

A STUDY OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes investigating the types of metacognitive strategies used by University students majoring in English. The results revealed that the students used “problem-solving strategies” most frequently and “person-knowledge strategies” least frequently. It was also found that discrepancy between good listeners and poor listeners about using metacognitive strategies and in the use of “person-knowledge strategies”. Implications for students, teachers and further research are recommended.

Key words: Metacognitive Strategy, Listening Comprehension, EFL learner

1. Introduction

Listening comprehension is a crucial part of language acquisition and instruction. It is influenced by many factors, among which metacognitive strategies are most important. Accordingly, language teachers face the challenging task of helping learners develop metacognitive skills. When learners acquire some metacognitive knowledge, they can manage and evaluate their own language learning better. Learners’ understanding of mental and emotional processes in their *EFL* listening can also help them master the ways of improving their listening skills.

This paper will start from an empirical research to explore the types of metacognitive strategies used by University students majoring in English listening and examined whether there are any differences in the use of these strategies between high and less proficient listeners. The article will conclude with the suggestions to develop learners’ metacognitive awareness so as to improve their performance in English listening.

2. Literature Review

Flavell invented the term “metacognition” in 1970s. It is thinking about one’s cognitive process, which includes two essential aspects - self-appraisal and self-management of cognition (Paris & Winograd, 1990, p.17). It refers primarily to an understanding or perception of ways different factors act and interact to affect the course and outcome of cognitive enterprises (Goh, 1997, p.361). Flavell identifies three major categories in metacognitive knowledge: personal knowledge; task knowledge and strategic knowledge (Flavell, 1976).

Wenden applies this term into the study of language learning. Metacognitive knowledge refers to information learners acquire about their learning (Wenden, 1998, p.518). It has also been classified into three categories. Person knowledge is knowledge learners have acquired about themselves as learners. It includes human factors that facilitate or inhibit learning. Task knowledge is learners’ understanding of the purpose and demands of a task, i.e. how to deal with a particular task. Strategic knowledge refers to learners’ specific knowledge about the nature of learning strategies and when and how to use them (Wenden 1998).

Besides metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive strategies have been widely acknowledged as a crucial component in metacognition. Metacognitive strategies refer to general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, guide their learning, i.e. planning, monitoring and evaluating (Wenden, 1998, p. 519).

Metacognitive listening strategies include five types of strategies: problem-solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, person knowledge, and directed attention (Vandergrift et al.,

2006). Problem-solving represents a group of strategies listeners use to guess what they do not understand in the process of listening and to monitor these inferences (Vandergrift et al., 2006). Planning and evaluation strategies are those types of strategies that listeners use to prepare themselves for listening tasks and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts (Richards, 1990). Mental of strategies those listeners must avoid if they want to become skilled listeners (Vandergrift, 2003). Person knowledge strategies include listeners' perceptions and attitudes concerning the difficulty of the listening task and their self-efficacy about second language (L2) listening (Sparks and Ganschow, 2001). Directed attention represents strategies that listeners use to concentrate and stay on listening task (Rost, 2002).

Based on the theory of metacognition, the metacognitive listening strategies awareness involves in the extent to which language learners are aware of their strategies and can regulate the process of L2 listening comprehension (Vandergrift et al., 2006). Empirical evidence shows that the effective use of metacognitive listening strategies plays a large role in successful listening comprehension (Vandergrift, 2003), helps students to increase their self-regulation and autonomy in listening (Vandergrift, 2002), and has a significant relation with students' motivation for language learning and listening self-efficacy (Vandergrift, 2005).

Metacognitive awareness in listening refers to the adoption of appropriate strategies and ideal allocation of resources (Lin, 2002). Several recent studies investigating metacognitive awareness about listening have made use of the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) as an instrument for eliciting learners' knowledge about strategy use and the demands from listening (Lee, 2007, O'Bryan and Hegelheimer, 2009; Bozorgian, 2012; Zeng, 2012). According to its developers, the MALQ was grounded in research and theory about L2 listening, most significantly the findings of research on strategy use and metacognitive knowledge based on Flavell's (1979) conception of metacognition (Vandergrift et al., 2006). In addition to validating the questionnaire, Vandergrift et al. (2006) found a moderately significant correlation between listening comprehension ability and the overall MALQ scores of the 966 respondents. They reported that 13% of the variance in listening performance could be explained by learners' metacognitive awareness. In addition, Rahimi and Nabilou (2009) found that high school students were more aware of their metacognitive listening strategies in general in comparison to university students. This showed that unlike other studies (Vandergrift, 2005), the level of metacognitive awareness across age groups is different. This difference can be attributed to students' motivation, self-efficacy, and language listening skillfulness. Due to the lack of related studies in university setting in Bulgaria, the aims of the present study are to investigate the total use of metacognitive listening strategies by university EFL students at different levels of proficiency and to examine the differences in the use of metacognitive strategies in listening comprehension between high skilled and low skilled proficient listeners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Thirty students at the University of Plovdiv, Department of English Philology participated in this study. They were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old. All the students participated in the study voluntarily.

3.2. Instruments

The research was designed primarily to collect quantitative data to be analyzed. The data were collected using two instruments: A listening comprehension test TOEFL and Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ).

2.2.1. A listening comprehension test

The instrument used in this study was the listening section of the TOEFL. It was used to measure the listening proficiency. It consisted of 33 multiple-choice questions. The test included two dialogues and four lectures.

3.2.2. The questionnaire

To assess second and foreign language learners' metacognitive awareness and perceived use of strategies in listening comprehension MALQ developed by Vandergrift at al. (2006, 432) was used in this study. The questionnaire contains 21 items, each item is rated on a six point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) without a neutral point so that respondents could not hedge. MALQ consists of five categories including problem solving (6 items), planning and evaluation (5 items), mental translation (4 items), person knowledge (3 items) and directed attention (4 items).

3.3 Procedure

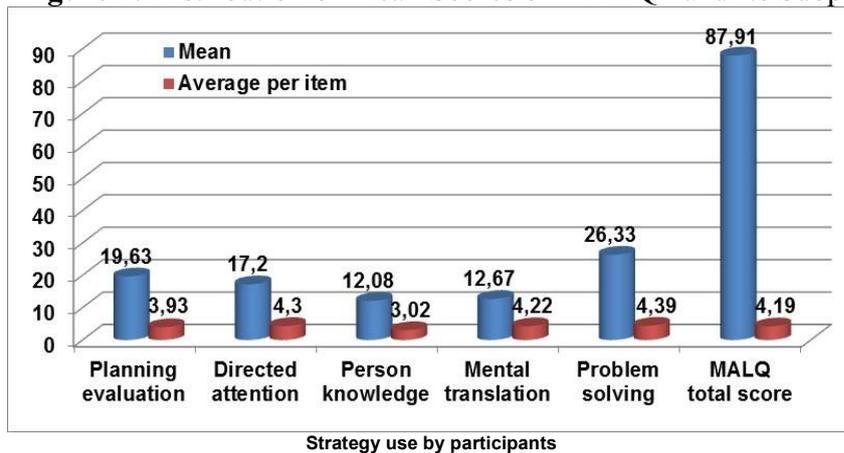
At first, the researcher informed the students about the purpose and procedure of the study. It was also emphasized that their participation would be anonymous and confidential. Then, the listening section of TOEFL was applied to the participants. It took 40 minutes to finish answering the questions. Based on the raw scores in the test, students were divided into two groups of high proficient and low proficient listeners.

The MALQ questionnaire was administered immediately after the test to the participants in both groups. In this way, they were engaged in an authentic listening activity and they had a specific task on which to base their responses. The students were instructed to circle the numbers on the Likert scale to best show their level of agreement with the statement. It took the participants approximately 25 minutes to complete.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the MALQ and its subparts from two experimental groups of low and high proficient listeners (n=30) are summarized in Figure 1. According to the data collected through MALQ, the total average scores in MALQ was 4.19. Therefore, that showed the students have rather high metacognitive awareness in listening strategies.

Figure 1. Distribution of Mean Scores on MALQ* and Its Subparts (n=30)



*MALQ consists of five categories including - problem solving (6 items), planning and evaluation (5 items), mental translation (3 items), person knowledge (3 items) and directed attention (4 items)

Among the five main categories of metacognitive strategies in MALQ, the category of “Problem-solving” was the first most frequently used (4.39) and “Directed attention” was the metacognitive strategy of second highest frequency (4.30). The third and fourth most categories included “Mental translation” (4.22) and “Planning and evaluation” (3.93). The category of “Person knowledge” (3.02) strategy lowest level of awareness (Fig. 1).

Problem-solving strategies, the first most frequently used metacognitive strategy, include a group of strategies listeners use to make inferences and to monitor these inferences. According to

Vandergrift (2003) and Goh (2000), metacognitive strategies, such as monitoring and problem solving are used by students when they regularly translate what is heard. These strategies represent the problem-solving processes, the knowledge retrieval processes, and the accompanying verification (monitoring) processes (Kintsch, 1998, p. 189). The second highest strategy awareness was for “directed attention” (4.30) which represents strategies that listeners use to concentrate and to stay on task such as getting back on track when losing concentration or focusing harder when having difficulty understanding (Rost, 2002). The third highest strategy awareness was for “mental translation strategies” (4.22) which include strategies that listeners must learn to avoid if they are to become skilled listeners (Vandergrift, 2003).

The least frequently used strategy was for “Person knowledge” strategies which include items assessing the perceived difficulty of listening compared with the three other language skills, learners’ linguistic confidence in second or foreign language listening, and the anxiety level experienced in second or foreign language listening (Sparks and Ganschow, 2001). It shows that EFL learners have a low level of confidence and self-efficacy in listening comprehension and they perceive listening skill harder than other skills. Maybe, it can be said that because Bulgarian learners consider listening as a difficult task to do, they concentrate with difficulty and they try to do their best in this regard. The second lowest strategy awareness was for “Planning and evaluation strategies” (3.93) which are those types of strategies that listeners use to prepare themselves for listening and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts. These strategies represent the purposeful nature of the comprehension process and the evaluation of the comprehension goals (Richards, 1983). It seems that Bulgarian students do not have enough awareness of these types of strategies (two last categories, planning-evaluation and person knowledge) and need to develop strategy awareness through explicit instruction.

EFL teachers should teach their students how to listen, to reflect on the process of listening and focus on using the metacognitive strategies of planning and monitoring and evaluation. In addition, the study found that more proficient listeners employed metacognitive strategies more frequently than less proficient listeners did. This finding suggests that less proficient EFL listeners should be made aware of these strategies and be instructed to make use of them.

The results of the MALQ and its subparts between two experimental groups - low (n=14) and high (n=16) proficient listeners are shown in Figure 2, $P_{0.05}$.

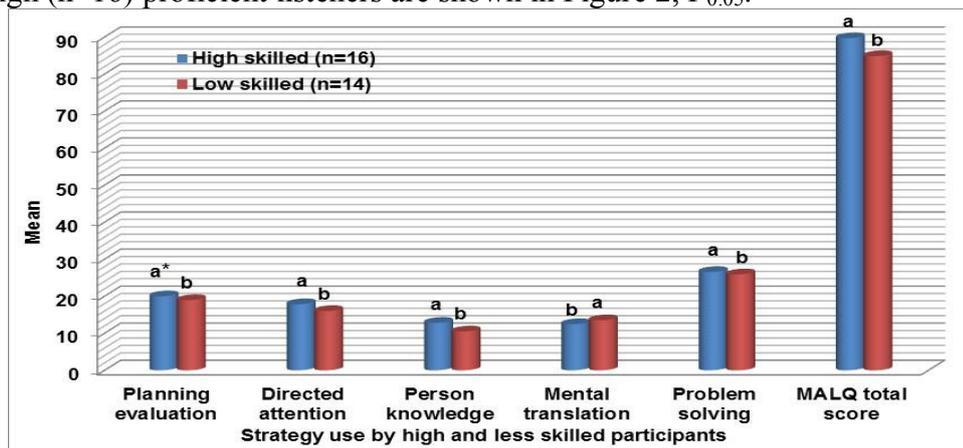


Figure 2. Descriptive Statistics of MALQ Subsections between High skilled and Low skilled Proficient Listeners

* Means separated by the same letter are not significantly different at $P = 0.05$ according to Duncan’s multiple comparison test.

The mean scores of high proficient listeners in all categories are higher than the mean scores of less proficient listeners, except for the “Mental translation” category. The total mean score of the listeners in high proficiency group is 89.69 in comparison to the mean score of the listeners in low proficiency group - 84.84. It shows that high proficient listeners use far more metacognitive strategies compared with less proficient listeners. This finding suggests that less proficient EFL

listeners should be made aware of these strategies and be instructed to make use of them to improve their listening comprehension.

According to research on listening comprehension (Flowerdew and Miller, 2005; Goh, 2000; Mendelsohn, 1995; Vandergrift, 2003), all EFL learners use some strategies to help them understand an oral English text. More proficient EFL listeners are more aware of the strategies that they use and employ these strategies more effectively than less proficient EFL listeners.

The results of this study showed that more proficient listeners tended to use metacognitive strategies of planning-evaluation, directed attention, person knowledge, and problem and solving more frequently than less proficient listeners. However, less proficient listeners employed more metacognitive listening strategies of mental translation than proficient listeners did (Fig. 2, $P_{0.05}$).

Vandergrift (2003) defined mental translation strategies as those strategies that listeners must learn to avoid if they are to become skilled listeners. These strategies represent an inefficient approach to listening comprehension that beginning-level listeners often feel compelled to use (Eastman, 1991). Accordingly, less proficient listeners tended to use “mental translation” strategy more than high proficient listeners.

Among these strategies, the use of “person knowledge” strategy by more proficient listeners compared to less proficient listeners reached the significance, i.e. there was a significant difference in the use of “person knowledge” strategy between less and more proficient listeners (Fig. 2, $P_{0.05}$). In this regard, it was revealed that less proficient listeners are less aware of this strategy and they have lower level of confidence so that they experience higher level of anxiety during listening task, resulting in impediment in listening comprehension.

In summary, through training in metacognitive strategies, students should show more responsibilities in the process of learning and learner autonomy can be promoted. When the students can control their learning effectively, they will become more interested in language learning. As a result, they are more willing to invest more time in autonomous learning in English listening after class. To help students become more autonomous and successful learners is the ultimate objective of language teaching.

5. Conclusion

This research investigated the metacognitive awareness of English majors in English listening and the relationship between metacognitive awareness and listening comprehension. This study is limited both by the small size of the participants and the nature of the listening test. A study of this should be replicated with more different groups of learners. Future studies should also use listening materials which are more authentic and closer to the students' current listening level. Finally, how to give the students training in metacognitive strategies and shorten the distance between metacognitive knowledge and listening practice provides a large research area for further research.

6. References

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