

EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension and Awareness of Metacognitive Strategies: How Are They Related?

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Abstract

Metacognitive strategies play an important role in many cognitive activities related to language use in oral communication. This study explored metacognitive listening strategies awareness and its relationship with listening comprehension on a convenient sample of 386 tenth-grade EFL learners using two instruments: (a) Metacognition Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari, 2006) and (b) a Listening Comprehension Test (LCT) developed by the researchers for the purpose of this study. The results indicate that students possess a moderate level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness. Additionally, whereas directed attention and personal knowledge fail to explain the variance in students' listening comprehension performance, problem solving, planning and evaluation, and directed attention are capable of explaining 56% of the variance in students' performance on the LCT. It is recommended that metacognitive strategies awareness be emphasized in listening comprehension instruction.

Keywords: EFL learners, listening comprehension, metacognition awareness

1. Introduction

Since we spend up to 40-50% out of our communication time listening (Mendelsohn, 1994), the fundamental role listening plays in both communication and language learning cannot be overemphasized. Listening is an active process that involves deciphering and constructing meaning from verbal and non-verbal messages (Nunan, 1998). Effective communication therefore necessitates that learners develop the listening skills deemed essential for understanding input for any learning to begin (Nunan, 1998; Rost, 1994).

The listening comprehension process involves two steps. The first encompasses receiving, memorizing, and repeating the sounds whereas the second, comprehension, entails the ability to explain the content of the message to which the listener is exposed (Zhang, 2001). Demanding in nature, this process requires engagement in a variety of complicated tasks that range between discriminating sounds and full understanding of the speaker's message. It requires that listeners invest an array of mental processes typically referred to as listening comprehension strategies (Coskun, 2010) viewed as learner actions that make language learning more effective and enjoyable (Oxford, 2002). Research suggests that this process poses a challenge that is hard to meet for many L2 learners (Chang & Read, 2006), especially in EFL settings where learners lack sufficient exposure to the target language (Graham, 2006).

O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, and Kupper (1985) categorize learning strategies into three types: (a) cognitive (e.g., repeating, translation, grouping, note taking, deducting, imagery, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, and transfer); (b) socioaffective (e.g., social-mediating activity and transacting with others); and (c) metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning for learning, thinking about the learning process as it is taking place, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating learning after an activity is completed). Among these, metacognitive strategies are considered as the most essential in developing learners' skills.

Metacognitive strategies, which reflect thinking about one's own thinking (Flavell, 1976), the individual's level of consciousness (Wenden, 1998), or the level of control over one's mental processes (Nelson, 1996), play a critical role in the cognitive processes of language as a means of communication. According to this understanding, metacognitive strategies are higher order executive skills that may involve planning for, monitoring, or evaluating

activities to manage, direct, regulate, and guide learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). They are considered a mental tool and a sign of successful learning that occupies the position of a seventh sense (Birjandi, Mirhassani, & Abbasian, 2006).

Under the influence of advancement in linguistics and cognitive psychology, research reviews during the last two decades, (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Macaro, Graham, & Vanderplank, 2007; Rubin, 1994; Vandergrift, 2004) have motivated scholars to consider well-informed, evidence-based approaches to listening instruction including metacognitive awareness (Goh, 2008). Researchers from different parts of the world have tried to outline the characteristics of strategic learners and the type of strategies those learners use in specific language learning tasks (Birjandi, Mirhassani, & Abbasian, 2006). For example, Oxford (2002) suggests that the development of learners' communicative competence and language proficiency is associated with the strategies they use. Al-Shaboul, Asassfeh, and Al-Shaboul (2010) draw attention that EFL learners may favor some strategies over others. This raises a concern regarding the identification of commonly used strategies and less frequently used ones and their impact on improving language learning. The top preference of Jordanian EFL learners was the metacognitive strategies. Bremner's (1999) research on Hong Kong learners' strategy use shows that those learners favor compensatory and metacognitive strategies over the affective and memory ones.

2. Review of Related Literature

The extant literature supports the responsibility metacognitive abilities embody in learning as they allow learners to be consciously aware of the learning processes taking place; a learning task entails some cognitive requirements and necessitates searching for the most effective strategies learners have at their disposal to select. Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, and Tafaghodtari (2006) pointed out that learners with high degrees of metacognitive awareness are better at processing and storing new information, finding the best ways to practice and reinforce what they have learned. Metacognitive strategies, being the most essential in developing learners' skills (Anderson, 1991), activate thinking and have the power to guide and improve the learning performance (Anderson, 2003). This stance is supported by Goh (2002) who argues that learners' metacognitive awareness correlates well with the effective learning taking place in all learning contexts. In a nutshell, literature in cognitive psychology and second language acquisition does support and document this line of research (Bolitho et al., 2003; Fernandez- Duque, Baired, & Posner, 2000).

In the context of second language acquisition, and pertinent to listening in specific, Goh and Yusnita (2006) approve the direct and positive impact of listening strategies on the listening performance. According to Yang (2009), instructing listeners about the role of metacognition in L2 listening helps learners to tackle the listening task more effectively, differentiating successful listeners from unsuccessful ones. Following this line of reasoning, Coskun (2010) conducted an experimental study on a sample of 40 (male and female) Turkish EFL learning beginners to examine the impact of a five-week metacognitive listening strategy training program on listening comprehension. The results showed a significantly higher performance by the experimental group, implying that metacognitive strategy training be integrated within regular listening classes to foster EFL listening performance.

Bozorgian (2012) studied twenty-eight, Iranian, high-basic level EFL listeners who took part in a "strategy-based" approach including: advanced organization, directed attention, selective attention, and self-management. The strategy-based approach was applied to four listening lessons focusing on improving listeners' comprehension of IELTS listening texts. Pretest and posttest comparisons revealed that less-skilled listeners show higher improvement than more-skilled ones on the IELTS listening tests. This supports the contribution of metacognitive instruction to empowering listeners and endorsing the listening comprehension ability.

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) viewed metacognitive strategies awareness as planning and consciously executing appropriate actions to achieve a particular goal. In fact, metacognitive strategies are employed to manage the overall learning process. It includes identifying one's own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy. Among native English speakers learning foreign languages, Purpura (1999) found that metacognitive strategies had a significant, positive, direct effect on cognitive strategy use, providing clear evidence that metacognitive strategy use has an executive function over cognitive strategy use in task completion. Studies of EFL learners in various countries like South Africa (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996) and Turkey (Yesilyurt, 2013) uncovered evidence that metacognitive strategies are often strong predictors of L2 proficiency.

Based on metacognition theory, the metacognitive awareness of listening strategies involves the language learner to realize the extent of his awareness of the strategies under his disposal, and how far he can organize and

manage the listening comprehension process (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari, 2006). Literature names such strategies like: task-requirement analysis, activation of appropriate listening-processes, making appropriate predictions, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating success of the adopted approach. For Vandergrift (1997), those are considered landmarks that could differentiate skilled from the less skilled listeners. Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari (2006) consider learners' metacognitive awareness of listening to include the learners' self-perception awareness, their realization of listening demands, their cognitive goals, and the approach and strategies they reserve to including problem-solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, person knowledge, and directed attention. Problem – solving includes a group of strategies that listeners use to make inferences and to monitor these inferences. Planning and evaluating strategies are those types of strategies that listeners use to prepare them for listening and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts (Richards, 1990). Mental translations are those types of strategies that listeners must avoid if they want to become skilled listeners (Vandergrift, 2003). Person knowledge strategies include listeners' perceptions and attitudes concerning the difficulty of the listening task and their self-efficacy about second language (L2) listening (Sparks & Ganschow, 2001). Directed attention represents strategies that listeners use to concentrate and stay on listening task (Rost, 2002).

The importance of metacognitive awareness in listening comprehension has been recently highlighted. The extant literature hosts evidence that the use of metacognitive strategies leads to better listening performance (Vandergrift, 2003; Thompson & Rubin, 1996). Goh (2002), for example, found more skilled listeners to display a higher level of awareness of their own listening problems. Following an investigation carried out on the relationship between metacognition, motivation and listening proficiency, Vandergrift (2005) found a remarkable pattern of increasingly higher correlations among the levels of motivation and the reported use of metacognitive strategies. Two years later, Vandergrift (2007) explored the relationship between metacognitive instruction and listening performance; findings approved a causal relationship between the two.

Literature also has studies in the EFL context that have explored the relationship joining metacognitive listening awareness and listening self-efficacy (Vandergrift, 2005), motivation (Sutudenama & Taghipur, 2010), and learning style (ShiraniBidabadi & Yamat, 2010). Despite the prevalence of communicative language approaches that emphasize well-balanced development of learners' communicative competence, listening and speaking are neglected in the lessons EFL teachers design, resulting in students' limited listening comprehension ability (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

It is documented that EFL learners encounter difficulty in listening comprehension due to more than one factor. For example, they lack control over the speaker's speed, are unable to get things repeated, and fail to recognise pauses. Additionally, they have difficulty in interpretation, concentration and developing learning habits (Underwood, 1989). Moreover, they fail to develop listening habits or to enhance the capacity to process information (Chen, 2005). Other factors that add to EFL students' suffering in listening comprehension include limited vocabulary and/or poor grammar, and misconceptions about listening activities (Graham, 2006). Some other difficulties in listening comprehension may arise because of the type of listening material adopted.

In fact, listening is not getting the due attention and is not given the due importance; students² receive neither sufficient nor adequate training in listening strategies (Seferoglu & Uzakgoren, 2004). Based on the available literature, it is evident that EFL learners suffer from weakness in listening comprehension performance (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010). In Jordanian schools, metacognitive listening strategies are not embedded in listening courses or curricula, and language art teachers do not seem to pay attention to these strategies while designing their lessons. Jdetawy (2011), for example, concludes that Jordanian EFL learners have serious problems in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Goh (2008) emphasizes that more research is needed to investigate the role of metacognitive listening strategies in listening performance in different contexts. Therefore, the current study predicts there will be a direct link between metacognitive listening strategies awareness and listening comprehension. In light of both theoretical claims and evidence from previous studies, the present study examined the following questions:

- 1) What is the tenth grade students' level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness?
- 2) Is there any correlation between EFL tenth graders' metacognitive listening strategies awareness and their listening comprehension performance?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted on a convenient sample of 386 (207 female and 179 male) 10th graders from public schools in Amman, the capital city of Jordan. The participants, with an average age of 16-years old, were native speakers of Arabic who had been learning English for ten years. Their proficiency level, as reported by their teachers, is low intermediate.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study: (a) Vandergrift, et al.'s (2006) Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) and (b) a listening comprehension test developed by the researchers, specifically for the purpose of this study. The first instrument was "designed for researchers and instructors to assess the extent to which language learners are aware of and can regulate the process of L2 listening comprehension" (Vandergrift, et al., 2006, 432). It has 21 items, each is rated on a six-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree- 6=strongly agree). The instrument comprises five components of metacognitive awareness: (a) problem-solving; (b) planning and evaluation; (c) mental translation; (d) person knowledge; and (e) directed attention--represented by 6, 5, 3, 3, and 4 items, respectively. The reliability coefficient of MALQ calculated in this study was 0.79.

The second instrument, aimed at measuring participants' listening comprehension performance, was a 24-item Listening Comprehension Test (LCT) that was developed for the purpose of this study. The test was based on two listening passages purposefully selected from the English textbook for the 10th grade/second semester with the aim of avoiding the interference of participants' prior exposure to them, hence background knowledge interference. These passages had a comparable length (366 and 375 words). They were read by a native speaker of English and recorded on a CD that was used as a source of input for the participants on the test. The test addressed fundamental listening comprehension skills including main ideas (e.g., The main idea in first paragraph is...), inference (e.g., The purpose of the writer in the last paragraph is ...), and specific details in the passage (e.g. The sentence that refers to effort is...). The test used three formats familiar to students: multiple choice, gap filling, and short-answer questions.

The test validity was ensured by presenting it to a panel of school teachers of English and English supervisors who had expertise in teaching English to basic school learners in general and 10th graders in particular. They were asked to indicate the comprehensiveness of the test to the target listening comprehension skills, appropriateness for students' linguistic and general background knowledge, and clarity of instructions. The test reliability was established by presenting it twice to a sample of 40 students, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .77. Since one point was credited for each correct item response, a student's maximum possible score on the test was 24.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected during the second semester of the academic year 2012/2013. Students were approached in their regular classes. They were informed about the purpose of the study and requested to sign the consent form. It was also emphasized that their participation would be anonymous and confidential. In order to avoid "retaliation" in case of not doing well on the LCT, MALQ was introduced first. The time students were given for the entire task was around 45 minutes: 30 for the LCT and 15 for the MALQ. Data from both MALQ and LCT were fed into and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Level of Metacognition Listening Strategies Awareness

To answer the question about students' level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of students' responses were calculated at the level of MALQ, its subscales, as well as individual items (Table 1). The overall level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness was 3.56 suggesting a moderate level of awareness. At the level of MALQ subscales, however, the highest mean response was 4.21, associated with problem solving whereas the lowest was 2.77, associated with personal knowledge.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' performance on MALQ and its subscales (N=386)

Sub-scale	No. of items	Mean Per subscale	SD
Problem solving	6	4.21	4.10
Planning and evaluation	5	3.90	3.16
Directed attention	4	3.73	3.05
Mental translation	3	3.17	2.35
Person knowledge	4	2.77	2.99
MALQ	21	3.56	11.58

4.2 Correlation between Metacognitive Listening Strategies Awareness and Listening Comprehension

The second question that addresses the relationship between listening comprehension and metacognitive listening strategies awareness was answered using correlation. The results (Table 2) indicate a statistically significant correlation ($r^2 = .56$) between listening comprehension and overall MALQ. Moreover, the correlation was significant between listening comprehension and each of the subscales: problem solving, planning and evaluation, personal knowledge, and directed attention. The only insignificant correlation was associated with mental translation.

Table 2. Inter - correlation among variables

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Listening comprehension		.56*	.53*	.20*	.31*	.41*	.11
2. MALQ			.85*	.07*	.12	.64*	.52*
3. Problem solving				.51*	.55*	.55*	.09
4. Planning and evaluation					.01	.35*	.28*
5. Person knowledge						.01	.18*
6. Directed attention							.19*
7. Mental translation							

$P \leq 0.05^*$

In order to determine the proportion of the variance in listening comprehension explainable by MALQ and its subscales, multiple regression was performed. The results (Table 3) show clearly that the three dimensions of problem solving, planning/evaluating, and directed attention explain (24%, 17%, 15%, respectively) 56% of the total variance in listening comprehension. The other two subscales of personal knowledge and mental translation failed to have a significant explanation in the variance in students' listening comprehensibility.

Table 3. Stepwise multiple regression predicting listening comprehension from MALQ subscales

	β	R	R^2	R^2 change	F	P
Problem solving	.32	.440	.24		9.52*	0.000
Planning/evaluation	.25	.381	.41	.17	8.52*	0.000
Directed attention	.11	.361	.56	.15	7.81*	0.000

* $p \leq 0.05$

5. Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between public basic (10th) EFL students' listening comprehension and metacognitive listening strategy awareness. The results indicated that students possessed a general moderate, satisfactory level of metacognitive awareness. This finding goes in line with the view that a threshold level of

metacognitive strategy awareness is required for language learners so that they can manage their learning process as well as they can manage a specific learning task (Oxford, 2002). This also goes in congruence with Vandergrift's (2003) assertion that metacognitive awareness is an area wherein an important difference lies between more skilled and less-skilled L2 listeners since metacognitive awareness helps in making the listening task less problematic, leading to better listening comprehension ability and a better language proficiency (Dreyer & Oxford, 1996).

Our results revealed that our sample had variability in using different strategies that contribute to their listening comprehension. Thus, their highest performance was associated with using problem solving. This means that they resort to their repertoire of vocabulary and main text idea and incorporate their own experience and general knowledge in text interpretation to deduce the meaning of unknown words. Towards general understanding of the text, they monitor self inferences of text and compare it to text-emerging interpretation.

In terms of planning, the participants of this study had a satisfactory level of planning and evaluation strategies. For example, they are keen on developing listening plans, manipulating similar texts, establishing their own purposes behind listening, continuously checking their self-satisfaction with the emerging interpretation, and constantly assessing their listening strategy effectiveness.

Relative satisfaction is also associated with students' use of directed attention strategies. Thus, students were capable of redirecting their focus when distracted. They also tended to focus harder in order to manage difficulties in understanding text rather than give up. On the other hand, participants' weakness in strategy use was associated with personal knowledge represented in assessing the perceived difficulty in listening. They also experienced difficulty in assessing their self confidence and anxiety related to English listening. From a wider perspective, our results revealed that the different subscales have a variable contribution to the listening comprehension of EFL learners. Thus, problem solving, planning/evaluating, and directed attention had a significantly more explanatory power of variance in EFL students' listening comprehension than personal knowledge and mental translation. The strongest predictor was problem solving strategies that enable students to analyze related information, search for possible solutions, check the accuracy of alternative solutions, brainstorm a variety of alternative plans or solutions, and activate what has already been learned and relate it to the current problem (Vandergrift, 2003; Rost, 2002).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between listening comprehension and metacognitive awareness among Jordanian EFL learners. The results lend support to EFL students' possession of a moderate level of listening strategy metacognitive awareness. They also indicate that students' manipulation of these strategies varies across different subscales (problem solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, personal knowledge, and directed attention). Students' highest use of strategies was in association with problem solving, and the lowest was associated with personal knowledge. The predictability of students' listening comprehension ability was associated with problem solving, planning and evaluation, personal knowledge, and directed attention.

Given the above findings, it is necessary that EFL teachers enhance students' use of strategies such as personal knowledge and mental translation. Additionally, EFL students are urged to avoid word-for-word or key-word translation while listening. Literal translation, a commonly used practice in EFL classrooms, is probably attributed to students' attempts to compensate for the lack of exposure to L2 in authentic communication. Calis and Dikilitas (2012), for example, reported that students with positive attitudes toward translation believed translation was helpful in memorizing L2 vocabulary. This, in turn, reflects a focus on form rather than meaning in interaction mediated by L2.

In light of the results of this study, metacognitive strategies awareness should be targeted in classroom instruction. Further research is invited not only to describe the impact of metacognitive strategies on listening performance but also carry out interventions that foster metacognitive awareness.

Finally, whereas this study addressed basic EFL students' listening comprehension ability and its relationship with listening strategies metacognitive awareness, its sample comprised 10th graders only. Therefore, generalizations are to be made carefully.

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