Exploring Comprehension Strategies of Low & High Ability Listeners with a Focus on the Effect of Explicit Strategy Instruction

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Abstract: While acknowledging the practical value and relative merit of listening comprehension as a means of foreign language learning, the present paper argues the case for a need to teach listening strategies to enhance students' realization of the various forms of speech. This contention is further enhanced by the fact that students' awareness of useful listening strategies will help them understand the foreign language correctly. To this end, this data-based research was undertaken using interviews and retrospective protocols with 17 EFL students and a pretest / post- test documentation.

Introduction

The fact that the ability to understand others through listening plays a very important role in the lives of people is an old consensus by now. Among the four major areas of communication skills and language development--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--the one that is the most basic is listening. Particularly in a language classroom, listening ability plays a significant role in the development of other language skills. The first thing students do in order to learn a language is that they generally have to listen to the words several times before they are able to recognize and pronounce those words. Listening in this respect gains priority among other language skills since it also helps students build vocabulary, develop language proficiency, and improve language usage. Unfortunately, it was not accepted as an active skill in the development of language and that is why, until recently the skill of listening comprehension was ignored in language teaching and learning methodology. Fortunately, the ideas about language learning and teaching during the last two decades changed considerably and it is only then, listening comprehension was considered as an active process through which listeners focus on selected aspects of aural input and creates meaning from what they hear. There are not many studies made so far and those that have been made show that listeners use some mental processes while they are listening. Those who use these mental processes called as listening comprehension strategies easily and fully comprehend the aural input. Some researchers also claimed that teaching such strategies can help learners facilitate better comprehension and their studies indicated that training in the use of learning strategies helps students to become more effective learners. Based on these research findings, it can be said that there is a relationship between strategy use and language learning proficiency and ability, and learning strategies training can effectively contribute to learners' language learning improvement when done properly.

In the last 20 years or so, there have been fundamental changes in the ways language learning and language teaching are perceived. Since 1970s-1980s there have, indeed, been significant paradigm shifts in learning theory, linguistic theory, and instructional models, with an important movement from a primary focus on teaching and a teacher-centered classroom to an increasing concern with learning and a learner-centered classroom. At the same time there has been a shift from a major emphasis on structure to an emphasis that includes attention to language function and communication. (Morley, 2001). Parallel with these changes in language learning and language teaching, in particular there has been a growing interest in defining how learners can manage their own learning and become more autonomous. Thus, there is now a substantial body of research outlining learner behaviors and describing the thought processes they follow while learning a foreign language. The mental and communicative

processes that directly contribute to learning are called learning strategies. Learning strategies are broadly defined as a set of operations used by learners that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information (Chamot, 1987). Brown and Yule (1983) categorized learning strategies into two groups, these being Cognitive Learning Strategies which are composed of inference, guessing from the context, and elaboration, or relating new information to other concepts in memory, and Meta-cognitive Learning Strategies which are composed of knowledge about cognition or applying thoughts about the cognitive operations of oneself or others, and the regulation of cognition, or planning, monitoring and evaluating learning or problem solving. In addition to these learning strategy categories, Chamot (1982) added Social-affective Learning Strategies such as cooperation and questioning for clarification. Working with one or more peers to obtain feedback, pooling information, modeling a language activity as well as asking a teacher or a native speaker for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation or examples are all Social-affective Learning Strategies. Studies in learning strategies have mostly focused on reading, writing, and speaking strategies of EFL / ESL learners. Learning strategies in listening skills have been widely ignored by researchers. However, the skill of listening comprehension has been thought to be the core of learning a language. There are a number of possible reasons for this insufficient importance that was attributed to listening comprehension. Reasons for this may lie in the lack of emphasis on teaching listening comprehension in language textbooks in general, as well as in the lack of available material specifically developed for and focused on the teaching of listening skills. Brown (1990) states that students are taught to speak slowly and clearly, and the teachers generally uses a public style language in the classroom which is also clear and slow. This speech style contrasts with the speech style of native speakers who do not speak slowly or clearly. So, it can be said that students who are from environments where English is not the language of the country have very few opportunities to hear the real language; these students therefore are not accustomed to hearing the language as it is produced by native speakers for native speakers. For that reason, students from the countries in which English is taught as a foreign language frequently have great difficulty understanding English spoken to them when they come into contact with native speakers of the language. According to the Herschenhom (1989), the fact that a student can speak a lot of sentences in a foreign language does not necessarily mean that he will understand them from a native speaker. There is a virtual chasm between the performance of native speakers engaged in a conversation and what a students expects a conversation to sound like (Herschenhorn, 1989). Another problematic point is that students are usually exposed to one accent of English, that spoken by the teacher and they have troubles when they are exposed to different accents. Belasco (1971, cited in Morley, 2001) expressed his concerns in that issue very clearly: "I was rudely jolted by the realization that it is possible to develop so-called 'speaking ability' and yet be virtually incompetent in understanding the spoken language... students were learning to audio comprehend certain specific dialogues and drills but could not understand the language out of the mouths of native speakers"(Belasco, 1971, cited in Morley, 2001). If these are correct and comprehension of the spoken language is not seen as a natural process, then it seems reasonable to claim that this ability should be taught in classroom environments. And since the early 1970s courses on listening comprehension have begun to be covered into curricula. Teaching listening comprehension has become a significant part of every language teaching program and teachers have started to help learners become better listeners.

The Study

The significant role of listening comprehension in language teaching has been accepted by researchers in the last few decades; however, little research has been given on what listeners actually do while listening to oral texts and to what extent learners' listening comprehension proficiency can be improved. Hence, the major emphasis of this study will be on the comprehension strategies that are used by high and low ability intermediate level EFL students in the department of Western Languages and Literature, English Language and Literature , K.T.U with a focus on the effect of explicit strategy instruction. Teachers and researchers have all observed that some students approach the language learning task in more successful ways than others. That is, all other things being equal, for example, the same learning environment, the same target language, the same age group, the same native tongue, some students are more successful than others in learning a second or foreign language. Any students, for instance, may be good at speaking than writing or vice versa, or at reading comprehension than listening. This difference in the distribution of general success in the particular skills suggests that learning strategies in listening comprehension in Turkish setting need to be investigated. As stated before, high ability language learners use a variety of strategies to assist them in gaining command of new language skills and with successful training, low ability learners can apply these strategies to various language tasks. And teachers have an important role in this training by conveying strategy applications to students and thereby supporting student efforts to learn the new language (Rubin, 1987). In this paper, the following questions were asked and their answers were sought by investigating the learning strategies that students use in

listening comprehension. These questions are "What are the different types of comprehension strategies employed by high & low ability listeners (EFL) in a Turkish setting?" and "Does explicit instruction in effective listening strategies help learners become better listeners?". According to Cohen (1987), once the leaning strategies of good language learners are identified, they can be made available, and where necessary, used by less successful learners to enable them to learn a foreign language more effectively. As effective listeners use strategies more successfully than those nominated as less effective listeners, the less successful students may need assistance in becoming more strategic learners. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the effect of explicit strategy instruction in listening comprehension by identifying the listening strategies used by a group of high & low ability EFL listeners. One implication is that language teachers certainly play a crucial role in teaching and learning arena as they are supposed to create opportunities to help learners gain independent control over the learning process. With this idea, for the educationalists, the present study gains significance as the results may probably shed more light on the value of explicit listening strategy training through awareness raising tasks.

Methodology

In this paper, qualitative and quantitative research methods were used and quantitative data was obtained from learners' self-reports through the procedures of small group interviews and immediate retrospective verbalizations. This was to allow us to understand the types of listening strategies used by high and low ability listeners. Between a pretest and a posttest, five principal strategies were taught explicitly for listening comprehension and a qualitative data was obtained through the comparison of participants' pretest and posttest results. Also a quantitative analysis has been done through these results about the effectiveness of direct strategy instruction.

The Findings

In the analysis of protocols, both cognitive and meta-cognitive listening strategies of high and low ability listeners were examined. For both groups, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies were identified. Cognitive strategies include inference, elaboration, recombination, imagery, contextualization, resourcing, translation, note-taking, grouping, key word and repetition and meta-cognitive strategies include self-management, self-reinforcement, selective-attention, self-monitoring, and directed attention (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). The data was subsequently grouped under 16 representative strategies. Table 1 on the next page shows the high ability listeners' retrospective protocols, and Table 2 shows the low ability listeners' protocols. They also show the lists of generic strategy classifications-cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies- and their respective strategies.

Cognitive strategies were used to process utterances directly by transforming them into mental representations that could be stored and recalled. Eleven such strategies were identified. Through cognitive strategies, many informants made associations between new and old information. Some of these strategies had clear benefits. When informants used 'contextualization', they were less preoccupied with getting the exact meanings of words. Instead they were more interested in constructing meaning in terms of the text itself and the information outside the text. The success of some strategies, however, was dependent on other factors. Elaboration strategy, though generally is helpful, was counter-productive when the wrong kind of knowledge was drawn upon. Translation actually slowed down processing and often took the informants' attention away from clues that might have assisted their comprehension. Recombination tactics were not useful when the informants did not hear or note down a sufficient number of key words for recreating the original message. Sometimes even when many comprehended words were noted, some informants were still unable to arrive at an understanding because they lacked the relevant background knowledge to complete the gaps. Key word strategy refers to the various ways in which the informants focused all their attention on a small part of the message. Because many informants experienced poor sound-script recognition, they tried to spell familiar sounding words in the hope that they could match them with something they already knew. Some informants also stopped listening to think about the meaning of one part of the input. Other strategy included repeating and grouping words and sounds of an unfamiliar word or a phrase. The informants hoped that this would facilitate recalling and processing at the next available opportunity, such as by using a dictionary or asking someone about the meaning. Although rehearsal or repetition may strengthen an item in short-term memory, language learners generally have limited capacity in their short-term memory to retain information in the target language.

Meta-cognitive tactics were used to manage complex cognitive processes before, during and after processing the information. Five meta-cognitive strategies were identified, these were self–management, self-reinforcement, selective-attention, self-monitoring, directed attention. Like cognitive tactics, some meta-cognitive tactics were more useful than others. On the whole, pre-listening preparation strategies prepared informants both, cognitively and actively. By anticipating contents, content words and rehearsing their sounds, informants avoided word recognition problems and processed the input more quickly. By actively encouraging themselves to relax during listening, they also lowered their anxiety in what many learners would agree to be a stressful activity. Another strategy used was selective attention. Informants decided in advance those aspects of the input they wanted to pay attention to. Directed attention, which helped to monitor attention, ensured that the informants perceptual processing was not interrupted. Nevertheless, some informants found the strategy of maintaining concentration to be stressful because they had not learned to vary the intensity of their concentration. To check and confirm understanding during listening, self-monitoring strategy were used. Some informants used monitoring to assess whether or not the problematic part would affect the comprehension of the input. As one noted: ''In fact I know all the words specifically but one word that I couldn't catch cause me not to comprehend the meaning''. Self monitoring strategies gave informants the option to actively employ other strategies to facilitate understanding.

High Ability

Retrospective Protocols	Representative Strategies	Generic Strategy Class.
'… in the speech, the woman clearly refuses the invitation of the man. So I think the expression 'I wish I could…' helped me comprehend the talk..'	INFERENCE	COGNITIVE
…'About Washington. I think it is a nice place and there are many places to visit so the woman states that hot weather can't prevent her to go there.. by this way I marked the…'	ELABORATION	COGNITIVE
… 'Marine shells'. I tried to concentrate on this phrase and I think I don' t know the exact meaning of 'marine shelf' so I let it pass and I tried to catch the following part but…'	DIRECTED- ATTENTION	META-COGN.
…' At first I listened to the each words and I tried to catch the words that I understood easily such as evolution, sea life, marine shelf..get the meaning.'	RECOMBINATION	COGNITIVE
…'I could not figure out the words uttered by the first speaker but the second speaker's talked clearly and I think this part is much easier than the first one. I can understand it.'	SELF-MONITORING	META-COGNITIVE
…'I could understand this sentence because when the woman takes the papers, something falls down so there should be put something behind the drawer to prevent this. I create such a scene in my mind to catch the correct answer.'	IMAGERY	COGNITIVE
…'In the first part, the women talks about something…I nearly understood but the structure 'I wish I could' made me confused and I couldn't decide whether she has gone or not, I think I have to learn more about 'wish clauses.	RESOURCING	COGNITIVE
… ' I tried to understand the meaning the words around the word 'ashame' but I couldn' t and I paid particularattention to the following sentence …'	SELECTIVE ATTENTION	META-COGNITIVE
… 'It was so easy because I caught all the words and I tried to concentrate like this in the following ques..	SELF REINFORCEMENT	META-COGNITIVE

… 'I tried to remember the words I got and then I comprehended the message..	**CONTEXTUALIZATION**	**COGNITIVE**
… ' the speech was so fast and I'm so tired, if not I am sure I can easily understand the questions..'	**SELF MANAGEMENT**	**META-COGNITIVE**

Table 1. Retrospective Protocols of High Ability Listeners

For example, when they considered a part to be important, some informants would listen out for repetitions, for rephrasing of the same idea, or for a summary at the end. Finally, use of such strategies allowed the informants to vary the intensity of their attention, thus making listening less stressful for them.

Both groups' protocols revealed an interaction of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. There were, however, some differences in the quantity and quality of strategies used. High ability listeners managed to achieve a reasonable interpretation of the whole passage in spite of problems they faced with. They continued listening and created different strategies to understand. They not only used familiar words to infer the meaning of the passages, they also kept their attention on the input. They also used this recombination strategy again by creating an interpretation from the words they know. This time it was acceptable because they had the relevant knowledge to support their reconstruction. At the same time, high ability listeners were actively monitoring their understanding of other parts of the segment. To do this they compared their interpretation with their knowledge and they checked their interpretation with the context in the segment by paying attention to the next part of the input. In this processing sequence, high ability listeners managed to monitor their ongoing comprehension while retaining a problematic part of the input in their working memory. Whereas those high ability listeners actively monitored their comprehension and attention, low ability listeners mostly dealt the passage itself. When they noticed an unfamiliar word, they paid special attention to those words and at the same time they paid special attention to familiar ones. They tried to use these words to catch the idea but generally they had to ignore the unfamiliar words as they couldn't understand and so their comprehension could not improve. There was also no evidence of them trying to use their prior knowledge to assist comprehension. This could be because the words they recognized were insufficient for schema activation. Low ability listeners also frequently used the repetition strategy. They repeated the words they got several times and even stopped listening to think about their meanings.

Low Ability

Retrospective Protocols	*Representative Strategies*	*Generic Strategy Classification*
… 'If I listened the dialogue once, I couldn't understand… but I listened twice and I concentrate on the word 'distance' and I heard it twice and this helped to fiend the correct ..''	**REPETITION**	**COGNITIVE**
… 'I tried to translate word by word then I got confused…'	**TRANSLATION**	**COGNITIVE**
… 'during the woman' speech I couldn' t catch the words but in the secon part of the dialogue I tried to write down the words of the man that I could catch..'	**NOTE-TAKING**	**COGNITIVE**
… ' I tried to combine the words that I catch easily to understand what the woman implied....'	**GROUPING**	**COGNITIVE**
… ' at the beginning of the speech, there was a word I was not sure …'	**SELF-MONITORING**	**META-COGNITIVE**
… ' the woman said 'ohh!' and I shaped the face of woman in my mind..the food was probably disgusting and she doesn' t want to eat it … but I was not sure….'	**IMAGERY**	**COGNITIVE**
…' As the words 'museum and restaurant' have nearly the same pronunciations in Turkish.. and I thought that these are the places probably that should be seen in Washington.. so whatever happens the woman wanted to go there…'	**KEY WORD**	**COGNITIVE**

… 'I heard somewhere 'community activities' and I decided that these activities were something related to 'projects' and then I choose the answer…'	SELECTIVE ATTENTION	META-COGNITIVE
… "I didn't hear all words clearly, I just guesses the meaning…"	INFERENCE	COGNITIVE

Table 2. Retrospective Protocols of Low Ability Listeners

Also translation was found the most predominant strategy type employed by low ability listeners, whereas it was used infrequently by high ability listeners. In short, both groups combined several comprehension strategies to process each listening segment. There was evidence of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies working together, as well as top down and bottom-up processes interacting to achieve comprehension. High ability listeners used a wider range of cognitive and meta-cognitive tactics which interacted efficiently to facilitate comprehension. They used prior knowledge, linguistic knowledge and contextual information, three important comprehension resources, to process input and manage the processing. In contrast, low ability listeners used mostly translation, repetition, note taking, key word and only low-level comprehension monitoring strategies. However, the two groups of listeners shared some similarities. Although it was different in quantity and quality, both of the groups engaged in top-down processing wherever possible, as evidenced in their use of strategies for inference, elaboration, recombination, and contextualization, which relied heavily on prior knowledge. Both also gave attention on problematic parts but were also ready to ignore difficulties and continue listening. A possible explanation for this is that when they found a word vaguely familiar they would try to think of its meaning. If, however, they knew the word was completely new, they would ignore it and keep their attention on the input. The interaction of strategies when one segment of the input was being processed shows that although individual strategies were useful, successful comprehension also depended on whether the listeners were able to combine various mental strategies in a way that could truly enhance comprehension

Eleven types of cognitive strategies and five types of meta-cognitive strategies which were used by high and low ability listeners were identified. These strategies were used by both groups in different quality and quantity. After this identification, subjects were asked some questions to get more clear information about their strategy usage, especially about the strategies 'imagery, self-monitoring, elaboration, contextualization. First question was a general question and was about subjects' listening subject matter preference. They were asked what kind of subject matter they would prefer to listen to, and high ability listeners said that they would like to listen to the subjects which reflect real life communication. They have reported that when the authentic listening materials are used in listening classes, they would easily and voluntarily engage in the listening tasks. The second question was about whether they use and learn the new language items by putting in context or not. High ability listeners reported that they always put the new language items in context and learn them in this way. However, low ability listeners mostly prefer to memorize these items separately or with the corresponding meanings in their native language. Another question was about whether it becomes easy for them to comprehend any listening passage if they are given any visual material related to the passage. High ability listeners said that it becomes easy because the meaning in their mind becomes more clear by the help of the picture or any scene. For this reason, they said that they find BBC or CNN news more understandable than TOEFL listening comprehension tests. On the other hand low ability listeners reported that in such situations they also comprehend the listening passages better but again not completely. The fourth question that was asked to the subjects was about whether they relate new information to the other concepts in memory. It was used more by high ability listeners than low ability listeners. And the last question was about whether they follow their comprehension level; that is, whether they monitor themselves during a listening task or not. High ability listeners reported that they monitor their comprehension and when they face with any problem, they actively employ other strategies to facilitate understanding. And low ability listeners also sometimes monitor their comprehension but they can't use this monitoring in an effective way.

The pretest / post-test which was designed to see the effectiveness of explicit listening strategy instruction showed that there is statistically a slight difference, in a positive direction, in the listening comprehension of the participants.

Conclusions

This study sought to better understand how a group of EFL listeners processed and managed information through specific strategies. The analysis of the informants' retrospective protocols and interviews records showed that both groups of high and low ability listeners use cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, however, with some differences in the quantity and quality of strategies used. High ability listeners managed to achieve a reasonable interpretation of the listening task in spite of problems they faced with. They continued listening and created different strategies to understand; on the other hand, low ability listeners couldn' t manage to create different strategies when they faced with problems. At the same time, high ability listeners were actively monitoring their understanding. To do this they compared their interpretation with their knowledge and they checked their interpretation with the context in the segment by paying attention to the next part of the input. In this processing sequence, high ability listeners managed to monitor their ongoing comprehension while retaining a problematic part of the input in their working memory. Also translation was found the most predominant strategy type employed by low ability listeners, whereas it was used infrequently by high ability listeners. In general, high ability listeners used a wider range of cognitive and meta-cognitive tactics which interacted efficiently to facilitate comprehension. In contrast, low ability listeners used mostly translation, repetition, note taking, key word and only low-level comprehension monitoring strategies. The interaction of strategies when one segment of the input was being processed shows that although individual strategies were useful, successful comprehension also depended on whether the listeners were able to combine various mental strategies in a way that could truly enhance comprehension. The results of the pretest and post-test documentation indicated that there is statistically a slight difference, in a positive direction, in the listening comprehension of the participants. There were indications that the difficulty of the task and the explicitness of directions to perform the strategies may both be important determinants of subsequent performance

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