

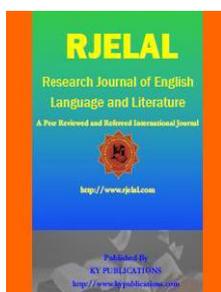


THE INTERACTION BETWEEN IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND THE LISTENING STRATEGIES THEY USE

LEYLA NAGHASHZADEH

Master student of Payame Noor University (PNU) of Tehran

E-mail: naleyla@yahoo.com



ABSTRACT

Listening skill is very likely to be neglected, especially for EFL learners, since they are normally not in touch with the "real and vast" target language. But if the purpose of language learning is to mingle with the native speakers of that language, listening needs to be perfected as well as the other skills. In order to help students to master this skill and make better sense of what they are said, we elaborated a research study to observe the effect of the listening strategies that learners use, on their choice of strategies. In this study participants were allowed to control the input by using computers individually. And their movements were recorded using a screen recording software. The strategies that students used were analyzed by observing the recorded video of their screen movements and were categorized into four types of strategies. The results showed that there is an interaction between the initial level of the learners and the strategies they use.

Key words: Listening strategies, proficiency level, self-regulation

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the second language research has grown in importance. However, many researchers have observed that in the listening domain certain aspects have remained untouched. Yet listening comprehension is an essential component of learning a living language. Learners should be able to make some sense of an uninterrupted flow of the language they are trying to learn. If they realize its undeniable importance, they will do their best to overcome this difficulty. Elkhafaifi (2005) showed that the anxiety that arises from the listening task had an influence on the comprehension of foreign learners. And some other researchers showed that listening task is the hardest skill to master in the domain of language learning. S.

Graham (2006) has shown that English students of French attribute their difficulty in comprehension to their own incompetence or to the difficulty of the text or the media, but very rarely to the inappropriate strategies.

Therefore, it's important to study the processes at play in the task of listening and L2 comprehension and see the effect of different factors like the initial level of the learners' competence and listening strategies on their performance. This way, instructors and teachers will be provided clues about how to help their students ameliorate their listening comprehension, and, consequently their communication ability. This study has mainly focused on any probable relationship between learners' general English

proficiency level and the listening strategies they use. We used a monitoring technique in order to find some information on this.

Consequently, this study aimed at answering the following question:

- Do the listening strategies that EFL learners choose in a self-regulatory listening task, depend on their initial level of proficiency?

Cognitive and Meta cognitive learning strategies

Learning strategies are the learners' approach to learning and using information. Previous studies and also cognitive psychology led researchers to elaborate a classification of the strategies to distinguish between cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. Cognitive strategies are "the steps or operations employed in solving problems that need direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of incoming speech information and involve direct manipulation of the language" (Roussel 2011). Metacognitive strategies are at a higher level. The learner is conscious of their learning process and controls it. Metacognitive strategies are "skills such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, and problem solving" that "are used by learners to manage, regulate, and guide their learning" (Vandergrift 2005). It seems that more-skilled learners, in the case of this study, listeners, use more metacognitive strategies than others.

Listening strategies

Listening strategies, as a subcategory of learning strategies, have always had a prominent place in the study of learners' auditory comprehension; especially after 1980s, when listening comprehension itself gained in importance as one of the main and most important components of language learning and stopped being considered an additional ability.

Listening strategies play a big part in the literature dedicated to listening comprehension. The literature concerns learning strategies that L2 learners adopt and use to learn, comprehend and get the meaning of the audios they hear. Many studies have been done in this field in order to figure out which ones are the most helpful. Among these researches there are certain studies that investigate the strategies that "successful" learners use and allow them to be more efficient (Naiman et

al. 1978). In order to find effective learning strategies many researchers started to focus on the concept of "good language learner" (Naiman et al. 1978; Rubin 1975). And they put forward the idea of teaching these strategies to other learners. The efficacy of these teaching strategies has been proved in many empirical studies (Chipman *et al.* 1985). The result of these studies demonstrated that learners actually do use different learning strategies and some of them are more successful than others. In many cases, the strategies used by learners could also be classified (Rubin 1981).

Methods already used for observing listening strategies

Many studies were conducted in this field, using different methods, in order to observe cognitive and metacognitive strategies. A very common method that has been used a lot is to give the learners some questionnaires to fill out. They were asked about the strategies they used and the data was collected and analyzed (e.g. Liu 2008); or the researchers collected interview data from the teachers and students (O'Malley et al. 1985). However some researchers believe that the responses that learners formulate might not lead to credible information. But since observing mental processes of learners is an almost impossible task, they prefer to study the oral (Goh 2002) or written evidence (Goh 1999) of the learning process at play. In these studies, learners are normally asked to tell or write what they understood after listening to an audio track. Other researchers, O'Malley et al. and Vandergrift among them, used think-aloud methodologies to examine learning strategies on a variety of tasks. Vandergrift (2003), for example, used a think-aloud procedure to collect data on the comprehension strategies that the learners used, while listening to a French audio. Recently Roussel (2011) did a different experiment observing the learners' behavior by using a screen monitoring software. His study involved so many variables and included several experiments.

Participants

The participants of the study were 30 female Persian-speakers who were studying English as a foreign language in an institute in Tehran. They were between 12 to 15 years old. They were chosen

randomly from intermediate and upper-intermediate classes. To measure the students' initial level of comprehension they were asked to listen to an audio track in American English two times in "collective listening". Then, they were asked, individually, to write everything that they recalled in English. Written assessment was chosen due to the lack of time. Interviewing the students, one by one, would require a lot of time. Two raters rated their performance by using a propositional analysis of their recalls (Kintsch and Van Dijk 1978). The raters gave one point for every recalled proposition and also evaluated the recall of the macrostructure of the text. They then calculated each learner's Z-score. This way the participants were divided to three groups (A, B, and C) based on their proficiency level; "A" the most skilled group and "C" the least. The lowest members of group C could be considered of international level A2.

Instruments

The audio tracks that were used in the pretest and the experiment were chosen from "Speak Naturally" series. This series contains short dialogues that are recorded by native speakers and were meant to keep the natural pace of speech. The dialogues are about quotidian conversations.

The main instrument used in this study is a software that is used for recording the screen. We used BB Flashback that allowed us to record everything that the participants did while listening to the track; such as pausing and movements backwards or forwards. At the end, the software provided us with an MP4 or AVI video for each participant. This gave us the chance to analyze the strategies that the learners used (global listening in contrast to analytical listening). For example, based on the information that is provided by the videos, we can infer that if the audio is not paused it corresponds to a global listening strategy. And if it is paused very often, every two seconds for example, it corresponds to an analytical listening strategy.

Procedure

After the participants were divided into three different groups based on their performance in the pretest, we had them listen to a different track, with the same level of difficulty as the one in the pretest. They listened to the discourse

individually, freely controlling the listening input on a computer. While they were listening to the audio on a computer, a screen recorder software recorded all the movements of the mouse, including forward movements, backward movements and pauses. This way we could observe the strategies that the students used (global or analytic). Learners were told to take notes whenever they needed to.

Then, learners were asked individually to write their recalls in English. Two raters rated their performance by using a propositional analysis of their recalls (Kintsch and Van Dijk 1978). The raters gave one point for every recalled proposition and also evaluated recall of the macrostructure of the text. They then calculated each learner's score as a percentage.

Results

Table 1 Pretest score for each group

	Pretest (Z-score)
Group A (n = 10)	27
Group B (n = 10)	13
Group C (n = 10)	6

Table 2 Average percentage score of each group for their recalled propositions

	Comprehension score (standard deviation)
Group A (n = 10)	58 % (25)
Group B (n = 10)	28 % (13)
Group C (n = 10)	20 % (11)

Table 3 Comparison between the T-scores of the three groups

Groups	T- test results
Group A and group B	P < 0.02
Group A and group C	P < 0.01
Group B and group C	P ≈ 0.1

The average of the comprehension of the class is 37%. The lowest score of the class is 10.6%

and the highest is 91.8%. By looking at table 3, we can see that the students' proficiency level has a great impact on their comprehension score. The differences between groups A and B as well as groups A and C are significant. But there isn't much difference between groups B and C. It is observable that the scores of some members of groups B and C are as good as the ones of group A and vice versa.

Learning strategies used by the learners:

After analyzing the videos that were recorded on the computers, we could categorize the listening strategies they used into four different categories:

1. An analytical listening after one global listening
2. An analytical listening after one or more global listenings
3. One or more global listenings in a row
4. One analytical listening without any global listening

Eleven out of thirty learners used strategy 1. Their average comprehension score was 39.20% that was higher than the average of the class (37%). Four students used the second strategy and their average score was 18%. Seven students used the third strategy, listening globally without any pauses or backward movements. Their average score was 29.8%. And finally eight students out of thirty used the fourth strategy and gained the average score of 25%.

Now let's take a look at the strategies used by the learners in each group. This way, we can have a better understanding of the relation between the initial level and the strategies. In group A (that had the best proficiency level) six students out of ten, used the first strategy and got an average score of 60% which is an excellent score. Two students chose the second strategy and got an average of 45%. Only one student used the third strategy and achieved the score of 91.8%. Only one participant used the fourth strategy and got the score of 17%.

In group B, one student used the first strategy and got the score of 21%. One student used the strategy Type 2 and got the score of 38%. Five of them used the strategy Type 3 and their average score was 30%. And finally, three used the fourth strategy and their average score was 33.8%.

In group C, one student used the first strategy, and got the score of 32%. Two participants used Type 2 strategy and their average score was 11.2%. Four members of this class used the third strategy and got an average score of 24.3%. And finally two of them used the fourth strategy and their average score was 35.8%.

Discussion

The members of group A and some participants in group B had a very good initial level and good knowledge of vocabulary, according to the pretest. The comprehension strategies that these participants used were very different from those of other members of group and members of group C. the strategy used by most of the participants of group A is as follows: a global listening followed by a listening with several regular and purposeful pauses. The pauses were mostly aimed at making sense of the sentences. There were not many backward movements. This group used some metacognitive strategies such as: regular pauses, and a great capacity for planning the listening task and self-regulation. Therefore, for these participants, initial level as well as the listening strategies put into practice, had an important effect on their comprehension.

The analysis of the study also shows that the strategies that the students put into practice depend on their proficiency level. Learners of group C mostly used the third and the fourth strategy, in which the pauses are numerous and difficult to interpret. Most of them did not have a precise plan for their listening task and recalled the discourse word by word, rather than the gist of it.

Conclusion

This study allowed us to observe four different categories of strategies that are used by students with different levels of proficiency. We could not actually conclude that all the members of a specific group used the same strategy, or that a strategy was used only by the participants in one group. For example strategy 1 was used by learners in group A, as well as some of the learners of group C. but we could see that very few members of group C (only one) used the first strategy that gave the best results among all the other strategies. The hypothesis we made can be supported by the result

of this study. Therefore, we can conclude that higher-skilled students tend to choose better strategies, since they have more free cognitive sources available, and get better results. However, learners with poor linguistic knowledge tend to skip elaborate planning and naturally, get poor results. We recommend that teachers and instructors help low-skilled learners make a concrete base for knowing more efficient learning strategies. Other studies might be done to elaborate on this point.

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