Scrutinizing Listening Strategies among Iranian EFL University Students

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Abstract – How to listen effectively is an important aspect of language teaching, nevertheless, it rarely is taught directly. The significance of teaching listening is because it’s a skill needed for constructing and communicating meaning. Recently, the role of strategy training in facilitating comprehension has been emphasized. In other words, it is highly appreciated that listening strategies are prerequisite to listening comprehension. The main goal of this study was to examine the listening strategies employed by university students. The researchers aimed to find to what extent university students use listening strategies in their EFL listening process, and which kind of strategies is more employed in this level of language learning among Iranian English students. The Persian version of listening strategy questionnaire (LSQ) translated and validated by Ghanizadeh and Babaee Moghadam (2015) was administered to 130 university students in Mashhad. It measures the perceived use of the strategies and processes underlying three factors including, cognitive strategies (i.e. linguistic inferencing, and problem solving), metacognitive strategies (i.e. planning, and monitoring listening comprehension), and affective strategies (i.e. Motivation, and anxiety). The results showed that they employed cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than socio-affective strategies in their listening sessions.

Keywords: Listening strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, University students, EFL learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension has played a significant role in language acquisition since the last two decades. In communicative approaches to language teaching, listening has been emphasized in all levels of language learning. An appropriate level of listening proficiency affects other aspect of language such as speaking and reading. During the 1990s, scholars acknowledged the vital role of listening comprehension in language achievement. People have to comprehend what their interlocutors say and respond to it. If they are able to listen effectively, then they will have a meaningful communication.

Chastain (1988) introduced listening comprehension as an “internal” process without any “external observation”, which shows its prerequisite importance in language learning. Students in a listening situation have the role of active participants rather than passive receiver of what is taught. Being active participants they should become strategic learners.

It seems that listening comprehension is very difficult for language learners especially in foreign language context. The learners develop listening faster than speaking, and it also affects the reading and writing abilities (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, as cited in Oxford, 1993).
For foreign language learners, some factors such as different accents, speech rates, and the requirement of different background knowledge, can cause problems in listening. Furthermore, foreign language limited contact with target language makes the listening process as a great challenge for them. In this case, they don’t have opportunities to practice English in everyday life.

Additionally, in these situations, we rarely teach students how to listen and we only test their listening ability. John Field (1998; as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 244) indicated that a real life listening of authentic material is different from that type of passage whose language is graded to fit the learners’ level. A non-native learner in real situations when listening to a passage he cannot understand, tries to guess the meaning, and making guess is not a sign of failure. However, in classroom situation we do not practice listening in this sense.

How to listen effectively is an important aspect of language teaching, but rarely is it taught directly (Vandergrift, 2007). Teaching of listening has recently developed. The focus on teaching listening is because it’s a skill needed for constructing and communicating meaning. Recently the role of strategy training in facilitating comprehension has been emphasized. In other words, it is highly appreciated that Listening strategies are prerequisite to listening comprehension.

Some L1 listening strategies such as guessing, making inferences, identifying topics, repetition, and note taking can improve students’ listening comprehension in an EFL context. Then using L1 to explain and teach these strategies in EFL classes is indispensable and beneficial (Bozorgian & Pillay, 2013).

Cohen (2003) concluded that if a foreign language curriculum chooses to introduce the strategies to students, they should raise the students’ awareness about learning preferences. This kind of instruction should promote the learner’s autonomy to continue the learning process out of the classroom.

Despite the importance of listening strategies for the development of foreign language proficiency, very limited studies have been performed in Iran, as a foreign language context, concerning the listening strategies employed by Iranian EFL students. Thus, this study sought to investigate listening strategies employed by Iranian university students.

The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:
1- To what extend do EFL university students use listening strategies in their listening process?
2- Which kind of listening strategies are more employed by EFL university students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The importance of listening

Vandergrift (2007) pointed out that listening is the least researched skill although it lies at the heart of language learning. Listening comprehension is a complex active process
rather than a passive activity. In listening process, student must discriminate sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structure, interpret stress and intonation, and associate it into the context (Vandergrift1999).

Vandergrift (1999) stated that listening comprehension is an integrative skill as it is the first skill that learners develop. Moreover, listening comprehension skills facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical competence. Terrell and Krashen (1983, as cited in Vandergrift, 1999) argued that the students should not be forced to produce utterances in the target language until they have an opportunity for the acquisition process to begin. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to seek effective strategies for presenting audio input in order to help students develop listening strategies.

Oxford (1993) stated “listening is perhaps the most fundamental language skill” (p.205). On the other hand, listening has been considered the most difficult skill for many language learners. It is a difficult skill for both learners and for EFL instructors. Most individuals develop their L1 listening abilities without any effort or attention, and because of this many L2 educators give little thought to what listening is and how it works. Moreover, language teachers may be unfamiliar with the activities that develop the necessary sub skills and strategies that lead to a proficient listening. Teachers lacking in pedagogic knowledge about L2 listening is because they don’t know effective techniques for listening instruction. Students usually listen to a text, respond to questions, and check their answers. Learners are not exposed to a flexible array of listening activities. Such situations are less than ideal because students would not have adequate opportunities to expand their listening skills and strategies (Siegel, 2014).

Listening competence helps the learners internalize the information even though they can’t speak. Although speaking is the major factor in language proficiency, listening comprehension has drawn more attention of educators than the past (Brown, 2001, p. 247).

Real time processing and phonological and lexico-grammatical features are two elements that distinguish listening comprehension from reading comprehension. Moreover, social and psychological factors influence L2 listening success. Obviously paying attention to linguistic input can’t lead the listener to a good comprehension of text (Vandergrift, 2007). Vandergrift (2007) stated that pragmatic comprehension, bidirectional listening, and affective dimensions of listening are very crucial aspects of successful listening.

Constructive nature of text comprehension was seen as the key innovation during the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement, namely the role of pre-listening phases. Teachers incorporate pre-listening activities to activate learners’ schemata. They employ activities to enable learners to use their prior knowledge to understand and interpret the meanings from text they hear. Practising core listening skills, such as listening for details, listening for gist, predicting, listening selectively and making inferences foregrounded in CLT.

Obviously, the main goal of listening instruction is to understand the target language in everyday life. Using the authentic material is one of the main factors which improve the listeners’ comprehension in real life situation (Vandergrift, 2007).
examined the influence of authentic materials on Iranian students’ listening comprehension ability. They used authentic materials in their listening class (experimental group) and compared the listening comprehension of students in control group, who didn’t received authentic treatment. The students which listened to authentic text were more successful in their comprehension than the other group.

Many studies also indicated that learners’ cultural familiarity of the target language has a substantial effect on learners’ listening comprehension. A crucial requirement for learning the spoken English is learning of cultural knowledge. Bakhtiarvand and Adinevand (2011) examined the effect of cultural oriented language materials on Iranian EFL learners’ listening proficiency. Their study indicated that cultural familiarization of the text has a very positive effect on learners’ listening comprehension.

It was believed that the Iranian course books are not prepared in line with intercultural communication, and they don’t prepare learner to cope with international society. Although, background knowledge, cultural familiarity, and linguistic complexity are three important factors to enhance the listening comprehension, target language culture is not emphasized in Iranian English course books (Bakhtiarvand & Adinevand, 2011).

Beginning language learners consider listening as a stressful activity, since they can’t process information quickly and sufficiently. The rate of text delivery is a challenging aspect of their listening. They feel they have less success in listening when it has not a normal speed. According to Goh and Taib (2006), different factors can influence this problem, such as cognition and affect. Renandya and Farrell (2010) mentioned some features of spoken texts that make listening difficult for lower level students, such as speaking rate, distraction, inability to recognize words they knew, new vocabulary, missing subsequent input, nervousness, sentence complexity, background knowledge, anxiety, frustration and unfamiliar pronunciation. The lack of pragmatic knowledge in L2 in the lower-level learners causes difficulties in their interpretation. It seems that it can be due to their bottom-up processing (Vandergrift, 2007).

Goh and Taib (2006) examined the metacognitive knowledge of primary school pupils about listening. Their study showed that primary school learners employ metacognitive strategies as much as older learners, but their knowledge is limited and should be developed. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) explained that the less skilled listeners should be instructed in the metacognitive process of listening; because, it makes the beginner-level students enable to listen or understand authentic texts inside and outside the classroom. Holden (2004) suggested that cyclical listening process should be better than linear for beginners. He stated that three stages of pre-listening, on-task listening, and post-listening activities can be incorporated appropriately as complementary strategies.

2.1. Listening Strategies

Teng (1998, p. 2) defined listening strategies as “The mental processes that are activated by listeners to understand learn, or to retain new information from utterances are referred to as listening comprehension strategies.”
Two kinds of strategies in an interactional event are so critical, production strategies which are used in order to compensate linguistic problems, and reception strategies which are used to clarify meaning. Production strategies are more intentioned rather than reception strategies. (Vandergrift, 1997b). According to Vandergrift (1997b), reception strategies are as the “Cinderella” of communication strategies. Reception strategies play a crucial role in solving the learners’ comprehension problems and they ended to the long-term language learning.

Vandergrift (1997b) investigated the reception strategies in novice and intermediate language learners. He adapted the Rost and Ross's (1991) classification of reception strategies. According this model (p. 499), there are six reception strategies namely;

- Global reprise: Listener asks for outright repetition, rephrasing or simplification of preceding utterance.
- Specific reprise: Listener asks a question referring to a specific word, term or fragment that was not understood in the previous utterance.
- Hypothesis testing: Listener asks specific questions about facts in the preceding utterance to verify that he or she has understood and/or what he or she is expected to do.
- Kinecics: Listener indicates a need for clarification by means of kinesics and/or paralinguistic.
- Uptaking: Listener uses kinesics and verbal or other nonverbal signals to indicate to the interlocutor that he or she understands.
- Faking: Listener sends uptaking signals or noncommittal responses in order to avoid seeking clarification.

Vandergrift (1997b) explained that novice learners use kinesics, global reprises, and hypothesis testing more than other strategies; instead, intermediate learners used these strategies less than novice learners and they more use up taking strategies.

Most studies about listening comprehension show that listening one of the most crucial skills in language learning especially at EFL contexts (Ghanizadeh & Babaei Moghadam, 2015). Unfortunately, there is little knowledge about listening strategies because most language learning strategy research is about reading, writing, and speaking. Listening facilitates the emergence of other skills and helps the learners to internalize the rules of language and then (Vandergrift, 1997a).

Vandergrift (2007) stated that how to listen effectively is an important aspect of language teaching; yet, rarely is it taught directly. Listening as a skill means constructing and communicating meaning, and it has been the cause of focusing on teaching this skill during the last 4 decades. The role of strategy training in facilitating comprehension has been essential in language teaching. Learners with listening problems may be motivated to find strategies to solving their listening problems (Goh, 2008). Goh (2008) also maintained, “Teacher modelling and scaffolded listening practice in metacognitive processes are clearly valuable for helping learners learn how to listen (p. 122).”
Field (1998, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) proposed a model for listening lessons which contains three stages, namely: pre-listening, listening, and post-listening. Learner’s motivation and sufficient context are emphasised in pre-listening stage. Extensive and intensive listening, pre-set tasks and checking learners’ answers are considered in listening stage. In post-listening, the functional language and vocabulary meaning are examined.

The perception of selected sounds, content words, and pronunciation of new words can be practiced to improve listening comprehension, but practice is not sufficient. Enhancing their comprehension, students also should adopt listening strategies, including, cognitive, metacognitive, and socioaffective strategies (Goh, 2000).

Students’ strategic listening has a positive effect on their listening comprehension. Those know how, when, and why to use listening strategies achieve high scores on their listening test (Amin et al., 2011).

The teachers should help students to improve their listening strategies use to understand spoken English. When using listening strategies, the authentic texts will be more interesting and accessible for learners in early stages (Vandergrift, 1999 p.174). Vandergrift (2004) stated “learning to listen” (process) happens primarily so the more important process at the higher levels of language learning become “listen to learn” (product).

According to O’Malley and Chamot’s (1990) model, learning strategies include metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective; accordingly, Vandergrift (1997a) proposed a model for listening strategies as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Strategies</th>
<th>Inferencing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>summarization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>translation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>transfer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>repetition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resourcing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>grouping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>note taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>deduction/ induction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>substitution</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metacognitive Strategies</th>
<th>planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>problem identification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-affective Strategies</th>
<th>Questioning for clarification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lowering anxiety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The present study aimed at examining listening strategies use among Iranian EFL university students. The researchers intended to find out the extent to which these students use listening strategies in a listening process.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

A total of 130 university English students were recruited to participate in this study. The students were all native speakers of Persian who live in Mashhad. They were at intermediate and upper intermediate level of English, studying at Imam Reza, Khayam, and Farhangian University.

3.2. Instrument

All the students were asked to answer the Listening Strategy Questionnaire (LSQ) designed based on Vandergrift’s (1997a) listening strategies model. The Persian version of the questionnaire translated and validated by Ghanizadeh and Babaee Moghadam (2015) was employed. This four-point Likert-scale ranging from (strongly disagree) to (strongly agree) was used to indicate students’ preferences. The scale containing 20 items measures the perceived use of the strategies and processes underlying three factors include cognitive strategies (i.e. linguistic inferencing, and problem solving), metacognitive strategies (i.e. planning, and monitoring listening comprehension), and affective strategies (i.e. Motivation, and anxiety).

3.3. Procedure

The scale was administered to examine to what extend university EFL learners use listening strategies and which kinds of strategies are more applicable in their language learning process.

The collection of the data took place in December 2015. The students participated in the study during their scheduled class time. The questionnaires were administered among all the participants in their listening classes. Before the participants responded, they were informed that it is not necessary to write their name on the face sheet. The participants were not in the testing situation and they just answered the questionnaires according to their experience in listening sessions.

4. RESULTS

The level of learners listening strategies use was examined using descriptive statistics. According to Table 1, cognitive strategies received the highest mean ($M=19.51$, $SD=3.14$)
followed by metacognitive strategies ($M=18.09$, $SD=3.22$). Socio affective listening strategies obtained the lowest mean score ($M=15.45$, $SD=2.58$).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Listening Strategies Used by University EFL Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>19.5154</td>
<td>3.14655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>18.0923</td>
<td>3.22165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio affective</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>15.4538</td>
<td>2.58532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies scores</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>68.00</td>
<td>53.1000</td>
<td>6.91684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>130</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To represent the above finding visually, the bar graph of the corresponding data was constructed. As it can be seen, cognitive strategies have the highest frequency and socio affective strategies were the least employed ones by university students.

Figure 1. The bar graph representing three listening strategies employed by university students.

All in all, the above data analysis showed that there was a disparity between three kinds of strategies students used. To see whether the observed differences are statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was applied to the data. Table 2 indicates the ANOVA results. As can be seen, there are significant differences among the three strategies employed by the participants ($F=61.44$, $p<.05$).
Table 2: ANOVA Table of Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1104.251</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>552.126</td>
<td>61.443</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>3477.585</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>8.986</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4581.836</td>
<td>389</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To further complement the ANOVA result, a post-hoc analysis was applied to the data. The objective of this analysis was to locate the exact place of difference. Table 3 represents the results of The Scheffe’s Test.

Table 3: The Scheffe’s Test for Determining the Location of Difference across the Three Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) VAR0002</th>
<th>(J) VAR00002</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.42308*</td>
<td>.37181</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>-1.42308*</td>
<td>.37181</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.06154*</td>
<td>.37181</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>-4.06154*</td>
<td>.37181</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*, The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As the table shows, there are significant differences across the three strategies: between cognitive and metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective, as well as between metacognitive and socioaffective.

5. DISCUSSION

It is highly accepted among EFL educationalists that emphasising listening comprehension strategies will help students to capitalize on the language input they receive, and to achieve greater success in language learning (Babaei Moghadam & Ghanizadeh, 2015; Babaei Moghadam, Ghanizadeh, & Akbari, 2015). As Vandergrift (1997) mentioned learning strategies are useful for students because they enhance language learning success. The use of listening strategies can make authentic texts more accessible in the early stages of learning a language, and the process becomes more relevant and interesting for the learners. Moreover, teachers can provide useful listening strategies when they put students in abundant opportunities for listening practice outside of evaluation.
The present study investigated the types of listening strategies employed by university students at the intermediate level of English learning. It was revealed that cognitive strategies were reported more frequently followed by metacognitive ones. This is consistent with Goh and Taib (2006)'s findings. This study, nevertheless, does not correspond with Vandergrift’s (1997a) study which had a comparison between novice and intermediate learners’ listening strategies. In his study, he indicated that cognitive strategies are more reported by novice learners and intermediate listeners reported using metacognitive strategies more frequently.

In another study which was designed in Iranian context, Bidabadi and Yamat (2011) revealed that Iranian EFL freshman university students at advanced, intermediate, and lower-intermediate levels employed meta-cognitive strategies more frequently and actively. On the other hand, in a recent study, Ghanizadeh and Babae (2015)'s findings showed that Iranian students at the beginning and intermediate level prefer to use inferencing, elaboration, summarization, translation, transfer, resourcing, and grouping more than other strategies.

According to the first question of the present study the results revealed that the students at the intermediate level of foreign language learning tended to apply a host of listening strategies when they were trying to understand a passage. Although the university students were not at a testing situation while listening, understanding the content was important for them, and they tied to receive more comprehensible data from the text.

It was also demonstrated that university students used socio-affective strategies less than two the other two strategies. It seems that some cultural factors in Iranian context have direct effect on their employment of socio-affective. Many students tend to avoid using some socio affective strategies, such as asking the teacher or their friends about what they don’t understand. Seemingly, these strategies fall within face threatening acts which are sensitive and delicate issues in Iranian culture.

The present study offers important implications for classroom teaching and for EFL teachers. It can be concluded that university EFL learners should be made aware of the strategies and should be instructed to improve their listening comprehension. The teachers should not pay attention to practice at the word and grammatical structure in listening practice; instead, they should encourage learners to actively participate in the listening text, and using traces of socioaffective strategies. When listening strategies are implicitly and explicitly instructed by the teacher, student listening ability as well as some barriers to effective learning, such as anxiety is expected to diminish (Babaei Moghadam & Ghanizadeh, 2015).

REFERENCES

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