



## The Effect of Strategy-Based Instruction on EFL Learners' Listening Performance

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### Abstract

The main intent of the present study was to find out the effect of strategy-based instruction (SBI) on developing L2 English learners' listening performance. Based on the homogeneity tests, out of 110 students only 62 were chosen as the participants of this study and assigned into the experimental and control groups. The students' age ranged from 16 to 22. The experimental group received three cognitive strategies (i.e., contextualization, inference and focus on some structural parts) and four metacognitive strategies (i.e., manipulating advanced organizer, selective listening, auditory memory management, and performance evaluation) as their strategy-based treatment. The control group, on the other hand, was taught based on the traditional listening comprehension activities. The results of data analysis revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of their listening comprehension skills. Implications for developing listening materials and research methods are discussed.

**Keywords:** strategy-based Instruction, metacognitive strategies, listening instruction

### INTRODUCTION

Based on the increased specialization experienced by the researchers and practitioners in the field of second/foreign language (L2) learning in general and L2 listening comprehension in particular, the process of L2 teaching/learning as well as materials design has undergone some dramatic developments during the last two decades. By focusing on EFL learners' problematic areas in listening comprehension process, researchers have realized that in modern spoken English, the ideal phonetic and phonological signals become altered in ways that create difficulties for the learner, who may well have been exposed to the "slow colloquial" form of English in their older textbooks (Brown, 1977, p. 2). Moreover, we know how spoken English has a more "diffuse cognitive content," how speech is not generally used to transmit "detailed information," and how speech is used primarily for "purposes of social interaction" (Brown, 1978, p. 276).

Considering the important role that listening comprehension plays in the process of language learning, Porter and Roberts (1981, p. 30) assert that "listening, more than any

other skill, has been sold short". They proved that the concept of listening had been seen as a model of speech production previously, whereas it has contributed to many investigations in various areas at the present time. Porter and Roberts further add that exposing L2 learners to authentic materials can be considered as an effective procedure used to develop their L2 listening comprehension proficiency. In fact, these materials can be learned as an appropriate input within a practical pedagogical framework.

Generally, providing a clear and comprehensive definition for listening comprehension skill is one of the challengeable processes. Some practitioners of the field have defined the term listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying (Howatt & Dakin, 1974). This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, her/his grammar, her/his vocabulary, and grasping her/his meaning. In this regard, Richards (1983) states that understanding the nature of listening comprehension draws on research in psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science.

In spite of the widespread presence of listening activities EFL young learners experience within the EFL context, they still show a deficiency in listening skills exhibited in inability to communicate effectively, follow oral directions and comprehend listening activities, because their teachers' listening instruction is more concerned with testing their comprehension rather than teaching them to listen effectively (Brown, 1986; Richards, 1983). As another important factor underlying EFL learners' deficiency in listening comprehension, some researchers (e.g., Graham, 2006; Underwood, 1989) also point to the problematic belief and knowledge learners have about themselves and their EFL context.

From the learners' point of view, the main problems are "dealing with such dilemmas as the speed of delivery of text, making out individual words in a stream of spoken English and making sense of any words identified, limited vocabulary knowledge, failing to recognize the signals, and lack of contextual knowledge" (Graham, 2006, p. 221).

Based on the aforementioned facts, the present study made an attempt to explore the possible efficacy of strategy-based instructional procedures in enhancing EFL learners' listening comprehension proficiency through using cognitive and metacognitive listening comprehension strategies. The purpose of manipulating listening strategies is to enhance listeners' performance and encourage them to apply these strategies in learning and acquiring English as a second language.

In general, teaching listening strategies is regarded as one of the important and sophisticated procedures helping learners to learn how to listen (Graham, 2006). More specifically, these procedures play a significant function in helping advanced EFL listeners to become more efficient and independent listeners. Accordingly, concentrating on performing listening strategies is one of the advantageous concepts in the process of oral comprehension. In this regard, Field (2004) claimed that internalizing appropriate listening strategies has significant function in flourishing listening comprehension and the ultimate process of second language acquisition.

Besides, the manipulation of these listening strategies can help the intelligent instructors and syllabus designers to prepare and manage appropriate materials in the instructional process of listening skill (Vandergrift, 2004). Based on the above, this study tried to answer the following research question:

- To what extent does the application of strategy based-instruction (SBI) influence the listening performance of Iranian EFL learners?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Taxonomies of language learning strategies

Theoretical and experimental investigations in second language acquisition and in cognitive psychology have prompted the practitioners and researchers of learning strategies to reveal their beliefs about the gradual developmental process of language learning strategy application (Chamot, 1987; Chamot et al., 1996; O'Malley et al., 1985). In fact, in order to understand the cognitive and metacognitive process of learning it should be focused on understanding the main points of learning strategy application in EFL context (O'Malley et al., 1985). Moreover, Chamot (1987, p. 71) states that "investigations of students' learning strategies are a relatively new endeavor in the field of second language learning".

In order to increase the quality of teaching, most of investigators have begun to modify their focus from the teacher point of view to the learners' standpoints and learning strategies (Wenden, 1987). In order to clarify this concept so many different classifications were suggested since 1970's. Each classification has its own features to develop the quality of language learning process. In fact, there is no scholarly consensus of the best classification of language learning strategies. In this study, the classifications of some researchers have been reviewed to compare the developmental process of studies in L2 learning process.

Chamot et al., (1996) classified the learning strategies into three parts; namely, cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective strategies. The tripartite classification scheme, originally developed for ESL students, was later applied with foreign language learners. Examples of the three strategies in each category are metacognitive strategies for planning, monitoring, and evaluating a learning task; cognitive strategies for elaboration, grouping, making inference, and summarizing the information to be understood and learned; and social/affective strategies for questioning, cooperating, and self-talk to assist the learning process.

On the other hand, Rubin (1981) classified language learning strategies into primary and secondary strategies. His primary category is direct strategies, which consists of classification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, and practice. In fact, these classified strategies contribute directly to learning. The secondary category is indirect strategies, including creating opportunities for practice and procedure, which affect learning indirectly.

To be stricter based on the classifications of some investigators (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) metacognitive strategies can be defined as self-regulatory actions or techniques which learners use to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). It consists of such subcategories as planning, advanced organizer, direct attention, selective attention, self-evaluation and functional planning.

### **Studies of using learning strategies in EFL context**

It is proved that some researchers (e.g., O'Malley et al., 1985) linked their investigations to the function of language learning strategies in developing second language acquisition. And most of the results revealed that the major studies focused on type and frequency of learning strategies used by EFL students in beginning and intermediate level, the gradual effect of instructing listening strategies, and the types of language tasks associated with the strategies.

In revealing the use of learning strategies in pedagogical contexts, some researchers (e.g., O'Malley et al., 1985) mentioned their own strategy classification schemes. They executed a study of learning strategies with some high school EFL students in two sections. In section one, participants and instructors entered into the interview section of the study to identify strategies with a range of tasks found in EFL classrooms. In section two, the students were assigned to receive learning strategies training on vocabulary, listening, and speaking tasks. Results from the two sections revealed that students applied more familiar strategies to discrete-point rather than integrative tasks; besides, strategy training could be efficient for integrative language tasks.

Another similar study conducted by O'Malley et al. (1985) was designed to identify learning strategy use of beginning and intermediate EFL students. These students were interviewed in small groups in learning language tasks such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, following directions, listening, making a brief presentation in class, social communication, and functional communication. Findings displayed that strategies could be classified into three broad categories of metacognitive, cognitive, and social mediating strategies.

### **The Priority of Listening Skill**

Listening is probably the most important and fundamental language skill and most of people spend approximately 60% of their time to listening (Rubin, 1994). Among the four language skills the proportion time somebody spends on the various tasks of communication, listening, reading, speaking, and writing, is 45%, 30%, 16%, and 9%, respectively (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Oxford, 1993).

It is mentioned that "the natural order for first and second language learning is listening, speaking, reading, and writing." The audio-lingual method, for instance, also assumes listening is the primary skill in the sequence of listening, speaking, reading comprehension, and writing (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Therefore, when learning a second or foreign language, the first step is to make an effort to listen, just as in first

language acquisition. The literature thus shows that if students do not learn to listen effectively, they will not be able to participate in spoken communication in the target language (Field, 2003).

### **Cognitive strategies in listening comprehension**

Numerous researchers have argued different ways in which listeners can improve their comprehension competence by using cognitive strategies (Dunkel, 1991). He also investigated that manipulating cognitive strategies play significant role in improving EFL learners' comprehension competence. As such, in order to deal with the process of listening, adequate instructions needed to involve students in thinking not just about the content of listening, but more importantly about the process of listening.

Based on Bacon's study (1992), cognitive strategies are comprised of two subcategories of top-down and bottom-up processing. It is believed that lexical segmentation and word recognition skills are crucially related to bottom-up processing (Vandergrift, 2004). Moreover, Field (1999) mentioned that this kind of processing combines some groups of features. It can combine phonemes into syllables, syllables into words, words into clauses and clauses into sentences. In fact, these steps known as the gradual processes in dealing with such sophisticated procedures as analyzing, identifying words and assembling sentences (Lynch, 1998). It is believed that automatic bottom-up processing assists listeners to recognize the implications of the study appropriately (Lynch, 1998). Reaching this position in listening strategy management needed much more trying, motivation and monitoring.

In fact, instructing various supra-segmental features can also help listeners to be more successful in word, clause and phrase recognition (Field, 2003). In other words, mastering bottom-up processing in cognitive strategies is a kind of prerequisite of confronting top-down processing. So Vandergrift (2003) discussed about the use of strategies and believed that at the beginning or end of listening segment, less-successful listeners paying little attention to connecting ideas from one segment to another. They all try to distinguish different sections of bottom-up processing. They confronted with top-down processing as a kind of distracter in developing conceptual frameworks and contractual meaning. On the other hand, the bottom-up processing deficiency prevents L2 listeners from being able to recognize words automatically (Tyler, 2001).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

From the population of foreign language learners studying English at two language schools in Ardabil, Iran, an initial sample of 110 students, aged between 16 and 22, was randomly selected. Care was taken at this point to choose a homogeneous sample consisting of participants who were at intermediate level of language proficiency. Accordingly, an OQPT (Oxford Quick Placement Test) was administered so as to select intermediate EFL learners. As such, a total number of 62 students, both male (N = 11) and female (N = 51), were selected and considered as the target sample of this study.

The participants' first language was Azari-Turkish. They had been exposed to English as their foreign language for two years.

## **Instrumentation**

The instruments employed in this study were as follows.

To make sure that all participants in the study enjoy the pre-intermediate level of language ability, Allen's (1992) version of Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was used. This test includes three sections: grammar, vocabulary and listening items. Each section is comprised of 30 items. The OQPT provides a reliable and efficient means of placing students at different levels of language ability. According to Kassaian and Esmaeli (2011), the test has been calibrated against the levels system provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). It should be noted that the scores on the OPT correlate with the scores obtained from several valid tests such as Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (NELP) and Michigan English Placement Test (MEPT), which include a vocabulary section and are used for placement purposes (see Khosravi, 2010). In this study, each item of the OQPT was awarded one point for the correct answer. Thus, the possible score could range from 0-90.

Second, in order to measure the participants' listening proficiency, two parts of listening comprehension section of the Longman's TOEFL test were used. The first one was used as a pre-test and the second one was used as the post-test.

Third, the English listening comprehension strategy questionnaire was adopted from Lee (1997). This questionnaire was used to estimate learners' experience in manipulating listening strategies in their EFL context. The translation of this questionnaire was prepared to decrease the participants' anxiety and to choose the best answer. Thirty-item listening strategy questionnaire was designed for this study.

## **Procedure**

In order to investigate the applicability of the listening comprehension pre-test, a pilot study was used to focus on EFL learners' listening performance scores on a short listening comprehension test. After administrating the listening comprehension pre-test, only 62 students were gained the average score in listening comprehension test. Consequently, the selected students were required to answer the listening strategy questionnaire in order to investigate the frequency of their strategy usage. This test presented on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "always".

Some instructional procedures have been done in order to familiarize L2 listeners with some learning strategies sufficiently. This process was done for 10 sessions so that the participants were engaged in the process of listening strategy instruction. Each session consisted of 20 minutes of instruction and assignments about listening strategies. Moreover, some tasks were assigned for students to complete at home.

Most of the instructors in EFL context have been exposed to time and equipment dilemma. In order to reduce this gap, some supporting aural and textual assignments were selected to help learners in developing their monitoring consciousness on listening strategies at home. Some examples have been made to show the overall rational of this study.

Based on the valid rational of some stockholders of listening strategies (Bacon, 1992; Goh, 2002; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 1997), it was preferred to select some cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies to be taught. It was proved that listening strategies are one of the complex and sophisticated skill in an EFL context (Arnold, 2000; O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; McClelland & Rumelhart, 1986; Vandergrift, 2003). In this study some categories of listening strategies were assigned appropriately in order to investigate influence of these strategies on some Turkish students' listening performance.

## RESULTS

In order to analyze the numeral data of this research, focusing on data analysis section seemed necessary. A proficiency test, a pre-test, a listening strategy questionnaire and a post-test were used in this study. Table 1 presented the descriptive statistics of proficiency test scores. As can be seen, the means, standard deviations and standard error of means are presented. In fact, in this test most of the students had received the average score.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for proficiency test

Groups	Means	Std. Deviations	Std. Error Means	n
G1	40.67	1.51	0.27	31
G2	41.03	1.42	0.25	31

Based on the results of this test, out of 110 students only 91 were selected to participate in the listening comprehension pre-test to reveal their listening comprehension level. In fact, out of the total number of students (110) only 62 students were selected and assigned randomly into an experimental and a control group.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for listening comprehension pre-test

Groups	Means	Std. Deviations	Std. Error Means	n
G1	19.74	1.50	0.27	31
G2	20.19	1.79	0.32	31

After exposing EFL learners with 10 days of instructing listening strategies L2 learners were prepared to participate in post-test. It was revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. The overall results of this test is indicated in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Statistical analysis for listening comprehension post-test

Groups	Means	Std. Deviations	Std. Error Means	n	F	P one t.	P two t.	df	t
G1	21.06	2.18	0.39	31	5.01	0.02	0.00	60	5.02
G2	18.70	1.41	0.25	31					

In the post-test there were two groups. The experimental group received strategy-based instruction while the control group received traditional listening comprehension activities. Based on the use of t-test in this study, it was revealed that strategy-based instruction had significant function in developing EFL learners' listening performance.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the previous investigations about the positive function of listening strategy instruction in helping EFL listeners to develop their listening performance (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Lynch & Mendelson, 2002; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002; Macaro & Erler, 2008) the results of this study confirmed the previous research finding.

In this study, the experimental group received explicit instruction on listening strategies for ten sessions of 20 minutes. It was revealed that the students' scores in an experimental group were higher than those in a control group. It means that there is a significant difference between the scores of two groups. Based on the performance of the experimental group it was revealed that the results of this study seemed unenviable. Fortunately, after administrating the post-test it was proved that strategy-based instruction had effective function on developing EFL learners' listening performance.

In order to focus on discussing about the effective reasons of the results of this study on post-test some points should be mentioned. In fact, there are a lot of factors that interact with the manipulation of learning strategies in an EFL context. Mendelsohn (1995) believed that time is one of those factors as the essential variables in strategy training process. Actually, more time would be needed to teach all listening strategies to L2 English learners in order to help them to become independent listeners. Mendelsohn (1995) calls for strategy instruction to be delivered gradually, and over an extended period of time. Moreover, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have mentioned that this factor is as an effective way to teach listening; it means that before starting to teach listening strategies, the action of teaching should be proceeding. Therefore, we need long-term studies investigating the effect of strategy-based instruction on L2 learners' listening performance.

In general, in stress-free and collaborative context L2 listeners can perform better in listening classes, so the use of authentic listening passages leads to greater improvement in L2 listening comprehension performance (Herron & Seay, 1991). This is consistent with the line of research on authentic material (e.g., Bacon, 1992; Oxford, 1993; Rubin, 1994). Moreover, a wide amount of exposure to a variety of listening tasks is another factor influencing strategy-based instruction.

Furthermore, due to the complex nature of listening comprehension, L2 listeners should encompass a wide range of situations, with different types of listening passages, different modes of presentation (videotape, audiotape) and different types of activities or tasks (Rost, 1990). Accordingly, this study focused on manipulating two top-down and one bottom-up cognitive strategies and four metacognitive listening strategies in an EFL context. Although so many studies favor top-down processing (e.g., Field, 2002;



O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Osada, 2001; Rost, 2002) in one hand and metacognitive strategies on the other hand mentioned in literature review section but there are some other studies that assign a crucial function of bottom-up processing (e.g., Keshavarz & Babaei, 2004; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998).

It can be argued that the experimental group in this study made use of two top-down, one bottom-up cognitive and four metacognitive strategies. In fact, literature review is full of studies that support the use of both cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies specifically top-down and bottom-up strategies at the same time on helping students to be independent listeners (e.g., O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Richards, 1990; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

All in all, it can be claimed that listening comprehension skill is a kind of active and sophisticated process (Bacon, 1992). Teachers should get rid of testing listening process by employing strategy-based instruction (Graham, 2006). Instructing listening strategies play crucial role in helping listeners to be changed into autonomous and independent listeners' without their teachers' scaffolding (Field, 2002). Employing top-down and bottom-up processing have significant function in developing EFL learners' perceptual knowledge (Vandergrift, 2003). Metacognitive strategies should be taught to learners to direct their cognitive strategies (Vandergrift, 2003). Contextual features have significant function in improving the effectiveness of SBI (Vandergrift, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

As mentioned before, the EFL learner's problematic areas in listening comprehension process are broad. Moreover, it is proved that the main problems highlighted by learners in listening process were frequently dealing with such dilemmas as the speed of delivery of text, making out individual words in a stream of spoken English, making sense of any words identified, limited vocabulary knowledge, restricted strategy use knowledge, failing to recognize the signals, lack of contextual knowledge and so forth (Graham, 2006). On the other hand, some stockholders of listening strategy instruction revealed that more proficient listeners had been appropriate to manipulate and internalize a wider variety of strategies with a greater flexibility, frequency, sophisticated, and appropriateness to meet task demands (Goh, 2002; Smidit & Hegelheimer, 2004).

Actually, teaching students about cognitive strategies such as contextualization and inference as well as listening for structure, and metacognitive strategies such as advanced organizer, selective listening, auditory memory and performance evaluation to listen for a purpose and to familiarize with listening strategies play significant function to help learners be more aware of listening process in various tasks.

So instructors should complement their product-approach toward listening strategies and letting their learners to think about the process of listening rather than thinking about their scores on listening tests after assessment-oriented instruction (Van Patten, 1990).

In the supporting sessions of using cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies, the learners' development seems inevitable as many studies have confirmed the importance of metacognitive strategy instruction (Goh, 1997; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 1999; 2003). In fact, using metacognitive strategies like cognitive strategies can develop listeners' view about their thinking process. By focusing these strategies listeners can monitor listening process based on three processes of planning, monitoring and evaluation. In literature review section much more points emphasized about these concepts.

It can also be concluded that the metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective beliefs and knowledge of learners can be influenced by their educational context. In fact, the process of preparing appropriate context and helping students to do works themselves without their teachers' scaffolding play a crucial function on learners to become self-regulated and independent listeners (Vandergrift, 2004). As such, instructors and educational setting may have crucial function in training motivated L2 listeners. Provided the presence of this context, manipulating language learning strategies instruction in an EFL context may play significant function in developing EFL learners' four skills. So, researchers should select and discover the appropriate context for their investigations.

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