

Metacognitive Listening Strategies used by Saudi University L2 Successful Learners

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Abstract

This paper reports on the metacognitive listening strategies used by second language successful learners when listening to a text in English. It is part of a larger study where 82 students were surveyed in regards to metacognitive listening strategies using the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ). Three successful listeners from among the 82 students volunteered to take part in the verbal reports (think-aloud protocols) in an attempt to uncover the metacognitive listening strategies this group of learners uses. The research question I sought to answer was: What are the metacognitive strategies that successful level four female Saudi students at the College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University report using while listening to a text in English? Results indicated that when listening in English, this group of learners use problem-solving and directed attention strategies more often than other types of metacognitive strategies.

Key Words: listening comprehension, verbal reports, metacognitive strategies, Saudi university students.

1. Introduction

After a long term of neglect, the centrality and primacy of listening in language learning is now well-established (Morley, 2001, p. 70). The view today is that listening comprehension “lies at the heart of language learning” (Vandergrift, 2007, p. 191). However, although developing L2 listening is crucial, language learners are rarely taught “how to listen effectively” (ibid). Instead, L2 listening classes tend to focus on the product, rather than the process of listening, which is a form of testing rather than actually teaching learners how to go about a listening text (Mendelsohn, 2006, p. 76). In fact, a listening lesson often does no more than obtaining correct answers to a set of comprehension questions, which, according to Vandergrift, “does little to help students understand and control the processes leading to comprehension” (2007, p.191).

However, the interest of listening instruction has recently been directed towards “raising student awareness of the process of listening” (Vandergrift, 2004, p.10). Goh clarifies that the focus of listening instruction since the 1990s has shifted towards “the use of listening strategies for enhancing comprehension and coping with problems” (2008, p.190). Lynch further explains that “recent approaches to teaching L2 listening have tended to emphasize the need to listening strategically” (2006, p. 92). Furthermore, an investigation into listening comprehension strategies, Vandergrift says, “can help clarify the process of listening and provide a more solid theoretical base for what teachers should do in the classroom” (1997, pp. 387-388). Vandergrift states that “while second language strategy research has expanded in recent years, the number of studies in listening comprehension is relatively small” (1997, p. 388). Hence, this study attempted to fill in a gap in the area of metacognitive listening strategies used by adult second language learners.

Listening Comprehension

Listening, according to Rost (2001), refers to “a complex process that allows us to understand spoken language” (p.7). However, Lynch and Mendelsohn argue that listening should not be viewed as a single process, but rather as “a bundle of related processes” (2002, p. 193). Rost further explains that listening is viewed as “a process involving a continuum of active processes, which are under the control of the listener, and passive processes, which are not” (2002, p.7). Hence, the complexity of listening is partly due to the fact that it involves a number of active and passive processes, rather than one single process.

Another consensus among researchers nowadays is that listening is an active process (Vandergrift, 1999, p. 168; Buck, 2001, p. 3; Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002, p. 193). Listening also makes a “transferable skill” in the sense that it is “one channel of information which helps learners extend their knowledge of the target language once the classroom is left behind” (Field, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, since “communication is a two-way traffic,” any successful L2 learner needs “listening in equal measure with speaking” (ibid). In fact, Nunan states that “listening is fundamental to speaking” (2002, p. 239). All of this suggests the importance of listening to language learners and that it should be given greater prominence in language teaching. However, listening has a number of features that distinguish it from other language skills and might explain why many L2 learners think of listening as a challenge to them. One is that it takes place in real time, which entails the necessity for automatic processing (Buck, 2001, p. 6; Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002, p.194). Listening depends on information that is of transient nature and which unfolds in time, with the absence of the recursive nature found in reading (Field, 2008). Listening also witnesses the “presence of a rich prosody” as well as “characteristics of natural fast speed” (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002, p. 194). All of this, according to Field, may be a significant reason for the anxiety of second language listeners. Yet, gaining insight into the listening process itself would benefit second language teachers in helping learners overcome the difficulty they face when listening in another language.

Listening Processes

One view of comprehension that has influenced the understanding of learner listening comprehension is Anderson's three phase comprehension model (Goh, 2002). Under this view, comprehension involves three stages: perceptual processing, parsing and utilization. The three stages, Anderson clarifies, are “partially ordered in time,” however “they also partly overlap” (2000, p. 389). The first stage, i.e. perceptual processing, witnesses the encoding of the acoustic message. In the second stage, “words in the message are transformed into a mental representation of the combined meaning of the words” (ibid). In the last stage, which is utilization, “comprehenders actually use the mental representation of the sentence's meaning” (ibid). “These three processes,” O'Malley et al. state, “overlap with and are consistent with listening comprehension processes identified elsewhere” (1989, p. 419).

Metacognitive Listening Strategies

Learning strategies refer to “a range of goal-directed plans and behaviors and have encompassed all 'thoughts and actions that assist learning’” (Rost, 2002, p. 154). One way of classifying learning strategies is direct vs. indirect (Oxford, 1990). The latter includes metacognitive, affective and social strategies, whereas the former includes cognitive strategies. Oxford explains that indirect strategies are labeled so because they “support and manage language learning without (in many instances) directly involving the target language” (p.135). “It looks,” Macaro states, “as if it is more these types of strategies that are good predictors of the successful learner rather than the more directed ones” (2001, p. 38). Hence, we witness the interest of researchers in this group of strategies which is assumed to be characteristic of more successful language learners.

The term metacognition was first used by Flavell in the 1970s to refer to the learner's awareness of both learning and thinking (Goh, 2008), and was later applied to language learning by Wenden (1987). Metacognition, simply defined, refers to “thinking about one's thinking” (Vandergrift et al., 2006, p. 432). Research carried out in this area indicates that metacognition is a vital contributor to any differences that may occur in second language listening (Vandergrift, 2007). Metacognitive strategies, in particular, refer to processes used by learners consciously for the purpose of supervising or managing language learning (Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002). There are five main elements metacognitive strategies consist of, including: planning for learning, choosing and using strategies for learning, monitoring the use of such strategies, coordinating different strategies and finally, the evaluation of both the use of strategies and of learning (Anderson, 2002). Yet, researchers in this field seem to agree that metacognitive strategies are basically classified into planning, monitoring and evaluation strategies, with each group consisting of a number of sub-categories (Rost, 2002, p. 156; Goh, 2008, p. 198).

Research indicates that it is the use of this type of strategies, in particular, that distinguishes more successful learners from less successful ones (Vandergrift, 2005, p. 74). This entails that research in this area of listening strategies would benefit teachers in raising their students' awareness to such strategies which is expected to help them be better foreign language listeners.

One of the earliest studies conducted in the area of second language listening strategies was done by O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper (1989). The researchers used think-aloud protocols to identify the listening strategies 11 intermediate level high-school students' use when doing a listening task. The study aimed at comparing effective and ineffective listeners in order to figure out any differences in the use of learning strategies that exist between these two groups of learners. Results demonstrate that whatever strategy any student use varies depending on the phase in the listening comprehension process. The students used selective attention and self-monitoring in the perceptual processing stage, grouping and inferencing in the parsing stage and elaboration in the utilization stage. The study also found that effective listeners use strategies more successfully than their less effective peers.

Another study by Vandergrift (2003) investigated the application of listening strategies by 36, 7th grade learners of French. The study particularly aimed at uncovering the various types of strategies used as well as differences between more skilled and less skilled listeners in regards to strategy use through the use of think aloud protocols. Vandergrift found that his participants used a variety of metacognitive strategies, including planning, monitoring and problem identification strategies. However, the participants did not report any use of evaluation strategies, which may be a result of their young age. Results of this study also demonstrated the frequent use of metacognitive strategies among more skilled listeners when compared to their less skilled peers. Further, results showed that less skilled listeners engage more in on-line translation, which is a bottom-up approach to listening.

Research in the area indicates that the significance of learning strategies in learning a second language is due to two main reasons: one is that looking into such strategies help gain insight into the different processes that are involved in language learning; the other reason is that by uncovering the different strategies successful language learners use, less successful peers can be taught new strategies, which might help them become more successful language learners (Chamot, 2005).

Research Design

This study was carried out at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT) at King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh- Saudi Arabia. The participants were all female, Saudi university students enrolled on a Listening (4) course. This part of the study particularly attempted to answer the following research question:

What are the metacognitive strategies that successful level four female Saudi students at COLT at KSU report using while listening to a text in English?

Macaro et al. (2007) state that from among the four language skills, listening seems to be “the most difficult from which to obtain a true picture of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies being used by participants” (p.167). Yet, Oxford (1996) believes that think- aloud protocols are most useful in “identify[ing] in-depth the strategies used in a given, ongoing task” (p.36). Think-aloud protocols, Vandergrift states, “appear to be a productive methodology for studying on-line strategy use” (2003, p. 471). Introspection, which is another term used for think-aloud protocols, has been listed by Lynch and Mendelsohn as a method of investigating “the routes by which listeners achieve understanding” (2002, p. 202). In fact, verbal reports are considered by Brown and Rodgers as “the best evidence we have of human mental processes” (2002, p. 73).

Think-aloud protocols have been used by many researchers to investigate the listening strategies used by L2 listeners, including: O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper (1989), Vandergrift (1997), and Vandergrift (2003). In fact, Macaro et al. (2007) state that “think-aloud protocols have been the preferred method of eliciting from learners their strategy use when listening” (p.166). The use of think-aloud protocols, Vandergrift explains, “is the closest researchers can come to tapping thought processes while information is still available to the listener in short-term memory” (2007, p. 192).

In order to answer the research question, I attempted to choose the three most successful listeners from among the nine participants who volunteered to do the think-aloud. The decision was based on their grades in the two in-terms they had already taken. Since the task was done on a voluntary basis, participants were motivated enough to carry it out. Doing the introspection in the participants' L1 and choosing texts that are unfamiliar to the students have been mentioned by Lynch and Mendelsohn as solutions to some problems that might occur as a result of doing think-aloud protocols (2002, p. 203). The listening task I chose for the students was of average length and difficulty, as I was aiming at lowering the burden of the task on the participants, since, as Brown and Rodgers explain "verbalization places additional cognitive demands on mental processing" (2002, p. 55).

Data Collection

The think aloud procedure had two phases: a training phase and a data collection one. Both phases were conducted within the same session over a period of two days. However, only the data collection phase was audio-recorded for later transcription and coding. In the training phase, the participants were trained on how to verbalize their thoughts. Following Brown and Rodgers' assumption that most people seem to talk through while doing arithmetic tasks (2002, p. 53), the participants were given a simple multiplication problem and were asked to verbalize the steps they go through while attempting to solve the problem. The training session was conducted immediately before the data collection session to help students get a clear idea about think-aloud tasks.

Following the procedure suggested by Brown and Rodgers, the students were given a multiple-choice task to do and were asked to report on what their brains are processing while doing the task. The task was taken from their course book and follows the format of standardized tests in which the respondents had to listen to the questions and only the choices they had to choose from were on paper. A cassette player was used for the purpose of playing the listening text and an MP3 was used for recording the verbal reports. The text was stopped at pre-determined pauses, at which point students attempted to verbalize their thoughts. In order to encourage the participants to think aloud, rather than talk aloud, I sat behind the participant while carrying out the verbal report. I also tried to keep the MP3 device inconspicuous, though the participants were aware that recording will take place. Furthermore, I used non-cueing probes in Arabic such as What are you thinking?, How did you reach that answer?, etc. in order to urge students to speak up. All participants verbalized their thoughts in their L1, i.e. Arabic, though there were some occasional remarks made in English.

Data Analysis

The protocols have been analyzed using a pre-defined taxonomy of listening comprehension strategies developed by Vandergrift (1997), which according to him, is "based on earlier work by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990)" (2003, p. 473). This taxonomy includes the three main types of strategies, i.e. metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective, but to serve the purpose of the study in hand, the focus was only on metacognitive strategies. In order to code the protocols, each think-aloud report was read carefully several times, then any corresponding think-aloud verbalization was underlined. Finally, the strategy used was categorized according to Vandergrift's taxonomy. Since the focus of this paper is on metacognitive listening strategies, any additional strategies revealed by the participants that fall under any of the other types of listening strategies have been excluded from coding.

Results and Discussion

The think-aloud procedure was used in the study to investigate the metacognitive listening strategies used by three successful listeners. The results indicated that all three participants agreed on the use of *advance organization*, which is classified under planning strategies according to Vandergrift's taxonomy. They all attempted to read the questions first before listening to the text.

Participant A: I read the questions first in order to know what to focus on and not to waste time on parts that are not important.

Participant B: I read the questions first in order to know what I will be listening to

Participant C: I have to read the questions before listening

All participants when asked about *synthesize*, which was a word mentioned in the listening text, reported that they did not notice it. They said:

Participant A: no, I didn't notice it.. because when she first started talking I thought it was about the previous question then I realized it was another question

Participant B: no, honestly, when I find the answer to the question, I don't catch up with the following part

Participant C: I didn't notice it, probably because I was focusing on other things.. on the type of questions

Their responses indicate their use of *selective attention*, which is also a type of planning strategy. Reviewing the questions is what helped them attend to particular aspects of the listening and ignore whatever seemed irrelevant to them. It becomes evident that they did not notice the word because it was not of any help in answering the questions. There are, however, other instances of selective attention in the participants' verbal reports, such as:

Participant A: I'm taking a general look at the questions so that when I listen I know what I'm after, hence I won't waste time listening to unimportant things

Participant B: the introduction attracted my attention.. thereby I would concentrate better

Participant C: the key words, Middle East and Northern Ireland, and these .. I have to focus on the names

Participants A and B also report the use of *evaluation strategies*, through which they judge their overall ability in carrying out the task (performance evaluation) or their strategy use (strategy evaluation).

Participant A: the mistake I made was trying to circle the right answer before listening to the question. Next time I'll wait for the questions before making up my mind on the right choice.

Participant B: I seem to have a problem and I need to concentrate more next time.

What Participant B says includes both performance evaluation (*I seem to have a problem*) and strategy evaluation (*I need to concentrate more next time*) while what A says includes only strategy evaluation.

Participant B uses *problem identification* when confronted with a word she hears for the first time:

[*Upcoming exam- new word for me.. but it is up and come.. so I can tell what the meaning is (she gives the Arabic equivalent)*]

In this instance, the subject uses linguistic cues to deal with the problem. She also identifies another problem which she was able to resolve:

[There was nothing related to the questions.. I got a bit confused.. but I was able to get back on track]

Participant C also uses *problem identification strategies* when saying:

[Here I found a problem which is that I didn't focus on lectures, discussions and readings.. I feel I need to write them down when I hear them because she mentioned many things which I need to concentrate on in order to decide on the right answer]

The participants also report the use of *monitoring strategies*; Participant A used double-check monitoring twice; once when asked "What are you thinking about?" she replied by saying:

[I think the answer was A.. it included all of them, but I don't expect that so I'll remain on my choice, which is D]

The other instance is when she said:

[When she first started to talk I thought this belongs to the previous question then I realized that it's another question]

When the tape started playing the comprehension questions, which are not written on the task sheet, Participant B also double-checked her comprehension. She said:

[The first answer is like what I anticipated....my answer here is also right]

By analyzing the think-aloud protocols, it appears that all three participants agreed on the use of *advance organization*, which is classified under planning strategies according to Vandergrift's taxonomy. They all attempted to read the questions first before listening to the text. Their responses indicate their use of *selective attention*, which is also a type of planning strategy. Reviewing the questions is what helped them attend to particular aspects of the listening and ignore whatever seems irrelevant.

It appears quite evident that they did not notice the word because it was not of any help in answering the questions. Participants also reported the use of *evaluation strategies*, through which they judge their overall ability in carrying out the task (performance evaluation) or their strategy use (strategy evaluation).

Among the strategies that are believed to play an important role in the listening process, Macaro et al. (2007) mentioned selective attention and using a variety of clues (including linguistic, contextual and background ones) to infer the meanings of unknown words. Further, translating key words seem to be closely related to the strategy of inferencing, and is thus viewed as a useful strategy (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Further, a study carried out by Vandergrift (1997) indicated that the metacognitive strategy that appears to be most often reported by listeners is comprehension monitoring.

Problem-solving strategies have also been reported by the three successful participants in the think-aloud phase of the study. For example, Participant B made use of linguistic cues to solve the problem of a word she encountered for the first time. The participants also reported the use of monitoring strategies, particularly double-check monitoring, according to Vandergrift's taxonomy (1997).

According to Vandergrift et al. (2006), problem-solving comprises a number of strategies that are used by listeners in order to inference and to monitor such inference. Berne (2004) reviewed the results of a number of studies that aimed at uncovering differences between more-proficient listeners and their less-proficient peers. In terms of problem-solving strategies, she found that more-proficient listeners have the ability to make guesses about the meaning of new words and make use of previous experiences by relating them to what they hear, while their less-proficient peers usually make far less inferences and do not attempt to double check their assumptions. Participants also reported the use of directed attention strategies. The third participant repeated a number of times her need to focus more on the text, while the second participant reported the use of one type of directed attention strategies, which is trying to get back on track when losing concentration. This type of strategies is defined by Vandergrift et al. (2006) as “strategies that listeners use to concentrate and stay on the task” (p.451). These strategies represent “the important roles played by attention and concentration in the process of listening comprehension” (Vandergrift et al., 2006, p.451).

Pedagogical Implications

The study shed light on the metacognitive listening strategies often used by successful language students. “There is some empirical evidence,” Vandergrift states, “that an important difference between more-skilled and less-skilled L2 listeners lies in their use of metacognitive strategies” (2005, p. 74). Hence, Anderson and Vandergrift suggest that “teaching strategies should foster the growth of metacognition among students” (1996, p. 17). Goh (2008) also believes that metacognitive instruction helps learners gain confidence and motivation and be less anxious, as it has a positive effect on the performance of listeners. Research indicates that “weak listeners potentially benefit the greatest from it” (ibid, p.196). Furthermore, both Goh (1997) and Vandergrift (1999) agree on the importance of raising students' metacognitive awareness. One idea they both suggest is the investment of listening classroom time in discussion on strategy use. They also agree on the importance of pre and post-listening activities. “Focusing on the process as well as the product of listening,” Vandergrift says, “can help students to reflect on their learning and can encourage them to consciously adjust their strategies” (1997, p. 406). Hence, language teachers are urged to preview the listening process step by step with their students, training them on the use of pre, while, and post-listening strategies. Guiding students through the process of listening, Vandergrift et al. (2006) argue, “can help learners develop the metacognitive knowledge critical to the development of self-regulated listening” (p.437). Such guidance also motivates students and grants them control over their learning (Vandergrift, 2003, p. 489).

Furthermore, since results demonstrate that many L2 learners do in fact perceive listening as difficult, investing classroom time in developing learners' strategies is worthwhile. Vogely (1995) states that "in order to be "good" listeners, the learners must feel "good" about themselves" (p.47). Developing learners' listening strategies leads to "increased strategy use, more efficient management of the listening process and learner autonomy" (O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2009, p. 10). In fact, learners who possess a higher degree of metacognitive knowledge and who are able to apply that knowledge to their learning situations are thought to be better at the listening process as well as storage of new information, and are also better at finding better ways to practice, which helps them reinforce what they have learned (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010).

Conclusion

This study investigated the metacognitive listening strategies used by female university level Saudi learners at COLT/ KSU. Results indicated that participants favored the use of problem-solving and directed attention strategies over the other groups of strategies. The study in general gave insight into the metacognitive listening strategies used by more successful L2 listeners through the use of verbal reports, supported with ample evidence from the literature available on the subject. Vandergrift et al. state that "research on the effects of metacognitive instruction has provided preliminary evidence that performance, confidence, and motivation can be enhanced through classroom instruction" (2006, p. 436). However, Macaro et al. (2007) say that "strategy instruction in the skill of listening is still very much in its infancy" (p. 185). Hence, this is an area that deserves more attention by researchers in order to test the preliminary evidence found in the literature so far.

To conclude, Berne (2004) states that "listening comprehension strategies have been and continue to be a very fruitful area for researchers to explore" (p.52). Yet, "whilst there is a considerable body of literature exploring listening strategy use, the literature related to strategy instruction is more sparse, although there is an emerging research agenda" (Macaro et al., 2007, p. 165). Even though listening is now generally believed to play a vital role in second language acquisition and the facilitation of language learning, it is still considered "a young field that merits greater research attention" (Vandergrift, 2003, p. 464).

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