

The Effect of Explicit Listening Comprehension Strategy Instruction on Listening Comprehension Strategy Use of Iranian EFL Learners

By

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Abstract

As the Cinderella skill, listening used to be a frowned upon section of any language instruction until recently. By merging listening instruction and strategy instruction, consequently, the present study aims to investigate the effect of explicit strategy instruction on listening comprehension. To this end, 40 intermediate English language learners were selected as the subjects based on their scores on Topnotch Placement Test (Saslow and Ascher, 2006). They were divided into experimental and control groups containing 20 students each. A strategy use questionnaire was administered to both groups. The results revealed that at the beginning of the study both groups had similar listening proficiency level with no significant difference between them. However, after the experimental group received the treatment (systematic instruction in using listening strategies), the scores obtained from the pre and posttest revealed that students who received strategy instruction in listening improved significantly over those who did not receive any such training. So, it can be concluded that explicit listening comprehension strategy training lead to higher level of listening proficiency in the target language. The results would have implications for teachers, material writers, and syllabus designers in addition to English language learners.

Keywords: *Listening strategy, strategy instruction, explicit and implicit knowledge*

1. Introduction

Background

The majority of language learners find it quite hard to live when it comes to listening comprehension in the course of learning any language – in addition to the other three skills of reading, writing and speaking plus the language components of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation – particularly when it comes to the context of foreign language learning in which there is a lack of comprehensible input in almost every aspect of the language in mind (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). In our own case, that is learning and teaching English in a foreign language context, most language learners want to listen and understand whatever they are exposed to and what people are saying to them. The order in which language skills are acquired by native speakers is first listening and then speaking, with reading and writing coming later. An area which is mostly neglected is listening comprehension, named Cinderella skill by some scholars such as Nunan (1999), with its particular problems arising from the fleeting, immaterial nature of spoken utterances and the complicated ways we process what we hear. For the most part, for language learners, listening is far more challenging.

When it comes to dealing with language skills priority, listening is the most fundamental language skill which can be developed; therefore, it should be a clear focus of classroom instruction (Oxford, 1998). The question is how to help learners develop their listening skills. Listening strategies may help them. According to Oxford (1990) learning strategies are “specific actions or behaviors accomplished by students to enhance their learning”.

With reference to strategy instruction in terms of listening comprehension, as listening is important for learning a language, in recent years there has been a growing interest in what should be done to help students develop and use this skill more effectively; because not all language learners acquire the same listening proficiency level to communicate successfully. Some researchers state that strategy instruction is

still a matter of some debate (Goh, 2002; Cohen and Macaro, 2007). In the studies carried out by these researchers, it was found that some students could not use the listening comprehension strategies effectively, which causes debate on the effectiveness on listening strategy instruction. Besides developing listening, some researcher's support strategy instruction and they believe that as strategy instruction raises consciousness about learning strategies it will lead to greater learner autonomy. Autonomy, in this sense, is defined as "freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well" (Peterson, 2001).

Making students aware of these language learning strategies, as well as incorporating their use in activities done throughout the term, is perhaps the first step toward learner autonomy. This might be achieved through learner training or learner development, where students learn about the factors which affect their learning, discover the strategies needed to become more effective learners, and in so doing take more responsibility for this process (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). However, knowing about strategies is not enough, for students should know when, why, and how these should be used in order to select the most appropriate according to their individual needs.

Statement of the problem

It is somehow obvious that listening strategy instruction is the missing piece of the puzzle of most language teaching programs. This is more obvious when most language learners complain about not being able to "listen" or "hear" appropriately. It is seen that learners do not know the nature of listening, how to improve their listening, and how to overcome the listening comprehension problems occurring while listening. With this lack of research in mind, the present research is going to be launched. English language program designers and curriculum developers may benefit from the results of the study while designing their own curricula or syllabi. So this study analyzes the effects of explicit listening comprehension strategy instruction on listening comprehension strategy use of Iranian EFL learners.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Making the learners familiar with a variety of listening comprehension strategies and teaching them how to use them independently in different settings of language learning may pay the price of this effort. In conformity with this logic, the present study tries to find appropriate answer to the following question:

1. Does explicit listening comprehension strategy training affect Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension strategy use?

2. Review of the literature

Listening Strategies

Strategies for effective listening can be classified into **top-down** and **bottom-up** processes. When listeners use their pre-existing knowledge to interpret the text and to guess considering what they will hear, they are involved in a bottom-up or knowledge-based processing. It means listeners should combine their background knowledge with the linguistic elements of the text in order to recreate their potential meaning. On the other hand, when they decode the linguistic input rapidly and map against their guesses, they are involved in bottom up or text-based processing. During this kind of processing, the understanding of the incoming language entails the analysis of text into sounds, words, grammatical relationships, and sentence and discourse meaning (Helgesen, 1994).

Metacognitive strategies: It is used to plan 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. What follows is an account of different metacognitive strategies (Brown, 2007).

1. *Directed attention* is concentrating on the input and avoiding distraction, by maintaining concentration as much as possible, listen closely to every word and continue listening in spite of problems.

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2. *Comprehension monitoring* is the process of checking and conforming how well one understands the input during listening by making use of both external and internal resources which include information in the text, visual element, context and prior knowledge.
3. *Real-time assessment of input* is necessary for achieving their comprehension goals during listening.
4. *Comprehension evaluation* is determining the accuracy and completeness of listener's comprehension. It can be done any time after an individual has finished and arrived at some tentative interpretation.
5. *Selective Attention* means paying attention to specific aspects of the input by listening for gist, listening for familiar of key words noticing the way information is structured.

Cognitive Strategies: These strategies are limited to specific learning tasks and involve more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Here we review these strategies.

Inferencing: Listeners fill in the missing information such as meanings of unfamiliar words and parts of a text while listening through using context, key words.

Elaboration: Listeners relate new information to existing knowledge to produce a more complete interpretation.

Prediction: Enables listeners to anticipate the next part of text by predicting the content from the title or the topic before listening and anticipating details in the next part while listening.

Conceptualization: Refers to the attempts to relate new information to a wider context or situation in order to produce an acceptable general interpretation of it.

Fixation: Refers to paying close attention to a small part of the spoken text in order to understand it.

Reconstruction: Involves using new words from the text and sometimes background knowledge to construct the meaning of the original input.

Socio-affective strategies: They have to do with social-mediating activity and interacting with others. The choice of language learning strategies is affected by a number of factors such as learning styles, degree of awareness, gender, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, type of task, tolerance of ambiguity, nationality, personality traits (Oxford, 1990).

How to Teach Strategies in the Classroom:

Oxford (1990) makes a comprehensive view of learning strategies. The strategies are classified into two groups: *direct or cognitive strategies*, which learners apply directly to the language itself. And *indirect or metacognitive strategies*, in which learners manage their own learning process.

The following two different approaches can be found to be applicable in teaching strategies in language classrooms.

Frameworks for Strategy Training

One framework, proposed by Pearson and Dole (1987 as quoted in Cohen, 2003) with reference to first language learning but applicable to the study of a second language as well, targets isolated strategies by including explicit modeling and explanation of the benefits of applying a specific strategy, extensive functional practice with the strategy, and an opportunity to transfer the strategy to new learning contexts. On the other hand, Oxford et al. (1990) proposed another framework, which can be considered to be useful for the introduction of strategies, including explicit strategy awareness, discussion of the benefits of strategy use, functional and contextualized practice with the strategies, self-evaluation and monitoring of language performance, and suggestions for or demonstrations of the transferability of the strategies to new tasks.

Steps for Designing Strategy Training:

The following seven steps are based largely on suggestions of strategy training by Oxford (1990).

1. Determine learners' needs and the resources available for training.
2. Select the strategies to be taught.
3. Consider the benefits of integrated strategy training.
4. Consider motivational issues.
5. Prepare the materials and activities.
6. Conduct explicit strategy training.
7. Evaluate and revise the strategy training.

Goals of Strategy Training:

Strategy training aims to provide learners with the tools to do the following (Cohen, 2003):

- Self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in language learning
- Become aware of what helps them to learn the target language most efficiently
- Develop a broad range of problem-solving skills
- Experiment with familiar and unfamiliar learning strategies
- Make decisions about how to approach a language task
- Monitor and self-evaluate their performance
- Transfer successful strategies to new learning contexts

Strategies can be categorized as either language learning or language use strategies. *Language learning strategies* are conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge and understanding of a target language. They include cognitive strategies for memorizing and manipulating target language structures, metacognitive strategies for managing and supervising strategy use, affective strategies for gauging emotional reactions to learning and for lowering anxieties, and social strategies for enhancing learning, such as cooperating with other learners and seeking to interact with native speakers.

Language use strategies play their role when the language material is already available, even in some preliminary form. Their focus is to help students use the language they have already learned. Language use strategies include strategies for retrieving and remembering information about the language already stored in memory, rehearsing target language structures, and communicating in the language despite gaps in target language knowledge.

3. Method

Participants:

The participants of the study were 60 EFL learners both male and female in the age range of 18 to 25 in Tabriz Jahad Daneshgahi Institute. The students would receive English instruction in the institute. Using Topnotch Placement Test (Saslow and Ascher, 2006), the researcher selected the learners who could be placed at the intermediate level based on the guidelines put forward by the authors. And, finally, 40 out of 60 learners were selected as the ultimate subjects, and divided into experimental and control groups, 20 students each.

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Instrumentation:

All in all, two instruments were used in this study, namely, Topnotch Placement Test, Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory. In order to determine the homogeneity of the participants, they were required to take a proficiency test based on the Topnotch Placement Test (Saslow and Ascher, 2006). To obtain what listening comprehension strategies the students needed, the researcher used Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory (LCSI). It has been developed by Gerchek (2000) and includes 12 listening comprehension strategies. What we did in the present study was to supplement each of these 12 categories with three statements amounting to 48 statements in total. This way we developed a comprehensive questionnaire to make us capable of extracting the underlying listening comprehension strategies.

Procedure

First a proficiency test, Topnotch Placement Test (2006) was given to 60 EFL learners in the age range of 18-25 in Tabriz JihadDaneshgahi Institute. According to Topnotch Placement Test (2006) guidelines, students whose scores ranged from 74 to 94 on the mentioned placement test were considered as intermediate and divided into experimental and control groups. As a pretest, Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory (LCSI) was used to obtain what listening comprehension strategies the students were more inclined to take advantage of. Both the experimental and control group's LCSI results were compared to see if there was any difference in the use of listening comprehension strategies. No significant difference was found. The listening comprehension strategy training program which was the intended treatment was prepared as Oxford (1990) suggests.

Firstly, the researcher considered the characteristics of the learners and determined the amount of time needed. Secondly, which strategies, related to the students' wants and characteristics, to be developed were determined in advance based on their reported desires on the LSCI scale.

The strategy instruction for the experimental group lasted seven weeks. The trainings were conducted on three days a week which included roughly 30 minutes of strategy instruction at the end of each session. In the experimental group where listening comprehension strategy instruction took place, the teacher helped students to develop some strategies as mentioned below. First, the name of the strategy covered in class was mentioned and defined by the teacher, the way that it could be applied, whether it helps the students comprehend the listening text was discussed with the students explicitly. The students also discussed what they felt about the related strategy; whether they thought the strategy would work for them based on their own experience and background in language learning. This phase was, in fact, the consciousness-raising part of the job which directly relates to metacognitive strategies. Then a task was given to the students in which they could see the way that they could use the discussed strategy. After working on that task, the students were given another task to consolidate whatever they had talked and learned about particular strategies. This was the related activities done in the allotted time in each session for explicit strategy instruction. Of course, during the experimentation, the teacher used cyclical review of the strategies already covered.

On the other hand, in the control group, no strategy instruction was delivered. No one talked about the strategies explicitly. No discussions about whether the strategy helped them understand better or not took place before or after the listening comprehension activity. The students followed their routine classroom activities in a way that they concentrated on the so-called four language skills with different tasks and activities. They used their conversational textbooks for reading skill and listened to the listening sections of the textbook without being made familiar with the different listening comprehension strategies.

After the instruction, the two groups were given LCSI again to see if the explicit listening comprehension strategy instruction made any difference in students' use of listening strategies.

4. Data Analysis

The present study aimed at exploring the effects of explicit listening comprehension strategy training on the listening performance by Iranian EFL intermediate students. To test the corresponding null hypotheses, the data were subjected to a number of statistical tests including a frequency count and two independent samples t-tests.

Restatement of the Null Hypotheses

The analysis of data is guided by the following research null hypotheses:

Explicit listening comprehension strategy instruction has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension strategy use.

Comparison of Strategy Use

To determine the frequency of listening comprehension strategies use by the participants, LCSI was administered to the experimental and control groups both before and after the listening comprehension strategy training. The LCSI consisted of 12 strategies and 48 statements with a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5. The key for Likert scale can be stated as follows:

1.0 to 1.4: never or almost never used

1.5 to 2.4: generally not used

2.5 to 3.4: sometimes used

3.5 to 4.4: generally used

4.5 to 5.0: always or almost always used (Oxford, 1990).

As the LCSI was designed with a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, the lowest possible mean is 1.0 (never or almost never used) and the highest possible mean frequency for a student is 5.0 (always or almost always used).

In this study the mean frequency before the listening comprehension strategy training for the experimental group was 3.02 and for the control group it was 2.63. After the strategy training, the mean frequency for the experimental was 3.92 and for control group was 2.78.

Table 4.1 Mean frequency of listening comprehension strategy use before and after the training

	Experimental Group		Control Group	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Before	20	3.02	20	2.63
After	20	3.92	20	2.78

According to the results above, Based on the key provided by Oxford (1990), the variation between the mean values of strategy use in the experimental group is significant. In order to see whether the experimental and control groups had any significant difference in terms of the strategy use before and after the intervention, we run a t-test between the two groups related to the subject's reports on the amount and frequency of strategy use both before and after the treatment sessions as follows:

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Table 4.2 Independent Samples t-test of Strategy Use before the Treatment

Independent Samples Test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.142	.297	1.347	22	.192	.37333	.27717	-.20148	.94814
Equal variances not assumed			1.347	17.364	.195	.37333	.27717	-.21051	.95717

As it can be observed from Table 4.2, the probability figure (Sig. (2-tailed)) is larger than .05 (it is .192), and as the Levene's test does not show any significant difference (it is .297 being greater than .05), we can safely assume that there is not any significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of strategy use before the explicit strategy training module given to the experimental subjects of the study.

Having observed that, it is time to examine the findings of the subjects' reports after the treatment. Here we have to run the same test with regard to strategy use after the treatment sessions. The comparison is depicted in the following table:

Table 4.3 Independent Samples t-test of Strategy use after the Treatment

Independent Samples Test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.240	.629	5.351	22	.000	1.13917	.21288	.69769	1.58065
Equal variances not assumed			5.351	20.313	.000	1.13917	.21288	.69555	1.58278

Looking at Table 4.3, as far as the p level is less than .05 that is $p < .05$ (Sig.2-tailed amounts to .000), therefore, it can be deduced that there is significant difference between the two groups. Because the Levene's test is greater than .05, i.e., .629 (meaning that the first line which is equal variances assumed must be reported, Pallant, 2010), and due to the mentioned mean difference of strategy use between the experimental and control groups (3.92 and 2.78 respectively), it can be said that our subjects in the experimental group have used more strategies compared to the control group.

Regarding the null hypothesis, as "Explicit listening comprehension strategy instruction has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension strategy use", based on our findings on the basis of reported data, we can argue for a strategy training module in our language instruction. As it has led to more strategy use which, in turn, results in a high chance of tackling communication problems while learning a language. Hence the null hypothesis is safely rejected. Therefore, explicit instruction in terms of listening comprehension strategy use will be beneficial as far as it leads to more strategy implementation on the part of students.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the types of listening comprehension strategies used by EFL learners. The study was motivated by previous findings showing that proficient listeners use more strategies than less proficient listeners. This study has tried to investigate the relative effect of explicit strategy instruction on the listening comprehension of Iranian students. Regarding the null hypothesis, as it went earlier, the Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory (LCSI) was first given to both experimental and control groups in order to extract the pattern of their strategy use. Then, the same inventory was administered to both groups after the treatment sessions on the experimental group, it was found that there was a significant difference between the mean of experimental group with that of the control group. Therefore, we can safely reject this null hypothesis and say that explicit strategy instruction has an effect on the use of listening strategies in the process of language learning.

6. Pedagogical Implications

This study was undertaken to see whether strategy instruction might have any effect on the learners listening comprehension improvement in the foreign language listening classrooms. It seems that the results speak in favor of such a role. So what could and should be done is concerned with two things: reflection and flexibility. Reflection represents the learner developing some degree of self-awareness in learning, and shows how a given learner may appreciate his or her strengths and weaknesses. Flexibility arising from strategy use training organizes and gives purpose to the way cognitive and social-affective strategies are used, and increase the likelihood of appropriateness of strategy choice. That is to say, strategy training is intended to raise the students' awareness of metacognitive strategies, through which the learner is more able to select strategies appropriate to a particular problem, rather than engage in the activity for its own sake. To make it simple, students should not be only taught what to learn, but also how to learn. Every teacher should realize the importance and necessity of listening strategy training, and find some effective ways to carry out strategy training in teaching listening. Such teaching approach involves providing helpful support and strategy training to help students succeed in listening comprehension and preparing them for effective functioning in real-life situations. Classroom instructions usually address only common problems, leaving individual differences untouched. It is therefore important for students, preferably under teacher's guidance, to assess their own weaknesses, make a plan to develop relevant strategies and skills and stick to it. More research evidence has confirmed the positive influence of strategy instruction on developing listening. Therefore, incorporating strategy-based tasks and activities in listening textbooks becomes an urgent need.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, it should be noted that the traditional idea of only exposing EFL students to listening texts in listening classes should be challenged by an approach in which strategies can effectively and successfully be embedded in the listening course by means of strategy training program. The knowledge of language that the students need is that of vocabulary and grammatical structures. At the same time, students should be trained about how to effectively use listening strategies. The more strategies they know, the more beneficial it will be for them. Furthermore, teaching learners how to use appropriate listening strategies is also important. For example, the translation strategy should be employed with care, as word-for-word translation can interrupt the flow of the listening process. Furthermore, as listening to lectures usually involves listening for main ideas, guessing the meaning of vocabulary from context clues, listening for details, taking notes effectively will enhance their comprehension.

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