنوم که درکش نمی‌کنم، سیع می‌کنم صداهای کلمه را تکرار کنم.
					31. سیع می‌کنم کلمات ک لیدیرا حفظ کنم و مفاهیمی کلی را که همونشید در ذهنم دسته بندی کنم.
					32. کلمات و مفاهیم کلی را بصرتو خلاصه، تصویر یا ددیع مینویسم.
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زمانی که چیزی را متوجه نمی شوم:					
					33. از گوینده یا لمعم می‌خواهم تا دوباره تکرار کند یا توضیح دده.
					34. از دوستان یا همکلاسی هایم می‌خواهم تا درکم از لیستینگ را شفاف کنند.
					35. نگراموشن نمی و در حین گوش دادن آرام سهتم.
					36. خودم را از طریق مثبت صحبت کردن با خود، تشویق می‌کنم.